



Digital Hermeneutics Embodied in Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters," and Memory: Analog to Flash Interface in the Light of Ecofeminism

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Research Article

Volume 9 Issue 2

Received Date: April 10, 2026

Published Date: May 05, 2026

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000364

Abstract

In poetry, exploration in layout and visual rhythm has made way for non-static visual poetry that has transcended the boundary of form, space, and semantic content. Brian Kim Stefans' *The Dreamlife of Letters* based on Rachel Blau DuPlessis' appropriated text, "Draft#7: Me" in turn inspired by Dodie Bellamy's "Sex/Body/Writing," exemplifies the boom of the Flash animation of the 1990s to 2000s wherein the focus lies in language, identity, and technology. The present research article endeavours to establish Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" as a specimen of how kinetic poetry and memory studies intersect, as both delve in ideas such as perception, embodied experience, and time.

Keywords: Memory Studies; Kinetic Poetry; Hermeneutics; Ecofeminism; Flash Animation

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Prolegomenon

Classical Hermeneutics was the art and theory of interpretation traditionally applied to sacred scriptures and literature that eventually expanded into a philosophical method of understanding. The newly emerged Digital Hermeneutics, on the other hand has come to represent a new epistemological and methodological framework that is compelled by the logic of computation and bridges humanistic interpretation with algorithmic processing, altering elements such as authorship, context, and meaning

in digitally mediated environment.

Classical Hermeneutics has been enriched by the theoretical ideas of Friedrich Schleiermacher [1] who stressed on the importance of empathy and reconstructing the author's intent; Wilhelm Dilthey [2] who emphasised the situatedness of hermeneutics within human sciences that would serve as a means of understanding lived experience; Hans Georg Gadamer [3] (whose *Truth and Method* marked the radical turn of the 20th century) whose work focused on the dialogical nature of understanding, the fusion of horizons, and the role of prejudices (in Gadamerian sense) that shape interpretation; and Paul Ricoeur [4] who introduced a hermeneutics of suspicion and narrative identity, emphasising the layered nature of interpretation and the interplay between meaning and explanation.

The advent of Digital Hermeneutics, firstly lay embedded in the rise of digital texts (born-digital) that were mutable, nonlinear, and often collaborative and not merely digitised (as scanned books); and secondly, the advent of computational methods (e.g. text mining, natural language processing, machine learning) in interpretation of cultural artifacts. Digital Hermeneutics, therefore, challenged the classical hermeneutical emphasis on close reading which is deep and context-rich, and proposed a model of distant reading [5], algorithmic mediation, and multimodal representation. Digital Hermeneutics then is a study and practice of interpretation in and through digital media that is both ontological and epistemological.

Algorithmic interpretation, Multimodality, Interactivity, and Scale are some of the key components that help in the analysis and interpretation of what Katherine Hayles calls “technotexts” in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* [6]. She described them as objects in which medium and meaning co-constitute each other. While Algorithmic interpretation constitutes an analysis of how algorithms read and interpret data raising questions of bias, intentionality, as well as transparency; Multimodality refers to the interpretative process that involves analysing not just the text, but the codes, the images, the hyperlinks, and the metadata among others. Interactivity can be understood in terms of the reader’s interpretive role being shaped by the hypertextuality, interface design, and search functionalities. Lastly, the Scale is a reference to the tendency of employing both close and distant reading within Digital Hermeneutics which allows for discovering new patterns across a large range corpora. The present project proceeds with this understanding of the elements of a technotext.

There are certain theoretical lineages that one tends to find within Digital Hermeneutics: Postphenomenology and Mediation Theory, Actor Network Theory, Critical Code Studies, and Poststructuralism. The intersection between Digital Hermeneutics and Postphenomenology has been located in the common tendency of exploring how technologies mediate human-world relations by Don Ihde [7] and Paul Verbeek [8]. Digital Hermeneutics has also borrowed from the Actor Network Theory, associated with Bruno Latour [9] and Michel Callon who proposed that interpretation emerges from networks of human and non-human actors. So, the actants in the production of meaning could include: algorithm, reader, dataset, or a user interface. The result of which is that the interpretation becomes distributed. Mark Marino’s *Critical Code Studies* [10] is another significant influence. Marino stressed the importance of using codes that structure digital texts (software layer, data architecture, socio-political context) in the process of interpretation. The influence of Poststructuralism in Digital Hermeneutics

can be traced back to Roland Barthes’ [11] “Death of the Author.” In Digital Hermeneutics this death is extended to the multiplication of authorship which have come to include collaborative writing platforms, and algorithm generated content. Interpretation therefore involves grappling with hyper-authorship, remix culture, and machine authorship.

Let us approach the literary prying and analysis of Brian Kim Stefans’ “technotext,” “The Dreamlife of Letters,” with this understanding [12]. In poetry, exploration in layout and visual rhythm has made way for non-static visual poetry that has transcended the boundary of form, space, and semantic content. Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” based on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ appropriated text, “Draft#7: Me” exemplifies the boom of the Flash animation of the 1990s to 2000s wherein the focus lies in language, identity, and technology. The present research article endeavours to establish Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” as a specimen of how kinetic poetry and memory studies intersect, as both delve in ideas such as perception, embodied experience, and time.

Tracing the Historical Context

The 1950s were shaped by the World War II, the nuclear age, and the Cold War. Mass Media, Cybernetics (Norbert Wiener) [13], Information Theory (Claude), and Structural Linguistics (Saussure, Jakobson) [14] bore deep influence on the period consequently putting under question the aspects such as authorship, language, information, and truth. Digital poetry of the 1950s is but an extended version of the wave of experimentation that was Modernism of the twentieth century, which one might describe in Jessica Pressman’s words as “Digital Modernism” [15]. She ascribes this term to the “second-generation works” of, “electronic literature that are text based, aesthetically difficult, and ambivalent in their relationship to mass media and popular culture. Such works offer immanent critiques of a contemporary society that privileges images, navigation and close readings.

The first generation, to use the term advanced by Katherine Hayles, designates, body of digitally born texts (as opposed to digitised print texts) composed mainly of hypertexts, a genre of text-based narrative that promotes multilinear reading paths. Print antecedents include Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and Cortanzar’s *Hop-scotch*. Second-generation works explore and exploit the features of new authoring software packages, especially Flash, which enabled the production of multimedia, multimodal, and interactive aesthetics. Representative examples can be found at <http://www.poemsthatgo.com/poems.htm>, an archive for the defunct online literary journal *Poems That Go* that includes “The Last Day of Betty Nkomo,” a Flash poem by Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI).” (ix).

Precursors to Digital Modernism: Typographic Radicalism and Concrete Turn (1950s-1970s)

Concrete and visual form of poetry has been experimenting with the typography since the 1950s into the 1970s. Poets such as Eugen Gomringer and the Noigandres group (including Decio Pignatari, Augusto de Campos), through their exploration of layouts and visual rhythm, are seen as the early precursors to have explored the dimensions of form, space, along with the semantic content. Emerging from electronic literature, digital modern turn marks the shift from the fragmentation that imbued the works of high modernism such as TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* to what may be referred to as the Digital Modularity. The poets of 1950s began looking at fragmentation as not a negative assemblage of sorts which evoked cultural memory and sense of ruin but rather as a possibility wherein reader participation and real time interaction kinetic model could operate. This model is what was proposed by Charles Olson [16] in his manifesto of 1950, "Projective Verse." He called for the method of "composition by field." He favoured an open, spatial, and performative poetics wherein the poet's breath and body were paramount. He stated: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" ("Projective Verse" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse?query=En>)

The mid-1950s were significant as the period marked the advent of the Concrete Poetry in Europe and Latin America as a radical formalist movement. Eugen Gomringer and Augusto de Campos particularly known for their poems, "silencio" [17] and "semantica" [18], respectively, shifted the focus of the poem from semantic to visual. The depth of semantic structure was now subservient to the visual surface/code of the poem. This meant a transformative shift in language which now edged drastically towards spatial and visual architecture. While Gomringer's "silencio" evoked effect of silence through form rather than metaphor and anticipated the digital screen which would carry words and images to convey meaning beyond the confines of lexical content—termed as "affordance of interface" by the media theorists; Campos through "semantica" managed to use language as a code and providing an exemplar of semantic reduction which becomes a mode of algorithmic repetition transforming language into a structural object.

The procedural and aleatory poetics of the 1950s marked the birth of algorithmic thinking. Strategies such as chance operations, randomness, and rule-based composition enticed the poets during the time. Jackson Mac Low generated poems using random number tables, shuffling algorithms, and pre-defined constraints. In his *The Texts of the Performance Pieces* (1955-1960) he remarked: "This poem is not a message but an event. It is a machine made of words" [19]. Yet another

work of his titled, *5 Biblical Poems* was generated using stochastic processes from sacred texts—and is recognised as a piece of early generative software poetry. Here, the structure is rule-based yet manages yielding variable output in the way a computer executes a script. Mac Low had interest in cybernetics and information theory and with his work comes the larger epistemological shift from poetry being subjective expression to poetry being procedure and performance. This is what is the essence of digital poetics.

Composer, John Cages in his "Lecture on Nothing" [20] remarked: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it". He is a significant name within the procedural and non-linear aleatory poetics, for with him comes the shift towards later digital writing wherein structure takes precedence over meaning and the poem. The paradoxical statement of Cage given above is reflective of what is called the "post-symbolic logic" of this phase embodied in Cage and the later digital writers/ing. Another name that emerges in this discourse is that of high modernist, Gertrude Stein who is seen as a precursor of digital logic because of her looped syntax, minimal semantic variation, and exploration of iteration. "A rose is a rose is a rose," she wrote in "Sacred Emily" [21] published in 1913 (https://writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_Rose-isa-rose.html). This recursive phrase is algorithmic in structure as it repeats with slight variation. It foregrounds form rather than content. Gertrude Stein influenced rule-based compositions of Mac Low and Cage.

The poets of 1950s did not have access to digital tools, yet they conceptualised poetry as a system that was programmable, visual, and procedural. They helped usher in new forms of modular-processual poetics. So, 1950s may be seen as a period of "latent digital modernism—not digital in the technical sense, but in its media epistemology. It was a threshold moment where language became a system, the poem a program, and the poet a coder of sorts.

The Flash Revolution (Late 1990s-2000s)

The Flash poetry boom in the late 1990s and the 2000s was the second wave in the genealogy of digital poetry that was marked by movement, interactivity, and temporality. It was Adobe Flash that facilitated rendering of motion and interactivity. The poetry during this phase used Flash to enable multimodal experiences. It relied on animation and had graphic intensity. These ingredients became essential to digital poetry wherein now the letters moved, transformed, and responded to user input while conveying meanings that touched upon issues of language, identity, and technology. Interestingly, authors like Brian Kim Stefans and Donna Leishman deliberately drew from modernist strategies of aesthetic difficulty, and therefore their creative output is particularly not-smooth to navigate as a reader who is denied narrative-comfort or easily-discernible-meaning.

While Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" [22] is a canonical Flash that animates alphabetical characters with kinetic choreography; Donna Leishman's "Cruising" [23] is an interactive Flash-narrative that remediates the fairytale, *The Little Red Riding Hood* into a digital experience wherein narrative ambiguity and subverted interactivity are maintained.

Post-Flash Era and the Modern Kinetic Poetry (2000s-present)

The Post-Flash Era and the Modern Kinetic Poetry Era spans over the period of the 2010s onwards. Poets during this period have been focused on frameworks such as HTML5, CSS animations, and JavaScript. There is also a pivot towards AR (Augmented Reality), and the inclusion of touchscreens or motion sensors. Slowly what has further caught the fancy of the poets of this period is the VR poetry, projection mapping, and the AI-generated motion poems. This phase marks a new kind of "machine reading." Here, the poem is built from code, navigated through data-streams and has the ability to respond to environmental cues of touch, motion, and AR interfaces. Pressman referred to such texts as "processural" because they are dependent on the operations of the machine to unfold. In this discussion, we like Pressman, have seen digital modernism as a literary strategy, and have not seen modernism versus postmodernism as a binary.

Interestingly, if we were to adjudicate these shifts in poetry from the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, drawing upon its seminal understanding of the culture/nature dualistic world view of the nature of things we would find the Concrete to Flash to Modern Kinetic Poetry as an ontological movement from "nature" to "nature-culture" to "culture." But whether we understand this shift in a positive or a negative light would depend on the kind of ecofeminism we ascribe to. While ecofeminists/isms such as Social/ist ecofeminism, Marxist ecofeminism, and Cultural/spiritual ecofeminism would see it with scepticism, the ecofeminist understanding that Affinity ecofeminism and in particular Donna Haraway offers her readership would see this as a value adding shift.

What do we understand by Kinetic Poetry?

An online article titled, "Kinetic Poetry: Moving Words, Evolving Poetry," published by *Medium* on 23 April, 2025, defined kinetic poetry as, a sub-genre of digital poetry. Kinetic poetry features movement of text using multimedia as means which shares similar form to Concrete Poetry. But Concrete Poetry embodies the potential to represent graphic, sonic, kinetic, properties through static text. The two genres are being practised simultaneously in the digital age, and often overlap with each other.

In other words, then, kinetic poetry acquires meaning through the interpretation of the motion of its words. The semantic content of a kinetic text, more often than not, appears in a sequence of experimental typography and textual mutation. This causes a certain awakening of sorts of the reader-spectator to the aspects of language, previously neglected or looked over. Mouse movements, clicks, and scrolling are aspects of interactivity between the user and the artefact. The effect of these user actions is significant wherein poems can alter in response to the user actions. Multimodality is yet another characteristic element within the realm of kinetic poetry which combines sound, visuals, and tactile-immersive components.

A Meeting Ground: Kinetic Two-Dimensional Space and Memory

Kinetic poetry and memory studies are concerned with time, perception, and embodied experience. There is temporal unfolding of words and images in kinetic poems which may be seen as a mimicking of the functioning of memory which in itself is a process of dynamic unfolding. Kinetic poetry may be seen to simulate forgetting, recalling, or even repressed memory when the reader experiences the vanishing, glitching, or the reappearing of the text.

The immersive-interactive character of kinetic poetry engages body and senses just as memory studies focuses on embodied cognition and sensorimotor memory. Moving texts are seen to evoke emotional or visceral memory responses which in a similar way may be beyond the ambit of the static text.

The archiving, loss, and media decay concerns surrounding many of the kinetic pieces that exist on obsolete platforms such as Flash, point to the transience of digital poetry which can be seen as mirroring the fragility of memory. But what this also points to is the situatedness of such kinetic material character on the more nature coloured edge of the culture/nature spectrum for it included an added dimension of bodily existence of human-nature to the digital platform. Yet this idea is contentious as a major component of digital poetry is characteristically lacking in any depth and is based on computational processes along with the realtime generative output of the author.

The Standpoint of Memory

Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" helps enter a realm of the digital experimentation wherein an artefact becomes a poetic embodiment of how memory feels. However, this experiential understanding exhibits a certain lack wherein it is beyond this simulation to create an effect that can bring about breakthroughs in trauma cases. The case

in point becomes discernible when one considers Marina Trakas' conceptual understanding of "Kinetic Memories" as defined in the article, "Kinetic Memories: An Embodied Form of Remembering the Personal Past" [24] published in Spring 2021 in *The Journal of Mind and Behaviour* (Volume 42, Number 2), wherein Marina Trakas propounds that contrary to the popularity of the "embodied cognition thesis," "gained in recent years, explicit memories of events personally experienced are still conceived as disembodied mental representations....we can consciously remember our personal past through sensory imagery, through concepts, propositions and language, but not through the body" (139).

Marina Trakas while endeavouring to thwart this idea in her article defends, "the idea that the body constitutes a genuine means of representing past personal experiences" (139). Trakas focuses on the "analysis of bodily movements associated with the retrieval of a personal memory, which have certain features that make them different from procedural memories, pragmatic actions and common gestures, as well as other forms of embodied memories as examined in recent literature" (139). To Trakas, kinetic memories then, "are bodily movements in which some event or action that took place in the past can be seen, because they are an externalisation of the subject's inner intention of representing a past experience sometimes by imitation of a past movement, and other times through embodied symbols and metaphors....although sometimes they present direct pragmatic benefits, such as communicative benefits, they seem to enhance the whole reexperience of the past event and memory recall, which ...is one important and adaptive value" (139).

Trakas is greatly influenced by the method proposed by Jacques Lecoq [25], who had famously stated that, "The body knows things about which the mind is ignorant" (8). A French actor, mime and acting instructor, Lecoq urged people to look beyond narratives that were conventionally linguistic and visual (words and images) and realise the potentiality of bodily movements, for it must be recognised as a "form of knowledge" for not just the actor but also the spectator and could generate new layers of meanings. He found this to be akin to a conscious recovering of the "freedom of movement present in children" (Lecoq 73), for instance say performing at family gatherings or as an extrovert friend in a group.

Interestingly, as recounted by Marina Trakas, in the fields of philosophy and psychology, explicit memories personally experienced by the rememberer are commonly associated with two capacities:

...the capacity of remembering or recollecting events, which in the literature is known as episodic memory, and the capacity of knowing what was previously experienced, called personal semantic memory or semantic autobiographical

memory. Episodic memory is associated with the ability of mental time travel through subjective time, and is generally characterised as a mental representation with rich phenomenological details. Personal semantic memories present fewer phenomenological details and refer to memories of general events or lifetime periods, or to episodic memories that have become semanticized over time (Trakas 139-141) [24].

What is significantly noteworthy of explicit memories here is that both these types include recollecting through mental representation of the past involving internal visual images. They may be "externalised through natural language," but are "essentially disembodied: besides the neural substrates of personal memories and the vocal apparatus that is necessary for speech production, other parts of the body are not considered to be involved in the recollection of the personal past" (Trakas 141) [24].

Kinetic memories challenge this disembodied conception of personal memory and Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" is an example of this understanding of personal memory.

What does not qualify as kinetic memories?

So, what are kinetic memories? And what theoretical framework are we employing? The answer lies in understanding what does not qualify as kinetic memories (as discussed earlier). As a constituent of personal memory, kinetic memories are the embodied aspects such as "facial expressions, tones of voice, arms, legs, and other parts of the body," which Trakas calls "'theatrical performance' done in the context of remembrances of past personal experiences" (141). We can, therefore,...consciously represent our personal past experiences not exclusively through mental images or language but also via bodily movements that can engage the whole body. Just like professional actors use their body along with words to express meaning to spectators in a play, in everyday life we also occasionally become actors while remembering our personal past. (Trakas 141) [24]

Kinetic memories are made up by what we might understand as "kinetic content," "bodily movements that are at the same time an act of remembering or part of an act of remembering the past" (Trakas 142) [24].

But it, differs from any kind of sensitivity originating from inside of the body— temperature, arousal, and other bodily feelings and sensations, including motor tendencies that we may refer to as the "interoceptive content," which are always internal unlike kinetic content that is external and public.

"Interoceptive sensations" are connected with "affective states" (emotions, feelings, moods) and personal memory

can present “affective content” along side other “possible contents such as propositional and imagistic content (both of which are commonly recognised in literature)” (Trakas 142-43) [24].

Kinetic content, commonly attributed to procedural memories when analysing personal memories is often forgotten. There exists a distinction between the kinetic content associated with procedural memory and the kinetic content associated with personal memory.

Procedural memory, also referred to as the “kinesthetic memory” or “skill learning” generally refers to the:

...motor skills that are the product of a gradual and implicit learning process. The operations of procedural memory are expressed solely in behaviour; which is why procedural memory does not imply an explicit recollection of the past (even if it reflects memory of prior episodes) and the traditional memory concepts of encoding retrieval do not apply” (Trakas 144) [24].

Learning to ride a bike or say, to tie one’s shoe laces require procedural memory.

Marina Trakas proposed that kinetic memories are forms of memories that present kinetic content but are not procedural memories, because they are memories that refer to the personal past. Although Pierre Bourdieu in 1980 analysed the notion of habitus and propounded that it is not correct to believe that procedural memories do not represent at all, what he meant by this was that procedural memories can have a representative nature and represent aspects of culture, and social position of individuals. Next there are two questions that Marina Trakas proposes:

1. What are the conditions that must be fulfilled for bodily movement to represent something from the past?
2. What are the ways in which kinetic memories represent past bodily movements?

The answer to the first question lies in the understanding that there exist what are called implicit kinetic memories.

Implicit kinetic memory (unwitting mimicry of sorts) wherein the:

...re-enactor does not *see* some other event through the whistling or mimicking because she perceives it as an occurrent performance, but not as a representation of a past event. It is also true that someone with enough information could recognise the re-enactment and see through....Even the agent herself might come to see some past event if it is pointed out to her that she is now re-enacting something which she saw in the past. (Trakas 144-145) [24].

But what is interesting to note is that implicit kinetic memories are “halfway between actual cases of procedural memories and explicit cases of kinetic memories. They could be conceptualised as explicit kinetic memories that are going through a process of proceduralisation, similar to a certain extent to the process of semantization that affects some episodic memories due to remoteness and aging” (Trakas 147) [24].

Tenets of kinetic memory, curated on the basis of the reading of Marina Trakas’ discussion on Wollheim’s *Representation: The Philosophical Contribution to Psychology* published in 1977:

1. An explicit representative nature is essential to kinetic memory. A minimal causal link through “kinetic memory traces” to a past personal experience is a necessary condition for bodily movement to be a memory. However, it is not a sufficient condition for bodily movement to be a representation of something else. The rememberer must intend to perform a bodily movement in which some event or action that took place in the past is actually *seen*. If the representative intention is absent, the bodily movement loses its mnemonic character; it is not anymore a re-enactment of a past experience but a habit or a skill. “Past personal experience” refers not only to first-hand experience of specific past events, but also to repeated events experienced, and persons met, actions witnessed/seen, places visited, and emotions felt. “Experience” is thus not synonymous to “a specific event.” The more kinetic memories are implicitly retrieved, the less they are linked to the past personal experience from which they originally derived, and the less this past personal experience can potentially be seen. The minimal causal theory of memory operates on the premise that some traces left by the past event are necessary to construct a memory representation of any kind. This nonetheless does not imply that the memory representation cannot include information not originated in the experience representation of the past event. This is the reason this minimal causal memory is compatible with generationism about memory content. In the case of Stefans’ digital poem, the link is previous works coauthored alongside technology.

2. Memory traces carry informational content. Different basic systems-not only the motor system, but also the visual system and other sensory systems-may be involved in the formation of kinetic memories. These need not be specific “kinetic memory traces”; kinetic memories may be constructed from relational binding, operated by the hippo-campus, among different memory traces. In this respect, the process of kinetic memory construction would not differ significantly from that characteristic of personal memory, expressed through natural language and visual imagery (more commonly analysed in literature). For instance, visual traces of physical appearance, the place, specific bodily movements; auditory traces of speech

particularly intonation, semantic; and motor traces of general movements and attitudes performed while speaking, along with other traces. Motor-related areas of the brain are activated when we observe actions and get reactivated when one remembers those actions.

The kinetic movement of the words in “The Dreamlife of Letters” help achieve this function and render it interactivity.

3. Procedural memories are independent of the operations of the medial temporal lobe (MTL). MTL is a region of the brain that is vital for memory and spacial cognition, encompassing the hippocampus, amygdala, and parahippocampal cortex. It plays a crucial role in forming and retrieving memories, particularly episodic and spatial memories, through processes like encoding, consolidation, and retrieval.

Interestingly, there is little work linking human bodily movements to memories of past experiences and their neural substrates, but the study undertaken by Hilverman, Cook, and Duff in 2016 provided evidence that patients with hippocampal amnesia produced significantly fewer gestures than healthy participants when remembering different semantic and episodic memories [26]. This suggests that gestures produced in the context of an act of remembering are at least part supported by the hippocampal region. However, further investigation is required to determine if the nature of the relationship between gesture and memory is stable across tasks and behaviour, or if these are conditions or contexts in which gesture might engage nondeclarative or procedural memory.

In another study undertaken by N.B. Klooster, S.W. Cook, E.Y. Uc, and M.C. Duff published in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* under the title, “Gestures Make Memories, But What Kind? Patients with Impaired Procedural Memory Display Disruptions in Gesture Production and Comprehension” in 2015, it was observed that the procedural memory system is necessary to learn and remember information and experience expressed through hand gestures [27].

The two studies support the belief that both memory systems, that is, the declarative and the procedural memory systems, are necessary for the construction of kinetic memories. In this respect, kinetic memories would partly rely on the anatomical structures that are known as the procedural memory system, without nonetheless being similar to specify occurrences of procedural memories.

4. Kinesis helps represent personal past in different ways: re-enactment and mimicry. This may suggest that kinetic memories represent by the most primitive sense of resemblance, that is, physical resemblance. This also leads us to the question of whether kinetic memories solely represent bodily movements? The notions of functional

(resemblance obtained through preserving of pattern of causal relations among represented objects) and structural resemblance (obtained when physical relations among objects are preserved) do not account for the representative nature of kinetic memory because representation cannot be explained in terms of similarity. Symbolic movements can differ according to their construction. When bodily movements refer to a metaphor, that has canonical form, and a shared meaning in culture, they are considered to be “codified symbolic movements” because they are paired with stable meaning. Nonetheless, some symbolic movements are not part of a common ground of meanings in a community, but can be invented on the spot by the performer, and are thus new and “creative.” This means that symbolic representations of past personal experiences can be codified as part of the cultural background or can be creative as a result of the spontaneity of the individual.

There is therefore a distinction between two main kinds of kinetic memories and their representative nature.

1. Mimetic kinetic memories: which can compare to mimicry wherein representation of past experience happens by physical resemblance (i.e. through an occurrent imitative realisation of the past experience).
2. Symbolic kinetic memories: which is similar to mime wherein representation of the past experience happens by being the symbol of the past experience. The symbol can be codified and culturally shared in a community, or can be the result of the creative and spontaneous performance of the rememberer.

Mimetic and symbolic kinetic memories belong to the same kind since both are bodily movements. Firstly, they are casually linked in a minimal sense to a past personal experience, and some other event that happened in the past is seen through them because they are part of an explicit, conscious process of remembering, that is, because the subject performs these movements intention as a re-enactment of the past. Secondly, there is similarity in the way in which kinetic memories represent the past personal experience. Both mimetic and symbolic kinetic memories present some properties that in the literature have been attributed to demonstratives and indexicals. In other words, both kinetic memories are demonstrations, that is, externalisations of the subject’s inner intention of representing a past personal experience. These bodily movements not only describe a past personal experience but also point at it, realising a demonstration as the past personal experience.

The meaning in both cases is provided by their referent, and their referent depends on the demonstration itself, the subject’s representative intention and the context of remembering. In certain ways, these three elements provide the “rule” that determines the referent of the bodily

movements performed. That is why the same movements could have different referents and thus different meanings according to the context and the subject's intentions. So, the meaning of kinetic memories is not a quality of the mimetic and symbolic movements themselves but a fiction of the given bodily movements in their total relation to contextual and intentional elements.

Although the meaning of a kinetic memory is given by its referent, it is not exhausted by its referent. Kinetic memory cannot be considered a pure indexical or a true demonstrative in the sense that Kaplan [28] talks about in his essay, "Demonstratives," published in 1977, in *Themes from Kaplan*, as it is the case for deictic gestures such as pointing. Because kinetic memories are memories, they have a reconstructive nature, and even in the imitative cases, a reconstruction of a past bodily movement is hardly ever an impersonal, exact replica. It is formed from different memory traces and, in most cases, includes the perspective of the rememberer. This perspective means that not only does previous knowledge shape the way one remembers the event but also one's present intentions, emotions, interests, and so on. In this case, memory shaping is similar to the particular way in which one performs the bodily movements. This particular way, this embodied perspective, changes from rememberer to rememberer, and from one particular act of recollection to another. A different rememberer could perform the same pattern of bodily movements with a distinct personal touch. Even the same rememberer could perform on two occasions the same pattern of bodily movements differently, according to current intentions, emotions and interests. This helps create a hermeneutics of sorts and Dodie Bellamy, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Brian Kim Stefans' works are an embodiment of this understanding. This embodied perspective of the rememberer is thus unique to each process of remembering, and is part of the meaning of the bodily movements. That is why the meaning of kinetic memory is not exhausted by their referent.

These semiotic and phenomenological similarities between the representative nature of mimetic and symbolic bodily movements that are performed in the context of remembering the personal past, might lead to the supposition that the two kinds of bodily movements have sufficient commonalities to be subsumed under the unique label of kinetic memory. Nonetheless, further theoretical and empirical research is needed to determine other possible similarities and differences at different levels of analysis, such as the phylogenetic, the ontogenetic, and the implementational ones.

Considering phylogenesis, it is very likely that the ability of reproducing actions generated by others in other places and at other times evolved before the emergence of abstract and symbolic representational systems.

Brian Kim Stefans' Flash poem, "The Dreamlife of Letters" employs both mimetic and symbolic kinetic memories.

5. Kinetic memories could eventually present a social and conversational function, but they do not seem to have the other general functional uses attributed to episodic memories. The functions of episodic and autobiographical memories have been a topic of interest in recent years. It is generally accepted that episodic memories are functionally adaptive because they allow us to simulate future events in order to plan and make decisions in efficient ways. Furthermore, individuals use episodic memories for a wider variety of purposes: to preserve the continuity of the self, to develop and maintain social bonds, to reappraise the past in order to regulate emotional states and moods, to teach others and feel a sense of achievement. Kinetic memories, are generally (but not necessarily) part of larger acts of remembering personal experiences, but seem to neither have the same adaptive function nor the same variety of uses that are characteristic of episodic memories. Kinetic memories are tied to the "here and now," and it is difficult to see how they could play a role in efficient future planning and decision making. However, kinetic memories do seem to serve present needs—the kind where they respond to demands of the immediate environment, such as a communicative demand, or they could be performed in the service of cognitive activities of the performer.

M. Wilson [29], in "Six Views on Embodied Cognition," made a distinction between these two functions. Marina Trakas defines these as under:

A) On-line embodied cognition—refers to bodily movements that directly respond to the demands of the physical and/or social environment and thus directly introduce a change in the physical and/or social world that is intended to be efficient for the actor.

B) Off-line embodied cognition—refers to bodily movements that serve intrapersonal functions in that they are put to the service of the higher cognitive processes of the producer. In this sense, they do not directly respond to the demands of the physical and/or social environment and thus can only indirectly introduce a change in the physical and/or social world.

There are three other kinds of embodied cognition—procedural memories, pragmatic actions related to an act of remembering, and gestures which can be differentiated from kinetic memories.

Procedural memory is an example of on-line embodied cognition. Maria Trakas discusses how E. Casey in the work, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* published in 1987 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), enumerated the characteristic aspects of procedural memories, such as efficaciousness [because they constitute an entire second

nature, an effective (and pre-reflective) history within the body that seeks to introduce a difference in the environment that at the same time is effective to the actor herself]; deeply orienting (because they form habits that allow us to become familiar with our environment and to establish a base of assurance upon which more complicated and spontaneous actions can arise); and regular (because procedural memories cannot be unpredictable and wayward if they are to be efficacious and orienting, although they need not be restricted to repetition. Procedural memories then “serve as our *familiaris* in dealing with our surroundings” (Casey 149). Kinetic memories neither help us successfully navigate the world nor stay oriented and be familiarised to/with our surroundings. And although procedural memories are flexible, they nonetheless present certain regularity that is absent from kinetic memories.

Pragmatic actions are instances where motor behaviour is embedded in a task-relevant external situation that only makes sense in that particular environment. The intention behind it is to make a change in the world. The pragmatic action introduces a difference in the environment that is unquestionably effective to the actor. Memory operates to serve the needs of a body interacting with a real-world situation and because the cognitive-embodied activity is embedded in a task-relevant situation it could be considered as a case of on-line embodied cognition. But this goal oriented aspect is not necessarily present in kinetic memories, as it happens in pragmatic actions that are attributable to the retrieval of a past event. In the case of kinetic memories meaning is independent from the physical environment where it is performed because it is mainly determined by its referent but in case of pragmatic actions the meaning remains the same in every physical environment. Because many kinetic memories are brought about by a representative intention whose reference bears the mark of the past, they are not cases of on-line embodied cognitions like the context of an act of remembering a personal experience (say singing a song).

Gestures may be understood as “movement of the arms and hands in a region of space reserved for symbolic expression, typically in front of the torso (McNeill, 1998. p. 11)” (Trakas 160) [30]. Kinetic memories cannot be reduced to gestures, for unlike gestures, kinetic memories can suggest the movement of other parts of the body. In fact, they can involve all motor repertoires, including posture and locomotion, such as dancing and walking, and voice modulation. Music may not have been a highlight of Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” but the deliberate silence comes across as an added layer of meaning and symbolism. Although kinetic memories cannot be limited to gestures alone, they certainly can take the form of gestures. We may be tempted to believe that kinetic memories, because of their representative nature,

can only take the form of iconic gestures (that is, of gestures that bear a physical resemblance to their meaning), but this is not in fact the case. Imitative kinetic memories can take the form of any kind of gesture: iconic, metaphorical, deictic (or pointing) or beat gestures (McNeill, 1992) (Trakas 159-161).

Deictic or emblematic gestures (e.g. accusatory pointing) are movements of hands/body, used to indicate specific referents in the immediate environment.

Beat gestures (e.g. funny imitation of a public speaker) are simple, rhythmic hand movements that accompany speech, typically used to emphasise certain words or phrases.

Iconic gestures are movements or actions that visually resemble or represent the content of the accompanying speech, conveying meaning similar to the words spoken.

Metaphoric gestures represent an abstract idea or a concept (e.g. feelings). Therefore, it is important to highlight the main difference between kinetic memories which take the form of gestures and other gestures performed by the speaker.

Regarding kinetic memories, the speaker invites the receiver to “see in” her/his gestures and other bodily movements a representation of something from the past, as if these gestures and bodily movements do not belong to her/him and should not be interpreted as her/his own but rather as signs of something or someone else related to the past. That is why in communicative situations kinetic memories have more commonalities with theatrical performances than with other gestures performed in everyday life that are directly attributed to the performer. Marina Trakas gives the example of actors who wish their audience to believe that all the gestures and movements that she does, belong to the characters they represent and not to the person that they are. Kinetic memories, then, that take the form of gestures can only be a subgroup of gestures and this does not depend on the kind of gestures themselves but on the context, which is determined by the subject’s intention of representing a past personal experience.

There is another difference between gestural kinetic memories and gestures that are directly attributed to the performer. Some gestures are thought to communicate non-semantic information, such as the speaker’s internal state, their attitude toward the addressee, and other information that in some situations can be important for the communicative interaction. Kinetic memories performed in a communicative situation can in certain cases provide information about the speaker’s appreciation and perspective of her past personal experience (a memory is always a reconstruction and the remembered event is in general shaped by the rememberer’s intentions and emotions), but unlike some gestures, they do not seem to provide any information about the relationship between the speaker and the receiver.

There are few empirical studies that analyse symbolic gestures and other bodily movements while remembering personal past experiences, so the idea that kinetic memories, as well as gestures, are exclusively performed in conversational situations is more an intuition than an empirically confirmed fact.

There can be cases where kinetic memories are independent of social context or communicative situation. E.g. imitating dance movements from a live concert at home. There can also be situations where kinetic memories, like gestures, may present a communicative purpose, but this purpose does not seem to be their sole function.

Gestures which are generally considered to be on-line embodied cognitions can in fact be understood as off-line embodied cognitions which serve higher cognitive processes. Gestures seem to play a role not only for the observer, but also for the producer. In fact, gestures serve multiple intrapersonal functions, that is, they have multiple beneficial effects at the linguistic and cognitive level for the speakers who produce them. They help formulate coherent speech by aiding in the retrieval of words from the mental lexicon; they are implicated in the process of integrating nonverbal information into a format that is available for speech and in this way they help with speaking; They facilitate working memory capacity in the moment in which they are produced, and they improve the encoding of information among many other intrapersonal functions.

The importance of their intrapersonal functions has led some researchers to state the controversial idea that gestures add very little to a communicative exchange under ordinary circumstances and that their main functions are intrapersonal.

Although the debate is ongoing that gestures may principally serve higher cognitive processes and may not necessarily be related to the communication demands of the physical or social environment.

In this case, gestures seem no different from other motor movements such as the “looking at nothing” phenomena. This refers to oculomotor mechanisms, more specifically eye movements, that are activated in the absence of appropriate external stimuli while remembering a scene or elements of a scene. It seems that the locations to which eye movements are directed appear to be determined, at least in part, by the mental representation of the scene remembered. Because this type of eye movement helps to retrieve information and is thus at the service of memory, it accomplishes an intrapersonal function and is better considered as off-line case of embodied cognitions. Kinetic memories cannot therefore be reduced to gesture nor can the function of

gestures be reduced to the enhancement of communication. The kinetic movements of words in Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” guide the spectator’s eye movements to emote meaning.

Writing as Memory Praxis: A Reading of “The Dreamlife of Letters”

Right at the outset of the Flash poem, “The Dreamlife of Letters” Brian Kim Stefans informs the reader of how, he:

In 1999, along with several other poets and writers, was asked to partake in an online ‘roundtable’ on sexuality and literature. The event...centred around a brief essay by the San Francisco novelist, Dodie Bellamy. The outcome of this roundtable, which would take place entirely through email, was to be published on the Poetics List that is moderated out of SUNY Buffalo.

All of the participants were divided into groups, each individual having a position in that group. As I was the second in position, I was assigned to respond to the person in the first position, who in my case was the poet and feminist literary theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

DuPlessis wrote a very textually detailed, nearly opaque, response...I decided that I wanted to respond to her text in a detailed manner, but I felt that normal prose would not suffice on my part, so I alphabetised the words in her text, and created my own series of very short “concrete” poems based on the chance meeting of words. My poem (which you can read here) along with a few short paragraphs in response to Bellamy, was my contribution to roundtable.

(https://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/the_dream_life_cleaned.html)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ poem [31], “Draft#7: Me” therefore was written as a response to Dodie Bellamy’s [32] essay, “Sex/Body/Writing.” It appears in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *Drafts 1-38, Toll* (Wesleyan University Press, Middleton 2001), which is a “series of autonomous, but interdependent canto-like poems” on which the author has been working since 1985 (*Drafts 138, Toll. ix*). Rachel Blau DuPlessis had worked on the “pre-Drafts work, called ‘Writing’ (1984-1985), and the first two Drafts were originally published in *Tabula Rasa* in 1987; *Drafts 3-14* were published in 1991; and *Drafts 15-xxx, The Fold* appeared in 1997, all from Potes and Poets Press” (*Drafts 1-38, Toll ix*).

In what Edric Mesmer [33] in the *Cordite Poetry Review* refers to as the, “ongoing epical meditation-meditation,” one locates Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ “Draft # 7: Me,” as an exemplar piece that has mobilised the epistle form to create

an open text. The “continuous work site” of DuPlessis has been described by her as having been founded on the logic of the provisional and the contingent” (Patrick Pritchette’s “Drafting Beyond the Ending: On Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ *Jacket 2*” [34] (<http://jacket2.org/feature/drafting-beyond-ending>). Such a character gives it a living breathing growing organism like structure.

“Draft#7: Me” is a polyphonic poetic narrative that stirs complex interpretive layers of meaning in the reader’s mind as it offers an opportunity for literary prying into the ideas of selfhood, memory, language, and perception. Its narrative is a disrupted version of any conventional one. And its syntactical structure adds to this effect of experimentation with the fragmentary form that is achieved through the employment of **typographic experimentation** (e.g. “9^{1st} St.” (Stefans 40), voy-elle (Stefans 42), “Sky writing-” (Stefans 40), “the Broadway I” (Stefans 43).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis resorts to the use of the devices of enjambment, white space, and isolated phrases. These are employed with the objective of achieving the interruption, redirection, and multiplicity of thought. This method is in alignment with the **Language Poetry** of renowned poets of the likes of Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, or Susan Howe, whose work focuses not so much on expressing a singular coherent subject but on the functioning of the language, as to how language itself constructs and fragments meaning. The disjointed form that emerges is an embodiment of a unified self that is highlighted by the unstable use of pronouns (her, me, you, I). American poet, Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” exhibits this disjointedness with an aim of achieving a certain unifiedness that evades because of the identity markers that the society imposes on individuals. Brian Kim Stefans’ concerns may be implicit in the dignified kinetic movement of the alphabetised words but are quite explicit in the words themselves. For instance his “prologue” sets the tone for the spectator as to what inversions of fixities of life to expect through the literal inversion of words such as “fixed gender” and “handsome!”

(https://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/the_dream_life_cleaned.html). The dreamworld, in other words, the aspirations of different genders are projected onto the letters. And as Jacquelyn Johns stated, “In order to have a ‘Dreamlife,’ the letters and words must indeed have dreams and be alive” (blogs.setonhill.edu). However, the words that crash into one another and are held in no order or syntax or direct apparent meaning do seem to offer a deeper parallelism between the multidimensionality of human existence and the poem with its unique structure. Jacquelyn Johns’ asserted,

Although the words in the poem and the words in the original response are exactly the same, they take on two completely different roles in each form, thus

comprising almost two completely different ‘lives.’ Likewise, people can take on two completely different personas when they are placed in two strikingly different situations; the woman at the bar Saturday night is wild and vivacious, while the same woman at church on Sunday morning is calm and reserved.

However, because the two structures will always be linked by their shared vocabulary they parallel the interconnectedness of all human life. Humans, although they may attempt to wear multiple guises, can never escape their whole selves; thus, the woman who bar-hops on Saturday and hails Mary’s on Sunday must still reconcile these two conflicting selves at the end of the day. (blogs.setonhill.edu)

Jacquelyn Johns therefore looks at the chaos of life, the multidimensionality, and interconnectedness of life embodied in “The Dreamlife of Letters.” To her,

...people constantly crash into one another for no real reason, especially when they are unceremoniously ripped from their surroundings and familiar contexts. Taken from their familiar surroundings, people naturally reach for human connection and contact, just as these letters, taken from their original essay, are streaming into one another. (blogs.setonhill.edu)

Stefans’ poem seems to be attempting to make sense of the watertight gender binaries. Another significant structural aspect of the animated Flash rendition is the device of personification, which further fosters the thematic weight of the piece.

However, unlike traditional personification, in which inanimate objects directly perform a human action or express a human emotion, this poem utilises a kind of implied personification.

For example, one line in the written poem reads, “character? /Chimneysweeper Christ.” From these few short words, readers begin to imagine that a word or letter is actually questioning the “character” of the person, which they describe as a “chimneysweeper Christ.” The words no longer represent an idea, they are the idea; the words are performing what they are representing. And because they are acting human-like, they are thus facilitating the aforementioned parallels to human life. Another example of personification in “Dreamlife” includes the repetition of the words “I,” “I’d,” and “in.” This repetition conveys the human characteristic of urgency and emphasis; because it is repeated so many times, the word “I” seems to come alive, yelling, “I, I, I!” The word “I” feels urgent and is actively looking to place emphasis on some point.

The word “I,” like humans, is feeling, thinking and expressing itself. Likewise, the word “in” is actually moving, attempting to burrow “in, in, in.”

The choice of the title is therefore significant from the point of view of this structural device. The component of animation accentuates the impact of the poem on the spectator, “the mis-matched words” on the screen require the reader to react to “learned cues (eg repetitiveness implies urgency)” as the “letters and words grow, shrink, fly, fall, and spiral, in addition to countless other motions. Readers can [in fact] see the poem moving just as people do.” (Jacquelyn Johns blogs.setonhill.edu)

Language serves, therefore, in construction of the subject of the poem while also being the medium through which it is woven. The speaker’s questioning of her own utterance instils in the reader’s mind the doubt the speaker is undergoing over the authenticity of **self-expression**, for clearly in the following lines there is instability of voice, and rather than it being singular it is polyphonous and insecure: “different/voices competing don’t used that, meaning/that model that word to identify/things that this isn’t it isn’t my voice/ it?” (Stefans 40). There is presence of linguistic and typographic signs that foreground the **materiality of language** (e.g. “em space” (Stefans 40), “ens and ems” (Stefans 40), “variable space” (Stefans 43), “dashing marks” (Stefans 43), “X’s” (Stefans 44). This emphasis on how words look and behave on the page evoke a **meta-poetic sensibility**, drawing attention to the poem as made, written, constructed, rather than as mere representation.

The poem also exhibits the persistent recurrent “me” though it is forever— deflected, deferred, or overwritten— which is indicative of a crisis or deferral of identity. The opening line references a “sealed lid”— suggesting containment, secrecy, or repression (Stefans 40). What is within is “mazed letters rem”—partially obscured, suggesting the partial or failed legibility of the self (Stefans 40). Later occurring line: “some ‘me,’/that is, or/no me,” articulates, the fundamental instability of the poem (Stefans 44). The self is both central and absent. This paradox resonates with poststructuralist theories of the subject (Derrida, Lacan), where identity is seen as fragmented, textual, and contingent.

Perception and visibility are significant aspects of the poem. Images fuse the sensory, symbolic and inexpressible. This implies that sight leads to voice, but voice remains stuck or unspeakable. This alternativeness of the poetic piece to the element of sight, the line between seeing and saying, is never quite resolved. This is best understood when Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes, “I line my eyes with blue/initiation. A bird-thought sits inside my throat” (Stefans 43). In the case of “The Dreamlife of Letters” the silence becomes poignant

and serves a role as compared to the kinetic movements and its function.

“Draft#7: Me” also incorporates a discourse thread of **primal memory or trauma**. Its use of a fairy-tale mythic language when DuPlessis creates the following image: “The bigmouth/ bears came chasing me and made me/dash all dark—” clearly, point towards **autobiographical memory** but remains surrounded by ambiguity and mythology (Stefans 41). It also translates a surreal childlike terror. “The big-mouth bears came chasing me” is probably just a metaphorical rendering of the trauma or childhood fear but when in the same Stanza 6 poet writes: “far run of little me—and that started/some me screaming of/me, a tuneful tidal wave/of much engulfing light,” there is shift from fear to over-whelming expression of emotion (Stefans 41). Brian Kim Stefans offers equally compelling images in “The Dreamlife of Letters,” consider for instance reference to “Oedipality” and “Oedipalized” (https://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters/the_dream_life_cleaned.html).

There is clear indication of **self-reflexivity** in the poem. There is a direct addressal to the act of composition when DuPlessis writes: “And so I started putting writing/ in to my poems/and writing over and writing my poems/ over—” (Stefans 44). The act of writing becomes recursive, palimpsestic—a layering of drafts, memories, selves. The speaker also admits to erasure, rewriting, and the impossibility of finality. The **refusal of authorial certainty** and that of poetic declaration comes through the verse lines: “plan/to withdraw my/candidacy, plan/to declare nothing” (Stefans 43). The poem has been looked upon as a space of unmaking as much as that of making. Stefans’ indicative words: “Kristeva,” “feminist,” “Cixous,” “bi,” “poly gendered,” “dream,” hold much meaning here.

The highlighted modernist aspects from the above discussion of Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ “Draft#7: Me” are evidently held on to in Brian Kim Stefans’ “The Dreamlife of Letters” which over the years has in fact come to pose,

“a challenge to viewers to question how to read a text. It is no longer the normal left to right, but instead the words flow from every direction, as if every word has its own character. Eliminating most of the syntax, the viewers can still discern some words concerning gender and identity repeating during the video, such as “gender,” “poly-gendered,” “pre-gender,” “sexuality,” corresponding to Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ standpoint. (Anonymous <http://medium.com/@b245361/kinetic-poetry-how-and-whywordskeep-moving-51757363763e>) [35].

The video lasts for eleven minutes requiring no interaction except the index interface, Stefans himself

described it as a short film that places viewers outside of the action.

The animation unfolds the aesthetic value of language apart from the carrier of meanings by delicate graphic design. This adopts the well-practiced visual aspect of concrete poetry to digital media. Language becomes units of design, as Kim Knight commented, than units of meaning, and is aestheticised on the visual plane (2017)¹

However, a pertinent question to address here is that how does Brian Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" compete with the different interpretations of the past as compared to Dodie Bellamy's "Sex/Body/Writing" and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "Draft #7: Me"?

Visual metaphors in "The Dreamlife of Letters" are indicative of the social-existential dynamics. The unpredictability and instability of the words point on a kinetically allegorical sphere that there is instability of identity—the trembling appearance of "am" on the screen and the interruption of "all" by the word, "alley," are instances of this destabilisation. In addition to this, it is a way to subvert narratives and forms that are conventional. Concrete poetry is what Brian Kim Stefans builds on to create context-shifting line up of words and visuals. Human errors and interpretive slippages can be seen paralleled through machine reading failures—there are glitches of the kind of misordered fragments and dropped punctuation—referred to as the "algorithmic fractures," that are responsible for the creation of meaning. These automated processes touch upon structuralist and poststructuralist concerns about language and signification. And account for the journey of a poem from Analog to Flash interface, which is indicative further of the shift from Nature to Culture according to Cartesian dualistic spectrum observed by ecofeminism.

Flash is essentially non-interactive and does not allow the viewer to navigate the performance. In that sense, it is less of an author-code. "The Dreamlife of Letters" is the cinematic compilation of poetic experience which does not allow audience interaction because Brian Kim Stefans found it best suited his intention. This work manages to stir up and interrogate the defining line between human intellect and digital automation. Memory studies intersects with queer poetics, feminist theory, and digital experimentation because all these share the idea of the instability of the self and the unreliability of historical past. The idea of self and

its relatedness with history/past is therefore apparent. As Paul Ricoeur suggested in *Memory, History, Forgetting*: "To be forgotten is to die twice" (412). Literature offers a way to finding one's identity through expression and documentation. An individual's desire to have a "dreamlife" finds expression in Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters." Jacquelyn John reiterates this point as he writes, "in order to have a 'dreamlife,' the letters and words must indeed have dreams and be alive" (https://blogs.setonhill.edu/JacquelynJohns/2008/10/close_reading_of_the_dreamlife.html).

Digital humanities allow for an incorporation of a long tradition of writing (here, DuPlessis' *Drafts* and Dodie Bellamy's "Sex/Body/Writing") to be incorporated almost as DNA (genetic blueprint of all living things), in helping construct "The Dreamlife of Letters," for it edges to the realm where machine and individual become coauthors in creating a text that is based on the traditions of concrete poetry. Prying of the afore mentioned works by Dodie Bellamy, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Brian Kim Stefans reveals a unique engagement between the three as they compete in their interpretations of identity, memory, and the past, when probed through a Ricoeurian framework of comparing embodied, historiographic, and algorithmic memory practices. In the Ricoeurian sense, writing helps in averting cultural death, for forgetting is ontological violence. It helps resurrect the non-normative. This is in tandem with Dodie Bellamy's attempt at putting forth the "abject" (sex, illness, excretion), for embodied memory she believed must discomfort in order to oppose the sanitised-conventional-histories. She wrote in *Bee Reaved*: "The best writing embarrasses the author...emerging from a compulsion to flaunt what any sane person would camouflage" (2022).

Dodie Bellamy's "Sex/Body/Writing" attempts at reclaiming memory through visceral immediacy of the feminised and queer body bypassing the historical narrative, resurrecting the messy, wounded, sexualised subjectivity—the abject—in order to thwart what the dominant discourse wants forgotten. Body becomes the site of archival resistance remembering through the somatic and affective (through sensation, trauma, and desire). This challenging of heteronormative canon through writing into memory the abject, the erotic, the leaky, the queer, the unstable self is similar to Rachel Blau DuPlessis' idea of writing as a site of ethical remembering. Her *Drafts* are seen as such rituals of remembrance. But memory to her is shaped by silences, absences, and the politics of gender. In other words, memory is polyphonic and historiographic. Her "Draft#7: Me" is an excellent exhibit of how memory is performed as a textual palimpsest—through intertextuality, fragmentation, and repetition. A feminist memory project (that is communal, historical, and personal), her "Draft#7: Me" resists

1 Quoted from Knight, Kim. (2017). *Brian Kim Stefans' The Dreamlife of Letters*.

<http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/index.html%3Fp=728.html>

patriarchal linearity by being non-chronologically composed and centres women's voices previously erased or obliterated.

Brian Kim Stefans' "The Dreamlife of Letters" on the other hand, challenges the idea of authorial memory completely, dismissing the varied versions of a remembered past Stefans offers the spectator the surface-level flicker of cultural residues that are algorithmic and impersonal. Stefans seems to be issuing a warning of sorts regarding memory that when memory becomes dignified, abstracted, or aestheticised beyond recognition it runs into the risk of disconnection from ethical engagement. "The Dreamlife of Letters" exudes the tension between memory as data and memory as duty. Stefans' digitisation of poetic memory reduces DuPlessis' words into kinetic, alphabetised, deconstructualised fragments. This places Stefans' memory work in the realm of cultural-mediated-procedural as compared to the memory work of Dodie Bellamy and Rachel Blau DuPlessis whose work is personal or political.

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