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The Anthropocene Scriptorium: Writing and Agency in Ben Lerner's *10:04* and Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*

1. Introduction: Big Data, Geological Agency, and the Literary

U., the narrator of Tom McCarthy's 2015 novel *Satin Island*, works as a corporate anthropologist charged with writing the "Great Report" – an all-encompassing, comprehensive account of contemporary life.¹ Given this daunting task, it is unsurprising that he hits a wall: "I'd begun to suspect", he notes, "that this Great Report was un-plottable, un-frameable, un-realizable: in short, [...] *un-writable*"². U. gains an insight into his impasse when he begins to understand that, in a data-saturated world, in which movements, consumer transactions, keystrokes, and click-throughs are relentlessly recorded, tabulated, and cross-indexed, the Great Report is not so much "*un-writable*" as being written in real time:

The truly terrifying thought wasn't that the Great Report might be un-writable, but – quite the opposite – that it had *already been written*. Not by a person, nor even by some nefarious cabal, but simply by a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself: some auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script – that that's what it *was*. And that we, far from being its authors [...] were no more than actions and commands within its key-chains.³

Writing, in *Satin Island*, morphs from being an exclusively human act into a nonhuman action, and this occasions a crisis of agency: human life is not only writing, but is constantly being written by algorithms. And this undermining of human autonomy and human action's participation in assemblages of other non-autonomous agents is not only a problem of agency: it is also a peculiarly *literary* problem, as the continuous

recording, tagging, and tabulating of human life comes to usurp some of the traditional tasks of literature. These days, McCarthy writes in an essay, it is software that "maps our tribe's kinship structures, our systems of exchange, the webs of value and belief that bind us all together"; algorithms transcribe human life into a "regime of signals" that is "omnipresent and insistent" and elides the role of a creative human author.⁴ As the distinction between human and nonhuman agency threatens to collapse, so does that between literary and nonliterary writing.

Satin Island not only links this altered understanding of human and literary activity to the ascendancy of what is often called Big Data – a term that captures the increasingly intensified capture, analysis, curation, and monetization of behavioral data – but also to the Anthropocene. As is familiar by now, this term reflects the insight that human life has become a geological agent affecting the chemical and climatological make-up of the planet. These two developments complement one another: just as the rise of Big Data entangles human agency with nonhuman and technological actions, the Anthropocene underlines the reciprocal implication of human and natural life. U. is obsessed with a widely mediatized oil spill – a process he describes as "Earth open[ing] its archives"⁵, as "Earth well[ing] back up and reveal[ing] itself; nature's hidden nature gush[ing] forth"⁶. Yet the oil spill is also a writing event: watching "the streaks and clusters taking shape as oil spread slowly inland", U. imagines "ink polluting paper, words marring the whiteness of a page".⁷ As this vision comes to U. when he is fruitlessly trying to write the Great Report, it illustrates the shift from human creativity to geological agency. In *Satin Island*, not only algorithms, but also the environment is constantly writing – that is, leaving traces of its actions; and as human life, in the Anthropocene, is a geological force in its own right, it is co-writing the geological record it inhabits, just as it is co-writing the databases that, in their turn, increasingly shape the lives we are living (and writing into archives again).

Satin Island's relevance for contemporary nature writing not only has to do with its thematic occupation with environmental issues, but also with its sustained focus on the contemporary vagaries of writing. It positions the notion of writing at the heart of the feedback loops through which algorithms and geological agency give rise to a proliferation of data that in their turn shape the assemblages of human and nonhuman forces that we inhabit. This reciprocally reinforcing entanglement of living and

writing characterizes what Mark Seltzer has called the "official world" – his term for modernity, which he sees as a world consisting "both of itself and its self-description, denotation, or registration".⁸ In the modern age, our lives are marked by a comprehensive process of self-writing (the "auto-alphaing and auto-omegating script" McCarthy refers to)⁹ and this writing becomes coterminous with human action: "It is not merely that there is nothing in the world that is not in the files", Seltzer writes; "the correlate is that there is then nothing in the files that is not in the world".¹⁰ What Kate Marshall has called "the Anthropocene's reflexive phase"¹¹ does not mark a real departure from the modern, official world; it is an intensified recognition that the reciprocal imbrication of human and geological life operates through processes of notation, of "observation and depiction".¹² The Anthropocene, then, is also a matter of writing; and as *Satin Island* suggests through its organizing preoccupation with ethnography, which McCarthy sees as a form of writing that is more literary than most literature¹³, it is also essentially a *literary* concern.

Ecocriticism traditionally – that is, in its first and second waves¹⁴ – valorized literature's mimetic and expressive qualities, and was justly suspicious of the human- and language-centeredness of critical theory, which often ascribed an agency to writing that seemed unhelpfully divorced from the material processes that, on a traditional understanding, make up nature. Recently, the promiscuous proliferation of the geological and algorithmic writing that *Satin Island* plugs into gives some seemingly obtuse critical elevations of writing an unexpected relevance. Jacques Derrida's easily ridiculed "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"¹⁵ seems hardly extravagant when there is no part of nature that is *not* co-created by human action, and when the power of the Google search engine is such that what it cannot find might as well not exist.¹⁶ (In *Satin Island*, the announcement of U.'s friend Petr's death is sent via Petr's mobile phone, with Petr's name showing up as the message's sender, making U. consider that "[t]o almost all intents and purposes", Petr is still alive.)¹⁷ Or take Maurice Blanchot's hyperbolic assertion that, because the act of writing both creates a new reality and in the process affirms the writer as a historical agent, "a writer's activity must be recognized as the highest form of work"¹⁸. This does not sound nearly so inflated when work, writing, and living have become overlapping practices, and when so much remunerated as well as invisible labor consists of writing data into databases.

McCarthy himself points to Michel de Certeau's imagining of social life as a vast "scriptural enterprise" – a massive process of notation that comes to shape and control human life. The result is life's "incarceration within the operations of a writing that constantly makes a machine of itself and never encounters anything but itself".¹⁹ For de Certeau, the only ways out of this self-perpetuating scriptural machine were "fictions, painted windows, mirror-panes"²⁰ – illusory constructs that allow readers a measure of freedom. Readers, de Certeau writes, produce "gardens that miniaturize and collate a world"; they are "travellers" that "deterritorialize" themselves and cannot be captured by the scriptural apparatus.²¹ In the age of the Anthropocene and Big Data, de Certeau's 1980 exaltation of the reader (which echoes the work of Roland Barthes) sounds decidedly dated; even if pattern recognition and data processing is more important than ever, it is hard to see such activities as alternatives (rather than prized contributions) to the contemporary "scriptural enterprise". As more and more reading takes place on computer screens and online, acts of reading are tracked, stored, tagged, and monetized – they are, in other words, forms of inscription, recording, and writing. As Wendy Chun notes, Big Data has "turned once silent and private acts – such as reading a book – into noiselessly noisy ones, eroding the difference between reading, writing, and being written"²². Critical theory's engagement with writing becomes surprisingly relevant for understanding changes to human agency in the Anthropocene, even if its elevation of reading and writing as affirmations of freedom stands in need of a sobering update.

Recent ecocritical accounts of literature's recalibrated relation to the environment and to nonhuman agency tend to either heighten or slight human responsibility. Adam Trexler's book *Anthropocene Fictions*, for instance, upholds the resilience and elasticity of narrative, as literary fiction manages to "give room to nonhuman things to shape narrative"²³; in this way, Anthropocene fiction testifies to the need for "a tremendous, common response from humanity", or, failing that, to the possibilities of "mass adaptation".²⁴ In contrast to this emphasis on narrative and human exceptionalism, more avant-garde experiments and theories celebrate art's capacity to display the mismatch between the human and the natural agencies afflicting it; it prefers works that emphasize "disjunctiveness, a being-overwhelmed by contexts in which the human perceiver is deeply implicated but cannot hope to command or sometimes even to

comprehend"²⁵. As Timothy Clark has remarked, such edgier accounts typically have little patience for literature, which through its partiality to narrative, perspective, and pattern seems fatally anthropocentric.²⁶

This essay complements such extant approaches – which either perpetuate an only slightly altered liberal notion of human agency or flatten the distinction between human and nonhuman agency – by situating the contemporary environmental relevance of literature less in its evocative and affective capacities than in its concern with writing. 'Writing' now also names human life's geological agency²⁷ and its participation in processes of data storage and transmission; in a time "when our most pervasive surrounding environment is technological"²⁸, self-conscious literary engagements with writing offer an occasion to tease out the implications of the entanglement between living and writing, between the human and the nonhuman. These engagements are not merely thematic, but concern the very possibility of literature as a distinct activity. In *Satin Island*, U.'s account of his life writing a "Great Report on our data-saturated present becomes *part* of that Great Report"; in Ben Lerner's *10:04*, which we will discuss later in this essay, the narrator's account of his attempt to try to write a commissioned novel comes to *replace* that novel as if to underscore that life, in the novel's hypermediated and climate-changed world, is *already* a form of writing.

These novels underline that registration technologies and human geological impact are two sides of the same coin. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has remarked, climate change and global geological change can only be observed through "computational models supported by a knowledge infrastructure" such as "weather observations, satellite data, radar readings, and so on".²⁹ At the same time, digital technologies leave a considerable environmental footprint through their vast expenditure of (often unclean) energy as well as through the use of rare minerals and the proliferation of e-waste; as Jussi Parikka has shown, "the purified industries of computing [are] secretly just as dirty as the industrial ancestors", as media technologies "retain their toxic materiality".³⁰ If human life now participates in "terraforming assemblages"³¹, it does so in part through the inevitably material processes of data processing that make its geological agency visible in the first place. *Satin Island* and *10:04* underline that this multiply overdetermined context is the environment in which contemporary literary writing participates, even if these novels are less certain how literature can still make a difference to

it. One challenge, as we will see, is that algorithmic and geological writing display some of the very features – notably performativity³² and reflexivity³³ – that have traditionally marked out literary writing.

2. Self-Writing and the Literary Environment: Reflexivity, Performativity, and Human Difference

Geological writing, like algorithmic writing, is never just mere notation, but also always constitutes action. Writing on the power of science to read the human impact on the Earth, Tobias Boes notes that "our very planet has become a medium for the storage and recursive transmission of human-generated messages"³⁴. Clouds, rocks, and water are now "repositories of readable data", and become essential parts of semiotic and hermeneutical operations (which is not to say, of course, that they can ever be fully decoded or understood).³⁵ What is remarkable about the assumed consequences of human geological agency – rising temperatures, sinking pH levels, species extinction, deforestation – is that they are "not merely legible signs of our impending catastrophe, they *are* the catastrophe itself"³⁶. What we find, in other words, is a "conflation of message and medium", in which "textuality is inseparable from materiality".³⁷ The Anthropocene, then, "is not simply something that is written *about*; it is also something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription".³⁸ Geological agency manifests itself as a "peculiarly embodied form of writing"³⁹, in which reading, writing, and living operate on the same plane – as so many actions that generate effects that require (even if they continue to complicate) reading. Human life, in the Anthropocene, does not express itself "in denotative speech acts but rather in performative interventions in which humankind functions as both subject and object"⁴⁰ – interventions that redefine even as they perform human action.

Human action, in the Anthropocene, is constitutively self-reflexive, autopoietic, and performative. So how can literature mark its difference from this dynamic? The opening of Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04* finds its semi-autobiographical narrator and his literary agent celebrating the contract and the sizeable advance he was offered on the basis of "an earnest if indefinite proposal"; all he had to do was "promise to turn [a story he had published] into a novel".⁴¹ Together with its thematic occupation with energy depletion, climate change, and superstorms, it is

10:04's sustained semi-autobiographical mode that signals its ambition to tap into the Anthropocene ecology of writing: in this ecology, all writing is also self-writing (as human action comes to *define* what it means to be human in the Anthropocene), and no form of writing is fully autobiographic (as there is no human agency that is not entangled with nonhuman others). In both *Satin Island* and *10:04*, the continuity between living and writing and between fiction and nonfiction is underlined by including essayistic writings by these novels' authors into their narrators' streams of consciousness. In this new ecology, a life led in preparation of the writing of a novel is *already* writing, and *10:04*'s narrator gradually comes to realize that his meticulous, nervous, and hyper-self-conscious notation of everyday life is *already* a novel, and will come to be published (as *10:04*) instead of the novel he had promised to write. *10:04*'s central movement, then, precisely echoes U.'s discovery in *Satin Island* that the Great Report, far from being unwritable, is already being written, and even being co-written by U. himself. Living, writing, and reading all operate on a continuous plane, and there are no clear-cut distinctions between the production of signs, the materiality of the signs, and the act of reading them – all count as inscriptions in this Anthropocene ecology.

10:04 collapses the distinction between writer, reader, and text through several strategies. There are the intermittent second-person addresses to the reader, which position the reader as a fellow New Yorker, rather than a disembodied abstraction ("You might have seen me sitting there on the bench that midnight."⁴²). The narrator underlines his ambition to "insert some physical particulars" into the letters he writes – an ambition he links to John Keats "always describing his bodily position at the time of writing, the conditions of his room".⁴³ The narrator's ambition to include the media of inscription into his text is compared to "the red-eye effect in the photographs of my youth, the camera recording the light of its own flash, the camera inscribing itself in the image it captured"⁴⁴. The most extensive invitation to "coeval readership"⁴⁵ comes when the narrator describes a trip to Marfa and cancels the distance between remembrance, writing, and reading: "I remember the address (you can drag the 'pegman' icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighborhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate window now)."⁴⁶ Moments such as these synchronize the occasion, the production, and the consumption of writing; they shift readers from the external position of interpreters to that of

agents in a textual process in which they, in Bruno Latour's words, "share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy"⁴⁷ – with the author, the character, the computer screen, the interface.

10:04 emphasizes that experiences of shared agency are always mediated; in the above example, the computer interface is a crucial agent in the assemblage the reader participates in. When in the face of an approaching superstorm New York City is described as congealing into "one organism [...] an aerial sea monster" (a recurring image in the novel, often in the guise of an octopus), the novel underlines how this image "constitut[es] itself in relation to a threat viewable from space" (and thus depends on the mediation of satellites), and is produced by "a million media, most of them handheld".⁴⁸ The autopoietic logic of Anthropocene writing interacts with that of contemporary digital media, which also operate according to a comprehensive self-writing dynamic. In the Big Data ecology, human behavior is recorded, stored, and algorithmically processed in order to affect future behavior, which will then itself be processed in turn, etc. The upshot is that the distinction between life and its algorithmic processing has disappeared: the Internet has turned into "the greatest laboratory ever for consumer research and lead generation"⁴⁹, in which behavior provides feedback that will enable algorithms to further map and shape lives – what *Satin Island* calls "real-world R&D".⁵⁰

In this logic, software has a performative dimension, as the real world becomes an encompassing and continuous beta test that writes, reads, and implements its own test results in real time. Orit Halpern has noted that in a condition of "ubiquitous computing", "bandwidth and life [are] inextricably correlated for both profit and survival".⁵¹ Wendy Chun has shown how algorithms both capture and inculcate habits – they naturalize particular preferences while circumventing moments of individual deliberation: "Habits are trained algorithms, stored in involuntary memory."⁵² Software is a performative process that "does what it says"⁵³: "Software is word become action: a replacement of process with inscription that makes writing a live power by conflating force and law."⁵⁴ Because of their performative and autopoietic operations, Big Data environments, like the Anthropocene environments from which they are inseparable, are essentially *literary* environments that perform and recursively actualize themselves in a way traditionally ascribed to literary texts.

So where does this leave human freedom? One feature of the data-saturated present is that information no longer simply translates into liberty. As Frank Pasquale writes, "[d]ata is becoming staggering in its breadth and depth, yet often the information most important to us is out of reach"⁵⁵. Contemporary data processing has actualized and updated the aim of what Fredric Jameson influentially called "cognitive mapping" – the challenge to locate individual action within the bewildering reality of global capitalism:⁵⁶ while data processing has managed to establish ever "larger connections", these cognitive achievements have not "enabled individual subjects to understand and change the system".⁵⁷ For Wendy Chun, far from empowering individuals, "[c]onstant participation grounds surveillance. The erasure of the separation between reading and writing – reading as a writerly process – has not liberated, but rather domesticated"⁵⁸. As Bernard Harcourt argues, there is now "[n]o need to distinguish ordinary life from the supervised correctional condition, since we will be watched, tracked, analyzed, and known at every moment of the day", as "the formerly coercive surveillance technology is now woven into the very fabric of our pleasure and fantasies".⁵⁹

Human life is never simply the author or the reader in processes of data transmission, but is instead distributed across these processes. Orit Halpern has mapped a shift toward "an attentive and affective global information-consumer space" that requires users (who write even as they read) rather than observing subjects.⁶⁰ Users, in this constellation, are no longer discrete bodies but "composed of agglomerations of nervous stimulation; compartmentalized units of an individual's attentive, even nervous, energy and credit"; at the same time, they are *being used* by networks composed of human, nonhuman, and technological actors.⁶¹ Big Data, then, are a crucial component in what the introduction to this volume calls "new materialist conceptualisations of shared materiality" – what it calls a materiality that "circumvent[s] the dualisms between matter and meaning or nature and culture", and instead emerges in the "dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies" (the introduction borrows this last phrase from Katherine Hayles).

10:04 and *Satin Island* are attentive to the challenges to both human and literary distinctiveness in these novel environments – new realities that, as these novels show, also furnish a new habitat for the novel form. Crucially, neither of these novels identifies the human, or indeed the individual subject, with the literary; for both, finding a new footing for

literature instead signals an openness to a shared life that is distributed among human and nonhuman agents. While thoroughly immersed in the Anthropocene and Big Data ecologies they aim, in Wendy Chun's words, to establish a position "away from preemption and predictable yet rampant consumption toward political contestation and sustainable habitation"⁶². These novels' engagement with the present modalities of writing, we argue, constitute their ethical and political dimensions – an ethics and politics that, as the introduction to this volume has it, are situated less in texts' "referential, mimetic or didactic dimensions" than in "the transformative agency of aesthetics itself". *10:04*'s term for literature's aesthetic agency is "a proprioceptive flicker"⁶³ – a glitch that creates a moment of opportunity and openness from *within* the environments the literary work inhabits yet momentarily suspends. The rest of this essay shows that both novels elaborate such a minor yet ineluctable role for literature – a role that emerges through their engagement with (rather than their withdrawal from) their novel environments.

3. Parachute Writing: *Satin Island*

Satin Island is obsessed with images of hyperconnectedness and encompassing infrastructures; its first chapter finds U. at the Torino-Caselle airport – which, significantly, is a "hub-airport"⁶⁴ – bombarded by screens, vibrating phones, Skype calls, assorted noises, and involuntary memories. *Satin Island*'s world is a world where it is impossible to escape and go off the grid. As McCarthy underlines in an essay, "[t]here is no space outside this matrix, no virgin territory of pure 'aesthetics' or neutral 'reflection' on which it hasn't impacted"⁶⁵. For U., this means that he must firmly locate himself "inside events and situations as they unfolded" – a "participation-from-within" he calls "Present-Tense Anthropology™"⁶⁶. The trademark is significant, and it signals that, in this dispensation, even "vanguard theory" is being fed "back into the corporate machine".⁶⁷

This encompassing machine figures in the novel as the so-called "Koob-Sassen Project". Inscrutable, boring, and sprawling, the project serves as the invisible infrastructure on which contemporary life operates:⁶⁸ "Koob-Sassen involved many hook-ups, interfaces, transpositions – corporate to civic, supranational to local, analogue to digital and open to restricted and hard to soft and who knows what else."⁶⁹

If this description of Koob-Sassen echoes the rhetoric of immateriality and cloudy weightlessness through which digital capitalism officially promotes itself, *Satin Island* consistently insists on the Project's ineluctable materiality – its status as, precisely, an infrastructure project to be compared to "poldering and draining landmasses of thousands of square miles, or cabling and connecting an entire empire"⁷⁰. The Project, in other words, is not only an autopoietic process of self-writing and data processing, it is also a form of geological inscription: "The Project was supra-governmental, supra-national, supra-everything – and infra-too."⁷¹ As we will see, *Satin Island* refuses to collapse the tension between the two sides of the Anthropocene scriptorium, and it locates the residual force of literature in such a refusal.

Readers of McCarthy's breakthrough novel *Remainder* will recognize this concern with the unavoidable material dimensions of human designs. In *Remainder*, "surplus matter, mess or clutter" continuously disrupts all human schemes, and attempts at transcending matter irrevocably fail.⁷² While *Remainder* emphasized the inevitable victory of matter over design, *Satin Island* is a sustained effort to inhabit an Anthropocene ecology in which the mobilization of matter to some extent *works* – but not as smoothly and seamlessly as many cheerleaders of digital capitalism assume. The cover of the American edition of *Satin Island* displays struck-through genre categories: "a ~~treatise~~", "an ~~essay~~", "a ~~report~~", "a ~~confession~~", "a ~~manifesto~~"; the only label that remains is "a novel". The distinctiveness of the novel, in *Satin Island*, is not a matter of a distinctively literary format: the book is made up of numbered sections, as if it were an anthropological report, and more than one critic has remarked on its formlessness.⁷³ Instead, it distinguishes itself as an environment in which the imperfect articulation of data and materiality is inhabited only to be momentarily suspended. In contrast to *Remainder*, *Satin Island* is not a representative for triumphant, but inarticulate, matter⁷⁴ – a job description that hints at Latour's notion of a "Parliament of Things", in which human representatives take up the case of mute objects.⁷⁵

In *Satin Island*, matter is not inarticulate – instead, it *writes*, and it feeds (only to resist) the fantasy that it can seamlessly be enlisted for data-processing. In an imaginary lecture, U. enthuses that the oil from the oil spill should not be brushed away, but that instead, we should be

lowering a needle to its furrows and replaying it all, and amplifying it all the while to boot: up and up, exponentially, until from littoral to plain to mountain, land to sky and back to sea again, the destiny of every trilobite resounds.⁷⁶

U. also hallucinates the Koob-Sassen Project as a picture of wholeness – as "hordes of people" coalescing "into one larger, more coherent pattern" that moves "towards its glorious realization, at which point *all* would become clear".⁷⁷ The novel shows that data, like the oil spill, foster the "almost sublimely reassuring" image of a "bottomless and inexhaustible torrent of giving": "*Datum est*: it is given."⁷⁸ At the same time, it underlines that this vision of infinite fungibility is an unsustainable illusion. This illusion emerges precisely when there is a glitch in the system – when U.'s computer is "afflicted by frequent bouts of buffering", which inspire visions of "hordes of bits and bytes and megabytes", of "a giant *über-server*".⁷⁹ *Satin Island* juxtaposes this fantasy of "unconditional and grace-conferring act[s] of generosity" with the sobering awareness that the buffering sign may be only that – "just a circle, spinning on [...] screen, and nothing else".⁸⁰

The novel personifies the dream to articulate matter with design through the character of Peyman, who runs the Company. Peyman, we read, connects all "scattered, half-formed notions and intuitions" to "a world of action and event, a world in which stuff might actually *happen*; connected us, that is, to our own age [...]. He connected the age to itself".⁸¹ If this illustrates the performative dimension of data processing, the error the novel diagnoses is to see this as a form of *human* agency (through its personification as Peyman), rather than as the onset of a radical recalibration of the very distinction between human and nonhuman agency. The articulation of data and geology never obeys merely manmade designs, and interferes in human life as delays, errors, and glitches: the novel is filled with delayed flights, missed meetings, cancers – "all the extraneous clutter, all the world-debris" that refuses to stop interfering.⁸² Importantly, U.'s writing itself is imagined as "the damp, pulpy mass" of paper that separates "evidence-based research" on the one side from "epic art" on the other.⁸³ *Satin Island* suspends the opposition between the two, yet articulates them as a thoroughly material medium – as a book, as data, or as another form of geological inscription.

Satin Island reflects on this position of a fully material suspension through U.'s obsessive engagement with the widely mediated case of a parachute murder. Like the buffering sign and the oil spill, the image of the parachute combines fantasies of plenitude (flying) with intimations of radical finitude (falling). In the case of the sabotaged parachute, the crime itself cannot be accurately pinpointed (is it the moment of sabotage? Is it when the victim discovers he gets no purchase on the air around him? Or when he notices his reserve chute is not working either? Or when he hits the ground?) but is in fact distributed across Earth and sky – all places on which the crime "left [its] imprint".⁸⁴ The parachute murder, then, redefines the atmosphere and the Earth as crime scenes⁸⁵ – as media in which different agents leave their imprint. The victim's experiences of falling are, U. reasons, "mere side effects of a technical delay, a pause, an interval"; like the buffering sign or the delays besetting Skype conversations, they are merely "the hiatus created by the passage of a command down a chain".⁸⁶ Unlike staring at buffering signs or oil spills, skydiving consciously *inhabits* a situation of distributed agency, a vast scriptural environment that human agents co-write. If *Remainder* is more interested in the confrontation between design and matter (a confrontation the oil spill and the buffer signal emblemize), *Satin Island's* mode of writing, like the parachute, aims to remain "*in transit*": the Project U. co-writes "has to be conceived of as in a perpetual state of passage, not arrival – not *at*, not *between*".⁸⁷ In the world of *Satin Island*, there is no nature that remains exterior to human and nonhuman agency: that outside, in the parachute image, is the "ground-target" where "the parachute stops playing its role"⁸⁸ – and where the skydiver dies. Life and writing, again, are co-extensive, and halting the process of writing – that is, living – means death.

Satin Island, for all its lack of plot and suspense, seems to move toward an illusory outside in its last chapters – only to abandon the reader with a failed epiphany, which underscores the reader's, the text's, and the author's implication in the encompassing scriptorium it taps into. U. finds himself traveling to Staten Island in New York – "the forgotten borough, the great dump"⁸⁹ collecting the continent's waste, which "seemed to resist all incorporation into any useful or productive screed".⁹⁰ Staten Island – which is mixed up in U.'s thoughts with the mysterious signifier "Satin Island" – "radiat[es] with a prospect, with an overwhelming promise, of significance" precisely because it seems a residue that has escaped the

autopoietic system that has spawned it.⁹¹ Yet the meaning of the term 'Satin Island' turns out to be prosaic at best (which allegorizes *Satin Island's* own decidedly non-epiphanic and non-heroic operation),⁹² and U. fails to take the ferry to Staten Island. The novel (almost) ends with a description of a homeless guy at the ferry terminal, who is holding the receiver of a payphone "making no attempt to listen or to talk into it"⁹³. U. wonders whether the payphone even works. Meeting the eyes of the homeless guy, U. disconnects from him only to plug "back into the city"⁹⁴ and return to the scriptorium he has been co-writing.

Near the end of the novel, U. entertains different strategies for undermining the system from within – by providing faulty data, or by conceiving of "Present-Tense Anthropology™" as "an armed resistance movement".⁹⁵ U.'s girlfriend reminds him that such a conception of agency is fatally anthropocentric, reflecting an all too masculine desire "to be the hero in the film who runs away in slo-mo from the villain's factory that he's just mined"⁹⁶. In the Anthropocene scriptorium, there are no human heroes, and no one is running away, least of all from the factory – the scriptorium where we labor, live, write. Still, there is slo-mo: U.'s girlfriend notes there is no need for mining the factory, as "the explosion's taking place already [...] it's always been taking place. You just didn't notice"⁹⁷. What makes *Satin Island* a novel rather than a manifesto, an essay, or a report, is its effort to make visible the entangled agencies that slowly exhaust even as they encompass the planet. While it does not simply reject or deflate fantasies of immateriality and delusions of human exceptionalism (as *Remainder* does), it shows how these illusions are caught up in crisscrossing and recursive dynamics that render them as groundless as they are material.

4. Proprioceptive Flickers: *10:04*

If *Satin Island* signals the friction between data and matter through buffering, glitches, and delays, *10:04* registers discontinuities in the Anthropocene scriptorium through occasional flickers. Flickering invariably indicates moments of transition – between absence and presence⁹⁸, between life and death⁹⁹, "between temporalities"¹⁰⁰, between fiction and nonfiction¹⁰¹, or "across genres"¹⁰². As in *Satin Island*, indeterminate moments of transition generate new intensities and potentialities – when, for instance, the powers of Big Data fall short and

"[a]nother historic storm [...] failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time"¹⁰³. The failure of a preprogrammed future to materialize shifts attention to the attempt to find "a way to inhabit the present"¹⁰⁴, and to test "what possibilities of feeling [are] opened up in the present tense of reading"¹⁰⁵. Crucially, *10:04* sees works of art and literature, and therefore also itself, as sites where such frictions and flickers are generated. They are sites, moreover, that are written on and across the borders between fiction and autobiography, in a domain where "the distinction between fiction and nonfiction [does]n't obtain"¹⁰⁶. In this domain, writing is "neither fiction nor nonfiction"¹⁰⁷, as *10:04* operates "on the very edge of fiction"¹⁰⁸, and thus in a place where flickers can occur.

10:04 situates itself in a world saturated by media and is obsessed with its geological agency, which appears in the novel through two major black-outs, the prospect of New York's future "underwater"¹⁰⁹, a fascination with dinosaurs, and evocations of "both galactic space and geological time"¹¹⁰. Like *Satin Island*, then, it has no illusions about the possibility of a critical position *outside* of the Anthropocene scriptorium; instead, it generates what it calls "proprioceptive flicker[s]" from *within* the scriptorium. *10:04* repeatedly imagines its own position in that scriptorium as a technology for registering and storing data – as a registration machine that, unlike traditional novels, does not immediately convert data into literary significance. The novel's careful, hyper-self-conscious, and almost pedantic notation of events, thoughts, and stimuli is part of an effort to "detect local texture variations", without "integrat[ing] that information into a larger picture".¹¹¹ This mode of notation is a strategy to "resist the will to integration"¹¹² and to decline "pareidolia" – the process "when the brain arranges random stimuli into a significant image or sound".¹¹³ *10:04's* storage work suspends such meaningful articulation, and instead insists on the continuities between writing, reading, and living as so many forms of inscription.

As in *Satin Island*, the ethics and politics of *10:04's* archival work emerge in encounters with assemblages that are neither fully human nor resolutely natural, but rather partly manmade environments. On one of his walks through New York, the narrator becomes intensely aware of the infrastructure surrounding him, "of the delicacy of the bridges and tunnels spanning it"; this intensity is like "a cortical reorganization", and it generates "a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body".¹¹⁴

This last phrase recurs later in the novel through another confrontation with built space: the city afflicts the narrator as "[b]undled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity". This is an assemblage of human and nonhuman, technological and computational agents that together serve as "the material signature" of "a collective person who didn't yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural" to whom *10:04* is addressed.¹¹⁵

10:04's emphasis on images of infrastructure shows that the communal body that its archival work intimates will not be a merely human one.¹¹⁶ So how is this imagined collectivity different from the data amassed by algorithmic processes – the archival work with which the novel competes? The novel's motto gives a clue to this difference. It presents a passage from the work of Walter Benjamin, which offers a particular understanding of messianism. According to this understanding, the messiah will not alter the world, but merely leave it as he finds it: "everything there will be just as it is here [...]. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different"¹¹⁷. The novel links this minor, imperceptible difference – in which everything is "a little changed, a little charged"¹¹⁸ – to the full availability of the past, and thus to the archiving work in which the novel engages. In another (unacknowledged) borrowing from Benjamin, *10:04* images a future "where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all of its moments"¹¹⁹. The difference between literary data storage and Big Data, then, is that this future database will also contain potentialities and virtualities that were never actualized; it will include "those [moments] that from our present present happened but never occurred"¹²⁰. Literature, on this account, is a technology that confronts algorithmic writing with its exclusive focus on actualities and on actual inscriptions; it borrows Big Data's ambition to store and collect everything, but it does so by *also* including potentialities that were never actualized. It is the friction between digital archives and *10:04's* archiving of virtualities that digital archives cannot contain: that generate the flickers that in turn intimate a coming "communal body", a "still-uninhabited second person plural".¹²¹

So, what does this archiving of potentiality have to do with a future second person plural, with a 'you'? How, in fact, do databases or their literary alternatives even address a 'you'? Here, the insight that writing, in the Anthropocene scriptorium, is a performative act becomes helpful.

Wendy Chun has shown that, unlike mass media that carved out a 'we' and a 'they', social media – in many ways the interface of Big Data – always produce a 'you'; in a situation in which "[t]he media have imploded in the social", 'you' always remains distinguishable, trackable, captured, and updated.¹²² Big Data and social media are relentlessly individualizing as well as consistently tracking individual's connections to groups, patterns, habits.¹²³ In this dominant logic, the second person is "never singular, but singular-plural"¹²⁴. *10:04's* address to a second person plural engages this dominant logic, while bending it to a less constraining "communal body"; its second person plural is "still-uninhabited" – it is the effect of a literary and archival logic that refuses to exhaust the future 'you'.¹²⁵ By enlisting reader, text, media, environment, and writer in collaborative processes of inscription, *10:04* addresses a virtual community; in Chun's words, it "inhabit[s] [...] the singular plural that is the you" in order to "produce a 'we' that does not flatten or align identity, but rather [...] exposes that singularity is fundamentally plural".¹²⁶ This demonstrates the particular agency of literature in Anthropocene and Big Data ecologies; it invites us to think of literature as a nonhuman agent that mediates and generates new modes of association between other agents – human as well as nonhuman, organic as well as technological.

When *10:04* ends with the words "I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural"¹²⁷, it underlines that the urban assemblage it has generated is a co-creation of different agents. Chun emphasizes that effective strategies for affirming community in Big Data environments do not (impossibly) withdraw into an illusory privacy, but rather aim for "community through exposure"¹²⁸ – the exposure, for instance, of an awkwardly oversharing narrator who is (almost) the novel's author, but also that of a reader who participates in the novel's operation. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan have noted how "novels of commission" (their term for novels that are organized around commissioned but unwritten works of literature) like Lerner's shift from product (the commissioned novel that never gets unwritten) to procedure, and also from claims of representativeness to enactments of relation.¹²⁹ In this way, *10:04* bends Big Data's logic of prediction and surveillance to the intimation of "a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence"¹³⁰. It "embrace[s] the fundamentally nonpersonal nature of our networked communications"¹³¹ in order to reimagine it as a conduit for

community – the community it enacts in the present of writing, living, and reading.

In an environment in which human action has become a form of writing, and in which writing has also become a feature of nonhuman agents, the positions of both human life and literature need to be reimaged. It may seem, as Christina Lupton has remarked, that machines and nature are now able "to 'speak' to themselves and to each other through networks and systems that bypass human cognition" – a condition of "high technology" in which, in words she quotes from Friedrich Kittler, "literature has nothing more to say", but just becomes an effect of media.¹³² *10:04* and *Satin Island* both imagine literary activity as thoroughly immersed in the networks and systems through which geological agency and data operations are articulated in the Anthropocene; they both see literature as a place where the glitches, delays, and frictions in these networks and systems – hiccups that dominant discourses tend to neglect – can be registered. For both these novels, literature is decidedly *not* a placeholder for human distinctiveness, but instead an intimation of an assemblage in which agency is distributed across human and nonhuman agents. If it alters the ways different agents relate to one another through a recalibration of writing, it also calls on readers to develop new ways to understand the relation between writing and reading.

Notes

- ¹ McCarthy (2015a:63).
- ² *Ibid.*, 126.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 133-134.
- ⁴ McCarthy (2015b).
- ⁵ McCarthy (2015a:118).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ⁸ Seltzer (2016:6).
- ⁹ McCarthy (2015a:134).
- ¹⁰ Seltzer (2016:143).

- ¹¹ Marshall (2015:25).
- ¹² Seltzer (2016:5).
- ¹³ Cf. McCarthy (2015b:n.pag).
- ¹⁴ Cf. Buell (2005).
- ¹⁵ Derrida (1976:158).
- ¹⁶ Peters (2015:26-27); Pasquale (2015:69).
- ¹⁷ McCarthy (2015a:149).
- ¹⁸ Blanchot (1995:313).
- ¹⁹ de Certeau (1984:150).
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 173-174.
- ²² Chun (2016a:94).
- ²³ Trexler (2015:26).
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.
- ²⁵ Clark (2015:183-184).
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ²⁷ Cf. Chakrabarty (2012:2); Steffen, et al. (2011:843).
- ²⁸ Peters (2015:2).
- ²⁹ Mirzoeff (2015:219); cf. Edwards (2010).
- ³⁰ Parikka (2015:111-113).
- ³¹ Woods (2014:134).
- ³² Culler (2000); Miller (2002); Bennett (2009:262-269).
- ³³ Alter (1975); Hutcheon (1980).
- ³⁴ Boes (2016:97).
- ³⁵ Peters (2015:4).
- ³⁶ Boes (2016:107).
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107, 98.
- ³⁸ Boes and Marshall (2014:64).
- ³⁹ Boes (2016:107).
- ⁴⁰ Boes and Marshall (2014:64).
- ⁴¹ Lerner (2014).
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 109.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 212.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.
- ⁴⁷ Latour (2014:5); italics in original removed.
- ⁴⁸ Lerner (2014:17).
- ⁴⁹ O'Neil (2016:75).
- ⁵⁰ McCarthy (2015a:52).
- ⁵¹ Halpern (2015:4).
- ⁵² Chun (2016a:81).

- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Pasquale (2015:191).
- ⁵⁶ Jameson (1990:51-54).
- ⁵⁷ Chun (2016a:40).
- ⁵⁸ Chun (2016b:367).
- ⁵⁹ Harcourt (2015:21).
- ⁶⁰ Halpern (2015:239).
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 249.
- ⁶² Chun (2016b:363).
- ⁶³ Lerner (2014:28).
- ⁶⁴ McCarthy (2015a:4).
- ⁶⁵ McCarthy (2015b:n. pag).
- ⁶⁶ McCarthy (2015a:78).
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁶⁸ Hageman (2016). "Infrastructure and the Anthropocene in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*." *Alluvium* 30 Oct. 2016: n. pag. Web. 7 December 2016.
- ⁶⁹ McCarthy (2015a:13-14).
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁷² McCarthy (2006:159).
- ⁷³ Ammah-Tagoe (2016). "Letters from 'The Contemporary': Letter 3." *Post45* 4 Nov. 2016: n. pag. Web. 7 December 2016; Miller, Christopher Patrick (2016). "Letters from 'The Contemporary': Letter 1." *Post45* 1 Nov. 2016: n.pag. Web. 7 December 2016.
- ⁷⁴ Cf. Vermeulen (2012).
- ⁷⁵ Latour (1993:142-145).
- ⁷⁶ McCarthy (2015a), 118. Given repeated references to the work of Rainer Maria Rilke in McCarthy's interviews, this image likely riffs on Rilke's well-known thought experiment with the "primal sound" generated by lowering a needle to a human skull: "What if one changed the needle and directed it on its return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound but existed of itself naturally – well, to put it plainly, along the coronal suture, for example A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music...". Rilke, Rainer Maria (2001). "Primal Sound." *The Book of Music and Nature: An Anthology of Sounds, Words, Thoughts*. Ed. David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 22. This fantasy also recalls archaeoacoustic attempts to recreate ancient sounds from marks and grooves inscribed in archeological finds – a process in which rocks and other materials are treated as data repositories (although, given these endeavours' lack of success, such repositories, in an archaeoacoustic sense, remain unreadable).
- ⁷⁷ McCarthy (2015a:69).

- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 97.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, 180.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 189.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ⁹⁸ Lerner (2014:15,136,201).
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 21, 67.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 194.
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 239.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 230.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*, 53.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 69; italics in original.
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ¹¹⁶ Elsewhere, one of us has shown that *10:04* neutralizes a humanist poetics of the person in order to open up a "transpersonal" dimension of connectedness. Cf. Vermeulen, Pieter (2016). "How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Lerner,

Ben, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future." *Political Theory* 7 Sept. 2016: n. pag. Online first. Web. 7 December 2016.

¹¹⁷ Lerner (2014: epigraph).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 28 and 108.

¹²² Chun (2016a:22-23).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹²⁴ Chun (2016b:363).

¹²⁵ Lerner (2014:28 and 108).

¹²⁶ Chun (2016b:379).

¹²⁷ Lerner (2014:240).

¹²⁸ Chun (2016b:379).

¹²⁹ Buurma and Heffernan. (2014:89)

¹³⁰ Lerner (2014:157).

¹³¹ Chun (2016a:13).

¹³² Lupton (2016:504).

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