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Preamble: why replacement?

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Preamble: Why Replacement?

The launch of the Open AI chatbot app, ChatGPT, in November 2022 was accompanied by a whirl of media attention, much of which focused on the potential of the technology to replace jobs currently calling on the creative talents of human workers. Copywriters and computer-programmers were identified by some as imminently “replaceable,” while the “scramble” of publishers to regulate the use of ChatGPT and its citation as a co-author in articles for academic journals indicated that the category of authorship itself might be at stake.¹ If the stories were sensational, they were also predictable, for the threat of replacement seems to have become the default frame for greeting every new development in AI technology. Equally predictable were the counter-claims that the threat of replacement was exaggerated, ChatGPT was just a clever mimic and true human creativity was in fact irreplaceable. Replacement and irreplaceability are tropes whose power to structure cultural discourse around technology is evident. As the contributions to this volume show, however, they are tropes whose power and appeal is felt in a far wider range of social, cultural, and political contexts. It is the contention of this volume consequently that the range, frequency, and urgency of these questions indicates that, as concepts, replacement and irreplaceability warrant sustained attention in their own right.

This volume addresses that need by adopting an interdisciplinary approach. In so doing we aim to better illuminate the ways in which notions of replaceability and irreplaceability function as the basis of a cultural logic whose roots reach back to the Renaissance and the birth of the “modern,” but which has become ever more visible in the epoch of globalization. The main claim of this volume, is that operations of replacement have become increasingly important during late capitalism and as part of a neoliberal order that continues to render human bodies and non-human objects as fungible, sometimes disposable, but in any case replaceable for different yet similarly functioning bodies and objects. In other words, this volume suggests that questions of replaceability and irreplaceability have become essential to thinking our planetary conjuncture even if they have only recently come to the fore as academic concepts within the humanities.

An indication of this growing concern with replacement within cultural theory is the publication in 2018 of Jean Owen and Naomi Segal’s edited volume, *On*

¹ At the time of writing ChatGPT is reported to have been listed as co-author on at least four separate academic articles (Stokel-Walker 2023).

Replacement (Owen and Segal 2018). Focusing on the rich theme of replacement within psychology, psychoanalysis, and its expressions in art and culture, Owen and Segal's investigations open conversations and lines of inquiry upon which this volume builds. Along with the psychological dramas of replacement, consequently, the present collection investigates the topic of replaceability in more broadly technological, cultural, and political terms.

Accordingly, we open with an essay (Martin and Willemars) which addresses the racist rhetoric of "the great replacement theory" and its links with ideas of fungibility historically bound to the transformation of black people's lives into the modus of the replaceable that informs a generalized financial logic predicated on the universality of exchange (Winnubst 102–112). In this introductory chapter it is noted that replaceability as fungibility is firmly established as a generative concept within Black studies. However, replaceability as a more general cultural logic at once expressing anxieties about dispossession and functioning as a principle of liberal governance, our text argues, encodes an incoherence in the self-understanding of the contemporary political subject in the global north. This incoherence is amplified by the dynamics of globalization and the convergence of technological and social factors that invest the question of replaceability with the force of the paradigmatic.

As the texts collected here show, different facets of that paradigm are evidenced in concerns with technologies of the self and of the other; with technologies of government, that are cultural, social, and indeed technological in nature and that rely on a threat or possibility of replacement. To try and bring some order to the multifarious nature of questions of replaceability, the texts here are ordered so as to contribute to this discussion in three principal directions which we delve into below: replacement and the sign; replacement and the subject; replacement and the psyche. The logic of this order is that we begin at the structural moment, continue on to the question of what that structure engenders, and end up with how that structure is experienced and acted on from the perspective of that which it has produced. In other words: how does the language of replacement produce a subject to replacement whose desires, fears, and agency impact the way we deal with the language of replacement today?

Signs and semiotics

By examining replaceability in relation to the production of meaning through a consideration of the replaceability of the sign and the sign as replacement the first section of this volume deals with the question of the language of replacement. These issues of replaceability as signification are linked to broader issues

of de/colonization in a text by Niall Martin, digitization and automatization by Emilio Aguilar, and imaginative and cultural translation in Chinese science fiction by Murray Pratt. A concern with the sign as “that which stands in place of” provides a model of replaceability so fundamental and protean that it subtends most of the texts in this collection, however in the contributions of Martin, Aguilar and Pratt, the replaceability of the sign takes on a very specific sense of crisis. In this section we focus on the way in which replacement undergirds fantasies of a technological and linguistic future that is taking place in the here and now, thus giving rise to (science-) fictions that operate as a response to contemporary anxieties about being replaced, all the while relying on implicit trajectories of replaceability as their foundational structure.

Reading Denis Villeneuve’s film *Arrival* (2016) as a rehearsal of the generalized dread that alphabetic code is being replaced by the alien code of the machine, Niall Martin considers how Villeneuve’s cinematography projects this anticipated semiotic replacement back onto a reimagined scene of colonial encounter, the arrival of the alphabet in the Americas. In Villeneuve’s film, Martin argues, the semiotic replacement imposed by colonialism is reimagined as empowering the colonized as redeemer, creating thereby a fantasy of replacement as “freedom from debt.” Within this story of redemptive replacement Martin explores a logic of privilege within the possibility of replacement which is variously manifest in the dread of being replaced, the demand that something be replaced, or the insistence that replacement constitutes a historical erasure (Martin, in this volume).

Examining the implications for traditional models of the sign and theories of semiosis posed by digital objects, Emilio Aguilar focuses on a specific example of the kinds of technological replacement described by Martin. Google’s Deep Dream technology uses neural network based Artificial Intelligence, working on pattern recognition, or pareidolia. This reliance on pattern recognition, argues Aguilar, renders obsolete the idea of the sign as a replacement for something it is not, and ushers in a new paradigm of replacement that is ecological in that it emphasizes the productive role of semiosis. The propensity of these network-based AIs to seek familiar patterns within random quanta of perception Aguilar terms “pareidolic semiotics” after the human propensity to see familiar images in random data. This imposition of the familiar on the random, he argues, “can also be described as an *overfitting act*: the moment when our interpretative bias abstracts the contours of reality to such an extent that it imposes meaning where there is none, thereby replacing most traces of randomness/unfamiliarity from that encounter.” (Aguilar, in this volume)

The opportunities of replacement as a motion of self-escape and self-encounter are taken up by Murray Pratt who, like Martin, is absorbed by the affordances of

speculative fiction in this respect. Reading across the short stories and essays collected in Ken Liu's anthology of Chinese science fiction, *Invisible Planets*, Pratt proposes three different declensions of the concept of replacement: the technological, the imaginative, and the cultural, and relates these different declensions to the practice of reading speculative fiction in translation in particular and to the sometimes "animated debates about the value of world/global literature, or the limitations of studying (comparative) literature in translation" more generally (Pratt, in this volume). Pointing us to Emily Apter's identification of the translation "zone" as constituted in the "balance between the singularity of untranslatable alterity against the need to translate *quand même*" (qtd. from this volume), Pratt ends up reminding us that the sign as "that which stands in place of" is at the heart of Rey Chow's insistence on the value of the "trans-pedagogical work of teaching culture across frontiers." (Pratt, in this volume)

Subject to replacement

The essays gathered in the second section shift the focus from technologies of signification to processes of subjectification and explore replaceability in terms of broader social and political questions, with chapters examining the tension between ideas of replacement and repair in Western environmental rhetoric by Reij Rosello, the need to recognize that the irreplaceability of witness testimony applies to both victim and perpetrator by Sara Magno, the formulation of a *longue durée* perspective on the role of replaceability in the production of current racialized notions of *the human* by Benedicty-Kokken, and an analysis of the implications of remediating Beckett's *Not-I* on television in terms of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, Jacques Rancière's idea of emancipation, and Bracha Ettinger's matrixial view of subjectivity by Celia Graham-Dixon. Here we are concerned with the ways in which those technologies of information that rely on replacement and replaceability, inform a politics of witnessing (Magno) and spectatorship (Graham-Dixon), an economy (Rosello), and a cultural narrative and imagination of replacement (Benedicty-Kokken), thus restructuring contemporary culture with reference to processes of meaning making that rely on the replaceability of the sign. Shifting from the notion of the sign as "that which stands in place of" to the experience of replaceability as an affective, political, and aesthetic encounter with the legibility of the subject, the essays in this section expand the notion of "standing in place of" into discussions of grief, testimony, spectatorship, and a poetic and cultural etymology of an imperial logic of replacement.

Reij Rosello examines the implications of thinking replacement in relation to mourning and grief. Responding to an advertisement that equates replacing one's shoes when the soles are worn out with replacing a car when its tires are worn out, they note that in the global north "an agreement that to repair is better than to replace" is now "the current historical norm." (Rosello, in this volume) Once plastic has become a "seventh continent" this compulsion to shift from an era of unbridled consumption to an ethos of conservation and ecological responsibility is difficult to resist, but it comes with the danger that we forget that there can be no repair without replacement (an old sole for a new sole in their chosen example) and the production of a new paradigm around a new irreplaceable must in turn create an invisible (and ungrievable) replaced. Rosello thus draws our attention to the operation of the episteme of replacement in the production of norms, to point out that the assumption that we all agree that it is better to repair than replace, also assumes that we recognize the equivalence between cars and shoes, and tires and soles. This replacement, it turns out, isn't recognized as such but remains unspoken. What is lost in this process of substitution, Rosello argues, is the trace of their difference: shoe soles and car tires represent highly specific and distinct political and environmental histories that are erased in the moment of their substitution. What is also lost is the possibility of grief, not just for lost soles and shoes, but for living bodies, too. Rosello concludes with the following: "the absence of broken bodies in this text is meant as the monument to the (unacknowledged or refused) grief that lurks behind any attempt to determine what is repairable, or replaceable on the humblest and seemingly meaningless level." (Rosello, in this volume)

Sara Magno continues the discussion on mourning, grievability, and witnessing in a different register, discussing a contemporary documentary video work titled *No Man's Land* by Salomé Lamas which deals with the testimony of a mercenary who speaks openly about the violence he inflicted on his victims in the form of torture and murder in the context of the Portuguese Colonial War. Magno is interested in the intricacies of witnessing and wonders what it means to listen to the testimony of a perpetrator as opposed to the testimony of a victim. In her account, the witness-as-perpetrator account is a necessary piece of evidence for understanding precisely the kind of brutality that took place under the euphemistic heading of *lusotropicalism*. In Magno's account, what is at stake in listening to this account is the horrible realization that Jacques Derrida's suggestion that "the witness is someone whose experience is in principle singular and irreplaceable" (qtd. in this volume) holds for the testimony of perpetrators too. Indeed, Magno suggests that it is as a result of listening to this testimony that the modality of violence can be grasped more accurately. Magno writes: "To give voice to this figure potentially comes with the risk of re-living the violence committed against the vic-

tims” and continues with “to justify such a risk, however, we must accept that perpetrators’ testimony is necessary to highlight the nature of the violence of rendering victims replaceable” (Magno, in this volume).

Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken widens the frame within which to think the implications of an imperialist logic of replacement through a consideration of the *longue durée* opened up by a comparative reading of solar imagery in Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia* and Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour*. Paying particular attention to the different uses of katabasis in Dante and Césaire, but also in early Christian katabatic narratives, Benedicty-Kokken argues that “the late Renaissance marks an epochal moment in the history of replacement, wherein Christ is no longer one among several wise beings, [. . .] marking the break between Christianity as one religion among many, and Christendom as a hegemonic power in the world” (Benedicty-Kokken, in this volume). Taking up Jason Allen-Paisant’s assertion of the “complicity of Christian ethics in the imperial history of the West” (qtd. in this volume), in her reading of the imagery of the sun shared between the two poets she shows how the difference in positionality in relation to the celestial implies “radically different ways of ethically being in the universe” and ends up wondering “[w]hat does such humanity look like from a Caribbean perspective and how is this very alternative notion of thinking beingness one that resists the full replaceability that European thought theorized?” (Benedicty-Kokken, in this volume)

Celia Graham-Dixon picks up on the politics of witnessing and spectatorship opened by Sara Magno, in an account of the remediation of Samuel Beckett’s *Not-I* from stage to television screen. Graham-Dixon’s text, in closing this section of the volume off, leads us into a psychoanalytically inflected discussion of Benjaminian anti-fascist politics. Drawing extensively on the work of Jacques Rancière, she aligns Benjamin’s understanding of aura with a Freudian view of the subject organized around the replaceability of the phallus. Criticizing the Freudian perspective with the help of Bracha Ettinger’s matrixial view of subjectivity, however, Graham-Dixon produces an account of *Not-I* where the screen, instead of being portrayed as an undesirable intermediary, becomes a site of potential encounter. With attention to the specificities of this shift in mediation, it becomes possible for Graham-Dixon, to provide an entirely new and original understanding of the contents of *Not-I* as well. Mobilizing Benjamin and Rancière to speak about the politics of spectatorship, she draws on the work of Griselda Pollock and Ettinger to pay attention to the gendered nature of the paradigm or episteme of replacement all the while emphasizing how to: “understand that the subjectivities existing within Mouth [. . .] emerge by way of the links that Mouth and the viewer work into existence through the encounter that takes place on screen.” (Graham-Dixon, in this volume)

Psyche and sacrifice

The essays in the final section explore the importance of replaceability in terms of the psyche through an emphasis on the aesthetic. Here we wonder how the subject made legible through the language of replacement responds to that legibility in terms of desire, fear, and agency. The section opens with an examination of the technological replacements of the human by the puppet and in discourses around posthumanism by Naomi Segal, followed by an exploration of psychic replacement as a response to an anxiety itself produced by replacement in Freud's formulation of the uncanny by Marc Amfreville, before concluding with an essay that examines the relationship between sacrificial replacement and the symbol in its relation to the replacement of the human by the animal by Ilios Willemars. In this section we build not only on Segal's earlier work, but on the earlier chapters in this work in order to situate the psychoanalytic not as the prime mover of a logic of replacement, but rather as the outcome of a social and cultural condition that has its roots in contemporary meaning-making that runs through changes in the fabric of our representational episteme.

Opening this section and continuing on the trajectory that Graham-Dixon announced at the close of the last section, Naomi Segal moves our discussion further in the direction of the psyche when she discusses desire and intimacy and wonders how anxieties around replacement can also be a source of powerful aesthetic experience. Taking a long look at puppets as things or beings we might either be or have, she describes how they seduce and terrify us, while offering us a way of manipulating desires, fears, and intimacies attached to ideas of replaceability. Departing from Rilke's essay on *Dolls (Puppen)* influenced by his horror of being treated as a replacement for his dead sister, and from Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Puppet Theatre" which argues that the movements of puppets are more graceful than those of human dancers, Segal close reads the role of puppetry in a host of cultural objects including Spike Jonze's film *Being John Malkovich* and forces our attention to the human as well as the posthuman resonances that the notion of replacement brings to bear on those readings. She thus urges us to wonder, when Ethan Hawke or Matt Damon pretend to be Jude Law, or when the performance artist Stelarc in Luxembourg lets his body be manipulated by people in Paris, Helsinki, and Amsterdam in order to create "intimacy without proximity," is anything left of the Kleistian equation of puppetry and grace? As such, Segal's text can be read as a text that wonders not only about replacement and the puppet, but about the meaning of, and desire for, intimacy at those moments when replacement seems nearest. Segal asks: "does the posthuman inflict on us the same deadly silence as we heard echoing from the 'doll-soul'?" (Segal, in this volume)

Marc Amfreville's contribution continues the exploration of the critical role of replaceability in psychoanalytic thought opened up by Graham-Dixon but redirects our attention from issues of desire and intimacy discussed by Segal, to issues of the uncanny as a precursor to more elaborate understandings of the death drive. Taking his cue from the Freudian principle that every replacement bears the trace of what it has displaced, Amfreville examines what is at stake in the psychoanalytic quest to bring to light what has been forgotten or buried in the process of replacement. His essay asks how a focus on replacement in E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, *The Sandman* informs our reading of Freud's reading and specifically of his understanding of *Ersatzbildung*. Amfreville argues that Freud's own awareness of the limitations of his analysis of the substitutions in Hoffmann's text threatens the adequacy of his replacement of Jentsch's analysis which ultimately leads Freud to the formulation of the thesis of the death drive. As such, Amfreville takes us on a ride that covers typically psychoanalytical terrain, all the while urging us to think about replacement not only as an anxiety inducing phenomenon, but as an antidote to dread as well: "Replacement is, in this context, not read as a process that causes anxiety or fear, but, instead, as a self-defensive – sometimes violent – response to forms of fear and anxiety that haunt the subject or would cause him or her to feel guilty." (Amfreville, in this volume)

In the final chapter to this section, Ilios Willemars argues that the replacement involved in acts of sacrifice where one body is substituted for another – an animal for a human in a sacrificial rite – can help us recognize the doubled nature of the body in contemporary theory as simultaneously replaceable (e.g. performative) and irreplaceable. Returning to Freud via Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, and Samuel Weber, Willemars notes how the body is formed as an irreplaceable subject – or soul – through a foundational moment of replacement – a detour through a linguistic placeholder or a mirroring. Confronting these accounts of performative subjectification-through-replacement with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's account of sacrifice in *Das Gespräch über Gedichte* (1904), in which Hofmannsthal locates the origin of the symbol in the confusion of human and animal as the precondition of sacrifice. This precondition, Willemars points out, confounds the assumption that "the animal" is incapable of sacrifice: indeed, replacement can only take place because the animal itself becomes in the moment of sacrifice, irreplaceable – that is, that it shares in the recognition of irreplaceability before death that is otherwise taken as exclusively constitutive of human being in the world. The concept of the placeholder is central to this account of the traditional body and soul dichotomy as Willemars uses it "to situate irreplaceability at the body, both of the human and of the animal as it exists not in general but in its singularity, and to show, [that the] soul, [. . .] must be understood as a replaceable entity that affects the body throughout its existence." (Willemars, in this volume)

The result of these three sections is a collection of essays which examines the ideas of replacement and replaceability as an emerging cultural logic in the present but with roots which can be traced back to the European Renaissance and the birth of the “modern” (Benedicty-Kokken). Although reflecting the role of replacement and irreplaceability in the authors’ own research areas, the reader will recognize a strong community of concern both within and across the different thematically organized sections. In the first section questions of signification inevitably open out onto broader ethical questions – decolonization (Martin), extractive capitalism and ecology (Aguilar), translation and transcultural communication (Pratt) that are amplified by essays later in the volume. Thus, within the opening section Martin and Pratt are both concerned with science fiction as a genre for exploring the relations between replacement, race, and ideas of futurity while Aguilar is interested in the role of replaceability in media technologies and wider social power structures. These themes are further amplified in the section turning towards the social aspects of replaceability with Rosello picking up on Aguilar’s concern with ecology and Martin’s interest in the relation between replaceability and grief. Graham-Dixon’s media-focused interest in the relation between the irreplaceability of the auratic and the replaceability of the phallus is resonant with the chapters in the final section dealing more explicitly with replaceability in relation to the psyche and aesthetics, while Willemars’s concluding essay on replaceability, sacrifice, and the symbol converses with Benedicty-Kokken’s account of the changing role of *katabasis* in Christianity, and reaches back to the opening section to revisit the idea of the sign as that which stands in place of something it is not.

Before closing this volume, however, we have found it useful to leave the reader with a final and more general text on the idea that we are living through what might usefully be termed an episteme of replacement. In that text, Willemars and Martin return to the issue of “the great replacement theory” addressed in the very first chapter to this volume. There we propose that the cultural logic of replacement and irreplaceability may be coming to an end – even if the symptoms of that logic continue to haunt our present. Covering a theoretical field that ranges from Georg Simmel, through Walter Benjamin, on to Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, ending with a reflection on the work of Arjun Appadurai and Frederik Tygstrup, this text titled: “Modernity’s Irreplaceability: Data, Derivatives, and the Fungibility of the Flesh,” draws together the central themes of this volume one final time when Willemars and Martin take as their “hypothesis [. . .] that the problem of replaceability is the fundamental structure of a modernity that is now nearing its end.” (Willemars and Martin, in this volume)

This volume, then, draws on disparate theoretical genealogies and different disciplinary backgrounds to make an argument about the importance of replacement for contemporary culture. Mieke Bal once suggested that cultural analysis as

a research practice can be summarized as “cultural memory in the present” (Bal and Gonzales 1999: 1). If it can be said of the essays collected here that they are multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary in approach, it can also be suggested about them that they all adhere to this same logic; the logic of exposing in the present a historical phenomenon that is best referred to as an episteme of replacement (Foucault 2007). The study of this episteme necessarily crosses disciplinary boundaries, since it is in the commonality of implicit questions undergirding these disciplines that the issue of replacement re-appears time and again. We might also say, then, that the structure of this volume is a reinterpretation of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. First, we look at the field of power and knowledge in terms of language and the sign, then we continue on to the field of the social and the anthropological, only to end with the psychological and psychoanalytical. Where Foucault speaks about representation, labor, and the human sciences; we speak, instead, about the sign, the subject, and the psyche.

Exclusive reference to Foucault, however, would threaten to obscure a perhaps even more important touchstone when it comes to the structure of this work. The idea that a logic of replacement can be traced back to the Renaissance and to the birth of the “modern” echoes Sylvia Wynter’s epistemology of what she calls “Man” (Wynter 2003). Indeed, the birth of that modern figure, rational man, that has come to operate as a stand-in – or replacement – for the human as such, returns us to the first and final chapters of this volume. This volume, those chapters propose, traces the development of a historical conception of the human that has, throughout its genealogy, been in need of theoretical and conceptual support and has implicitly relied on the notion of replacement and replaceability as its foundation.

If it makes sense to suggest, as Foucault also does, that art and literature are the sites where epistemological ruptures and fissures first become visible, the texts collected here produce a similar argument. They suggest that it is through close readings of cultural and aesthetic artifacts, which ask for different disciplinary approaches, that something of an episteme of replacement may first become visible. Approaching the question of replacement through a wide variety of cultural and technological objects, then, turns out to be the approach that is equipped at unearthing our epistemological conjuncture most succinctly, not in spite of their variety, but as a result of that very variation. It is out of a conviction of the irreplaceability of the interdisciplinary, then, that we present these essays.

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