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HYPERRHIZ 15: ESSAYS

Collapsing Generation and Reception: Holes as Electronic Literary Impermanence

GRAHAM ALLEN AND JAMES O'SULLIVAN

University College Cork and University of Sheffield

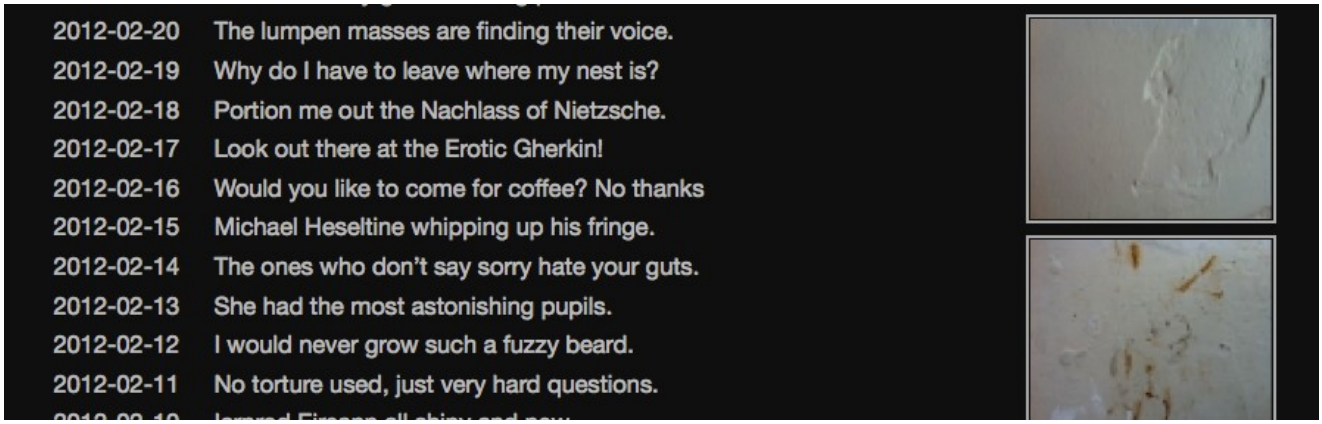
ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Holes, a ten syllable one-line-per-day work of digital poetry that is written by Graham Allen, and published by James O'Sullivan's New Binary Press. The authors, through their involvement with the piece, explore how such iterative works challenge literary notions of fixity. Using Holes as representative of "organic" database literature, the play between electronic literature, origins, autobiography, and the edition are explored. A description of Holes is provided for the benefit of readers, before the literary consequences of such works are examined, using deconstruction as the critical framework. After the initial outline of the poem, the discussion is largely centred around Derrida's deconstruction of "the centre". Finally, the literary database as art is re-evaluated, drawing parallels between e-lit, the absence of the centre, and the idea of the "deconstructive poem".

INTRODUCING HOLES

Holes,[1] by Graham Allen, is a digital poem which presents a new approach to autobiographical writing. Composition of Holes began on December 23rd, 2006, though it was not digitised until 2012, when it was published by James O'Sullivan's New Binary Press. The work is a ten syllable one-line-per-day poem that offers something less and something more than a window on the author's life. Holes is a poetic vehicle for the exploration of chance, meaning, juxtaposition and language, an organic literary work which goes beyond the edition, evolving and proliferating as new lines are added on an iterative basis. Currently, lines are written daily, but added to the site on a weekly basis.

From a technical perspective, Holes (see Fig. 1) is arguably unsophisticated, in that it merely uses database technology with a customised Wordpress frontend to encapsulate an expanding poem. It is a poem, atypical in its form, but nonetheless a poem, structured and rhythmic. Like many works of electronic literature, Holes is a novel juxtaposition of old conventions and new modes of transmission, re-problematising a whole range of literary and textual constructs. This is more than token remediation; Holes could not have been bound in a traditional textual construct because of its iterative nature. Only a digital apparatus could be used to realise the author's vision of a piece that grew by one line each day, and it is in this respect that Holes precisely adheres to what Hayles defines as "a first-generation digital object" (3).



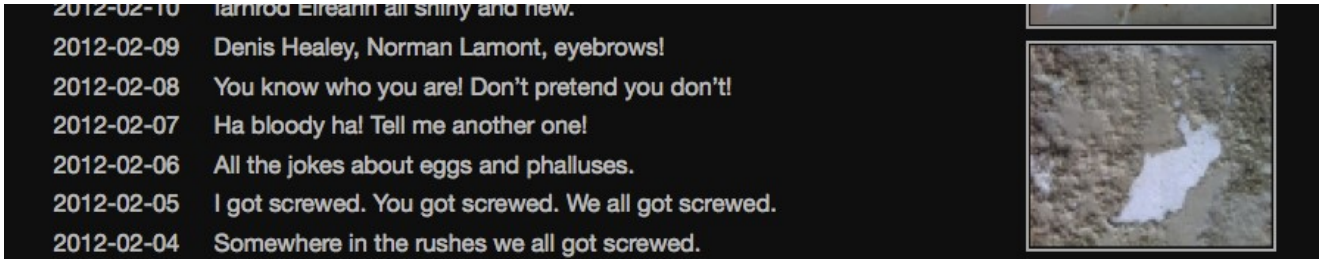


Figure 1: Holes, http://holesbygrahamallen.org/.

The lines of the poem are entered directly into the work's database, and then displayed on the home page of the customized Wordpress theme. Taking this approach allows for the interface to be maintained with ease, while keeping the essential literary data separate in an independent MySQL database, and thus, sustainable and flexible.

Readers can make use of the calendar feature to display a line from a particular date at the top of the page, with all subsequent lines populating the screen, scrolling downwards. In the first prototype, user-specified lines of text were simply displayed in isolation, but it was later felt that continuing the poem from such points would better serve readers. Firstly, it allows temporal examination to take place on a larger scale. For example, a reader who wants to see all of the lines from a particular month in a particular year may do so without the need to repeatedly utilise the dropdown date menu. Secondly, by presenting the text in this fashion, the search function also fulfills the need for a bookmarking mechanism. If a reader reaches a certain point in Holes, and wishes to return to that same point at a later date, they may do so quite simply by using the corresponding date as a point of reference. This is an uncomplicated way of allowing users to read the entire text in multiple segments, negating the need to add additional functionality.

Holes is not without its antecedents, perhaps most notably, Alan Sondheim's Internet Text, first posted online in 1994. Like Holes, this work seeks to "document a long-standing online performance" (Sondheim), utilising the publishing affordances of the screen to achieve literary intentions unsuited to the page. Such works respond in part to an important question posed by Sandy Baldwin: "How can contemporary publishing be seen as a creative act?" (Baldwin & Zerby). Holes is arguably more of a cybertext than Internet Text, in that the underlying database is essential to its form, and thus, from a ludo-literary perspective, it is something more than remediation, something less than computationally-complex, whatever that might be. It is, as many critics explored and many artists implemented around the turn of the century, the merger of database and narrative into a new form (Manovich).

DECONSTRUCTING ORIGINS

Holes has a rather philosophical origin, in that it was originally conceived as a contribution to the 2007 meeting of the annual Jacques Derrida symposium of which Allen is a founding member. This was JD07, held at the University of Singapore, by John W. Phillips and Ryan Bishop. 2007 was a significant year for all those interested in deconstruction, as it was the 40th anniversary of the year in which Derrida published his first three monographs: Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology, and Writing and Difference. If this were a deconstructive essay, this discourse of origins could be immediately destabilised, first by referring to the fact that Derrida had been active for a number of years prior to 1967, and second, by following that up with an observation that Holes itself started the year before in 2006. One might then refer to the text that accompanied the publication of the first year of Holes in the journal Theory & Event, which begins: "What would a poem look like if it took 'Structure, Sign and Play' as a manifesto for poetry?" ("365 Holes"). Derrida's essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", is, of course, an extremely interesting text through which to think through the nature of origins. Originally presented in 1966 at the conference at Johns Hopkins University, entitled The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, held as an event to welcome European structuralist thought and practice into the United States, Derrida's essay performed a subversion of the conference's stated objectives and instead announced the arrival of

post-structuralism, and deconstruction in particular (see Macksey & Donato). In Derrida's hands, that is to say, post-structuralism arrived in the States before structuralism and a deconstruction of the linear notion of temporal origins was, therefore, performed by its arrival. Origins are always subject to deconstruction.

The stated relation of Holes to Derrida's essay clearly has to do with his deconstruction of the notion of "the centre" in that much taught and debated essay. As Allen wrote in the "365 Holes" essay, imagining the poem announced in the first sentence: "Instead of a centre it would have a series of holes". Each line of Holes is in that sense a hole, something that can be looked through, but an aperture so small as to permit little light, or sometimes, even no light at all. The poem, thus, started by imagining a poetic response to Derrida's deconstruction of "centred structure", his attack on "the transcendental signified". It quickly grew beyond a "mere deconstructive poem", however. Continuing the project, Allen became interested in the unexpected and often aesthetically satisfying juxtapositions and patterns the lines would create by being drawn together. Most fascinating was the unexpected and unplanned nature of these patterns of meaning and sound. Chance could, of course, be said to be a deconstructive theme (see for example, "My Chance/Mes Chance"). However, it is also an abiding goal of poets post-Mallarmé, and a good many that came before him. With Holes, Allen has stumbled on an accessible, readable format which makes a genuine space for the productive role of chance.

The problem with the project was that from 2006 to 2012 Allen could not see how it could ever be published. The author considered publishing every ten years, in a way which might remind one of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's Drafts. Early on it dawned on Allen that this was a poem that he needed to keep writing, until "the end". It was, because of its purely formal structures (syllabic, calendar), an "open text", without any possibility of formal, purely aesthetic closure. But it was only when Allen met and started working with O'Sullivan that the digital potential of the project was spelt out, which when reduced to its basics meant that the poem could be delivered to an audience as an accumulative text, updated on some agreed regular basis. Thus it is true to say that Holes was not born digital in terms of its conception. It only became a poem with a possible audience once it was conceived again in digital terms—conceived rather than reconceived since the placing of the poem on a digital platform did not alter its essential structure, one ten syllable line-a-day emanating in content from the worlds (inner and outer) inhabited by its author. In this sense, Holes is, and is not, born digital: all origins are subject to deconstruction.

GENERATION & RECEPTION

Returning to the question of origins can perhaps help us think about the literary consequences of Holes. Some of the contexts were mentioned earlier, including what seems to be the crucial influence of Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play". Such an understanding of the lines of influence and origination are rather skewed, it must be said. Certainly, Derrida would be the first, if he were still alive, to point out that behind his own essay and philosophy lie a host of other texts, many of them literary. One of those influences that punctuates the book in which "Structure, Sign and Play" is published, Writing and Difference, is the Jewish Franco-Egyptian poet, Edmond Jabés. There are two essays in Writing and Difference dedicated to Jabés, and these accounts of the poet's work are dominated by the figure of the hole. In "Edmond Jabés and the Question of the Book", Derrida attempts to capture what is distinctive about that poet's meditations on history and Judaism. Rather memorably, he describes literature as: "The painful folding of itself which permits history to reflect itself as it ciphers itself" (64). The idea of "the Book", in other words, is Jabés's ultimate figure, since it emphasises, as Derrida famously says in Of Grammatolgy: "There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texts]." To add a little more from this notoriously controversial moment in Derrida's work: "We have tried to show …that in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and blood"…there has never been anything but writing …that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (158-9). Writing precedes what we call reality, we understand the world through bookish eyes. We are children of the Book, no race more so, as Jabés and Derrida both remind us, than the Jews. So that Derrida writes in his essay on Jabés: "Everything enters into, transpires in the book. This is why the book is never finite" (75). As Jabés himself puts it in his The Book of Questions:

> If God is, it is because He is in the book. If sages, saints, and prophets exist, if scholars and poets, men and insects exist, it is because their names are found in the book. The world exists because the book does. For existing means growing with your name. (31)

History is a book which writes us into being. But, as Jabés makes clear, literature and poetry are attempts to think of the book from within its pages, to give that book a new mode of consciousness, a possibility for reflection. Whilst history wishes to close the book and imprison its subjects within fixed meanings, poetry is an attempt to resist such closure.

In the final text in Writing and Difference, "Ellipsis", Derrida returns to Jabés, and suddenly Derrida's writing, and Jabés' quoted lines, are full of holes. First the poet himself:

> You are boring a hole through the wall at its base …
> A hole, it was only a hole,
> the chance for a book …
> It was only a hole
> in the wall
> so narrow that you never
> could have gotten into it
> to flee.
> Beware of dwellings. They are not always hospitable. (in Derrida, 298)

Then Derrida explaining this profusion of holes:

> Can one not affirm the nonreferral to the center, rather than bemoan the absence of the center? Why would one mourn for the center? Is not the center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death? The death which reassures and appeases, but also, with this hole, creates anguish and puts at stake? (296)

So the hole here is a name not only for the anxiety-inducing absence of "the centre": anxiety-inducing, at least, for those who desire "the centre", and thus desire fixed meaning, and thus the literal, and thus ultimately death. It also, this hole, begins to be the name of what replaces "the centre" playfully, and joyfully, that is an acceptance of the figurative and the interpretable and the infinite in the sense of that which lacks closure. This leads Derrida to ascribe to the figure of the hole the attributes of what in "Structure, Sign and Play", and indeed throughout Writing and Difference, he has called "the supplement" or supplementarity; a term which indicates the fact not only that all meaning depends on repetition (iterability) but that in each of those acts of repetition there is a crucial difference (différence). So that Derrida imagines:

> the center as the sign of a hole that the book attempted to fill. The center was the name of a hole; and the name of man, like the name of God, pronounces the force of that which has been raised up in the hole in order to operate as a work in the form of a book. The volume, the scroll of parchment, was to have insinuated itself into the dangerous hole, was to have furtively penetrated into the menacing dwelling place with an animal-like, quick, silent, smooth, brilliant, sliding motion, in the fashion of a serpent or a fish. (297-8)

Whereas, Derrida implies, against this tragic version of the hole as dangerous absence, one must rejoice in the fact that the hole requires filling and refilling, that it is in a very real sense unpluggable.

All of this was somewhere in Allen's mind when he began writing Holes. His Holes have one origin in

Derrida's meditation on Jabés's desire to keep the book open and alive and available for return. But of course, these contexts as soon as mentioned bloom into as many different meanings as there are readers of this essay. And that is the point. The deconstructive contexts are mentioned simply for accuracy, to put the record straight, but more importantly to indicate these tragic and comic, these dark and light understandings of the figure of the hole. What do they mean in specific relation to the poetic project in question?

The idea of Holes is one in which the possibility of an open poem is ventured. Open to time, of course. The fact that it is on-going in a linear sense seems less important to this aspect, than that the digital platform allows it to be published reasonably simultaneous with its composition, thus collapsing the traditional literary gulf between these times of generation and reception.

Just as importantly, then, Holes is open to interpretation and to what Derrida would call the play of the signifier. The referent, if there is one, slips as soon as each line is published. Allen has kept most references to what linguistically are known as shifters, that is to he and she and they and we, knowing full well that these pronominal referents radically shift. So that the poem is open to as many referents as the reader can bring to it.[2] Of course many of the social referents can be retrieved: the Bank crisis of 2008, the fall of Fianna Fáil as a consequence, the Iraq and Afghan wars, the Syria crisis, Israel's various incursions into Gaza and violence against the idea of Palestine, ISIS, terrorism of all sorts, the fallout from Blairism in the British Labour movement, the Scottish Independence referendum of 2014, the various social and political referenda in Ireland since 2006. But the effect of these shared markers is not to close off meaning, but rather to ground the poem in a world in which there is what the late Romantic scholar Marilyn Butler once called a fierce war of ideas. Added to this there are untold references to more personal events: giving up smoking, being ill, getting Parkinson's Disease, going through financial crisis, moving house, getting a divorce, becoming a father, the triumphs and betrayals of the workplace. But all these events are reduced to a size where context cannot survive. They are then strung back together like one of those examples of digital pointillism in which each dot of the emerging picture turns out to be a separate, distinct image.

From the point of view of traditional autobiography, of course, the loss of the referent and context we are referring to here would be understood as a catastrophic failure of representation. Yet as the late Barbara Johnson makes clear in one of her most famous essays, autobiographical writing generally is a lie and even a loss (and misfiguring) of self (179-90). The objective of Holes is and has always been to get a little closer to reality than the well-formed, closed, structured narrative autobiography can manage. Life is chaotic, unplanned and subject always to chance. Holes is an attempt to get as close to those forces, whilst remaining readable, or what Barthes called lisible (readerly). It provides its long-term readers with a text that is produced by an author experiencing the same world and enduring the same events, week by week. Occasionally standing back to reflect, as they flick up and down the uneven stream of lines, of how quickly life passes. The effect is, perhaps, to build into the composition, the publishing and the reception or consumption of Holes a phenomenological realism which has been one of the holy grails of poetic expression since the age of Wordsworth and Whitman. Giving up the rather thin aura of canonicity aspired to by most forms of contemporary codex poetry publishing, Holes through its digital platform collapses the divisions of time on which that secular mode of reliquary is normally constructed. The payoff is an experience which can become a genuine part of the fabric of the reader's weekly existence. And at that point a poem begins to have been constructed that, à la Derrida and Jabés, can be experienced as an open book inside of which one lives. A book that, in some small way, reflects upon its own mode of representation and meaning.

RE-EVALUATING THE LITERARY DATABASE

The edition is as unstable a notion as origin, with many scholars now seeing each edition as being just one of many existing and potential textual constructions, uniquely contextualised. This context is volatile, susceptible to editorial decisions, publication processes and social influences. This is the very essence of Holes, in that it is organic, iteractive, permeating in a manner that can only be bound by a form that is open to constant manipulation. Such traits are the hallmark of electronic literature. Holes, as its aesthetic exists at

present, an act of evolutionary digital autobiography, will never be fixed, and thus it will never be bound by a specific context, but rather, open to multiple contextualisations, each of which emerges out of day-to-day existence and experiences, constantly in flux. The Holes of today is not the Holes of next week, nor is it the Holes of next month. One could argue that Holes will inevitably reach a point where its final line is added, but at such a juncture it will become something else, other to what it is now.

While its MySQL database is the primary computational apparatus utilised in Holes, as a work of electronic literature, the piece deconstructs the notion of organised data. While the content is collected in a structured manner, this collection continuously expands, transcending, from a literary perspective, the fixidity of its form. Literary devices relate to both structure and composition. In terms of composition, literary devices include those elements that comprise a text, such as characters and plot. Literary techniques are those linguistic properties devised for artistic expression, such as metaphor. Through Holes, we can perceive to which of these categories the literary database belongs. As cultural scholars, we tend to insist upon the classification of all works within a genre—a trait represented in the Electronic Literature Organisation's detailing of keywords—even when the rigid fixidity of such an approach is resisted by the art. It is in this sense that Holes demonstrates, by resisting the structure which the database insists, how electronic literature is inherently dichotomous, relying on concrete logic to create ephemeral aesthetics. Holes is using its construction from and out of an electronic database to remediate elegy, lyric, auto-biographical text, diary, narrative, the "mighty line" of English iambic pentametre—these are forms and types, categories, styles, aesthetic and rhetorical traditions. They are all remediated and reimagined by the capacity for regeneration and iterative publication that one finds in Holes, and thus, lose the fixidity that make them what they are.

Holes reasserts and reinvents modern poetry's deconstructive relation with the lyric voice of the lone poet through a mode of utterance which closes the curtain of pronominal substitutability over all of its subjects. Holes responds to the law of genre in relation to the literary database. The law of genre works on the basis of repetition and citation, and yet repetition and citation inevitably deviate from the thing they apparently perpetuate. The strange logic of exemplarity, as teased out within Derrida's philosophy, is at stake when we think about the law of genre. What kind of genre or law of genre or generic limitations and prohibitions does Holes exemplify? Holes, after all, lives up to its name, or at least partly so. A database it is, but it is also a hole in itself: is it a lyric or an epic poem, is it romance, or perhaps it is an auto-biographical novel? At every moment of its existence it has been on the edge of the non-generic. From its genesis Holes has been on the verge of falling into itself, of collapsing so that it ultimately rested, if this were ever possible, on the uncategorisable, unidentifiable, non-name of a literary work outside of all names. This is, of course, impossible, but this is precisely what electronic literature, along with all literature, grasps at.

We would have to think long and hard about what dreams and fantasies, what new aspirations and ambitions, the idea and the reality of the electronic database bring forth outside and within us. What limits, what "frames or art", do electronic databases resurrect within us? The database conjures ideas of transparency and fluidity, of speed and connectivity, hyperlinks, networks, a collective dream fantasy of transparent and resistless collectivity and connectivity keep us meditating on these wonderful new creations. But what aesthetics emerge from the literature which electronic databases are now making possible? Does that aesthetic necessarily have to replicate, isomorphically accompany, the dreams of transparency, fluidity and infinite reach which encourage and burden the creators and purveyors of the new archives? Holes is an answer in the negative. It is a poem which rests on the electronic database, but more than that it is a poem which manifests at least some of that medium's potentialities. These potentialities are largely for loss and for chance. The referent is lost in anonymous substitutability, save for those forms – political, cultural, popular, newsworthy – which apparently connect us as a people, a nation, a Continent, a generic race or genus. Holes is a database of the retrievable and the irretrievable, the memorable and the erased and effaced. It grows textually and visually in the public eye. As such it is a "life poem". But unlike Drafts, it has no elongated and punctuated publication history and can be seen right now in all of its "organic" form. Holes could only exist digitally, resting as it does on the electronically archived codes of its visual manifestation.

For all of the aforementioned reference to philosophy and theory, Holes is phenomenologically realist because, first and foremost, it involves a practice of writing. The photographs that accompany the text on the site are a visual metaphor for this aspect, as if one decided to take a close up of every wall one encountered. Holes involves a practice of turning each day into a ten syllable snapshot. Such a curtailed image can only ever be of one thing and even then no more than a detail of that "thing". Again, the metaphor of placing numerous photographs together comes to mind. A technique akin to the kind of fast forward autobiographical film made possible in the digital age. Ultimately this practice-based nature of the poem, in which author and reader share the unfolding of the text's patterning together, comes to supplant the dream of mastery which haunts traditional well-made poems (see Wood). There can be no claims of mastery and authority in a poem the length, content and patterning of which are outside the control of the author. The author is not dead, of course. Only Roland Barthes's 1968-inspired rhetoric would claim such a thing. Yet in the digital age, in which the temporal boundaries between composition, publication and reading have been so spectacularly shattered, the author becomes precisely a subject rather than a master. The author of Holes is the subject of but also subject to the poem, which in its lack of closure and its sheer repeatability deserves the title of a book. A hole that is a book. But a book which makes no claim to be the Book. A book without mastery, perhaps.

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NOTES

1. http://holesbygrahamallen.org, Graham Allen's Holes, published by New Binary Press.
2. For the very reasons of polysemy that are being invoking here, we do not intend in this essay to begin citing and then interpreting examples, exemplary lines. There are, Allen is suggesting, no exemplary lines in Holes.

PERMALINK

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ABOUT

Graham Allen is Professor at University College Cork. His books include Harold Bloom: Towards a Poetics of Conflict (1994); Intertextuality (2000 and 2011); Roland Barthes (2003); The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom, co-editor with Roy Sellars (2007); Mary Shelley (2008) and The Reader's Guide to Frankenstein (2008). His work has been translated into Japanese, Korean, and Persian. Graham has published two collections of poetry, The Madhouse System (2016) and The One That Got Away (2014). His poems have previously been published in such venues as Southword, The Stinging Fly, The Rialto, Poetry Ireland Review, Revival, La Questione Romantica, The SHOp, Cultural Politics, and Cyphers. He was the winner of the Listowel Single Poem Prize in 2010.

James O'Sullivan is the Digital Humanities Research Associate at the University of Sheffield. James holds a Ph.D. in Digital Arts & Humanities, as well as advanced degrees in computing, literary, and cultural studies. His work has been published or is forthcoming in a variety of interdisciplinary journals, including Digital Scholarship in the Humanities, English Studies, the International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing, and Digital Humanities Quarterly. He is the co-editor of Reading Machines with Machines. He is Chair of the DHSI Colloquium at the University of Victoria. James is also a published poet, and the Founding Editor of New Binary Press. Further information on James and his work can be found at http://josullivan.org.