

## Accountable Metaphors: The Transhuman Poetics of Failure in Tao Lin's *Taipei*

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Tao Lin's novel *Taipei* (2013) can be described as a picture of transhuman existence in the current digital world. However, its poetics of failure does not seem to adjust to the typically utopian visions that have often been related to transhumanism. Instead, the novel's aesthetic approach resists diverse forms of transhumanist universalism in ways that are closer to the theoretical premises of critical posthumanism and agential materialism. In this article, I analyze Lin's use of accountable metaphors and poetic failure in *Taipei* as a means to resist uncritical claims to transhumanist, universalist aesthetics.

Keywords: critical posthumanism; transhumanism; agential materialism; accountability; poetics of failure; Tao Lin

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## Metáforas responsables: la poética transhumana del fracaso en *Taipei*, de Tao Lin

*Taipei* (2013), de Tao Lin, podría describirse como un retrato de la existencia transhumana en el mundo digital actual. Sin embargo, su enfoque estético desde la perspectiva de la poética del fracaso no parece ajustarse a las típicas visiones utópicas que se relacionan con el transhumanismo. En vez de eso, dicho enfoque parece dar la impresión de resistir las diversas formas del universalismo transhumanista de un modo que estaría más cercano a las premisas teóricas del posthumanismo crítico y el materialismo agencial. En este artículo analizo el uso narrativo de la metáfora responsable y la poética del fracaso en *Taipei* como un modo de resistir supuestos complacientes con la estética universalista del transhumanismo.

Palabras clave: posthumanismo crítico; transhumanismo; materialismo agencial; responsabilidad; poética del fracaso; Tao Lin

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Shortly after its publication in 2013, Tao Lin's *Taipei* was described by Zara Dinnen as "a fictional document of life in our current digital culture" (2013). While comparing the novel's aesthetic quality to that of Thomas Pynchon's or David Eggers's work, Ian Chang also classified it as an "internet novel" depicting "a fully virtual life" (2013). The title itself seemingly confirms the relevance of such an interpretive key, since the city of Taipei is depicted in the novel as the almost virtual backdrop to its main character's transhuman existence. The novel narrates two years in the life of its protagonist Paul, a digitally and drug-mediated, omniscient, pseudoautobiographical third-person projection of Lin as a literary author. Almost static in terms of plot development, the novel can be considered an extended psychological portrait of Paul presented through his use of various digital devices and his experimentation with—mostly—synthetic drugs. Because of this, the only Paul that can be portrayed through the free indirect style used in the novel is the one that results from the digital and biological symbioses of his transhuman self-consciousness, a concept that Chang referred to as "cyber-consciousness" in 2013, and that Aislinn C. McDougall has more recently theorized as "a post-postmodern narrative mode that embodies the intermediation between human consciousness and digital machinery in fictional narrative" (2019, 1). *Taipei* has been described as a social media novel, written in a faux-naïf style that exploits irrelevance and exhaustion to convey poetic failure in the context of post-postmodernist literary trends such as Alt Lit and the New Sincerity (Morrell 2014; Krmpotic 2014, 35). As has been explored elsewhere, the style is, however, complicated by its "markedly postmodern hyperreality and a combatant postmodern self-parody" that undoes the authenticity of cyber-conscious subjectivity (McDougall 2019, 1). The novel can be interpreted as a metaphor for a transhuman aesthetics that is held accountable for the many limits of subjective, objective and mediated expression.

In this article, I bring together the theoretical backgrounds of critical posthumanism and agential materialism to contextualize Lin's narrative use of poetic failure in *Taipei* as an instance of the passive-aggressive resistance to humanist universalisms that Brian Willems has theorized as a narrative of "calculated risk" (2015). By resisting uncritical claims to universalist aesthetics, Lin's poetic failure aligns itself with agential materialism and critical posthumanism in challenging objectivist and anthropocentric universalism.

## 2. TRANSHUMANIST METAPHORS

Ambiguously positioned between the utopian and dystopian possibilities of transhumanist organizations such as Humanity+ (Thomsen 2013) or concepts such as the *Singularity* (Kurzweil 2005), and the less anthropocentric or (phal)logocentric approaches of ecology, feminism (Pepperell [1995] 2003) or deconstructionism (Herbrechter 2013), the posthuman debate has spawned diverse posthumanisms

since it became a central critical concern in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Within the general frame of posthumanism, transhumanism is mainly premised on the combination of Darwinism and technoscience. Transhumanism presents itself as the next step in an ongoing evolutionary process that joins technological prosthesis with genetic adaptability in defining humanity as a species. In an increasingly (bio)technological environment, transhumans enhanced by pharmaceutical and nutritional therapies, genetic modification and participation in interconnected artificial intelligence would be those best adapted to succeed. However, while transhumanism typically indulges in utopian projections of anthropocentric transcendence that engage the technological, ecological and biological, Stefan Herbrechter has also argued that “contemporary technological development [...] threatens to dethrone the human and the idea of human uniqueness from a biological, informational, cybernetic and cognitive perspective” (2013, 47-48).

In the late twentieth century, Donna Haraway (1985) and N. Katherine Hayles (1999) put forward the transhumanist metaphor of the cyborg as an emblem of an emerging new paradigm resulting from the collapse of liberal humanism. Both Haraway’s and Hayles’s arguments qualify as transhumanist because they advocate the enhancement of humanity through its fusion with the technological, either by depicting the human body as an articulated mechanism—Haraway—or by describing the human being in metaphorical terms that compare human rationality to artificial intelligence—Hayles. However, since both Haraway’s and Hayles’s main interest lies in trying to provide answers to old questions related to the formation and control of embodied ideologies and power structures, they both fail to account for unresolved aesthetic and ethical issues concerning artistic and ontological teleology.

Hayles’s account of posthumanism can be considered transhumanist not only because she contests Joseph Weizenbaum’s Luddite views on artificial intelligence (1976), but also because of her optimistic view that the posthuman can be used “as leverage to avoid reinscribing, and thus repeating, some of the mistakes of the past” (1999, 288). These mistakes include human teleology and autonomous will, since they presume “the liberal humanist subject’s manifest destiny to dominate and control nature” (1999, 288). In Hayles’s view, if human reason fused with artificial intelligence, “human consciousness would ride on top of a highly articulated and complex computational ecology in which many decisions [...] would be made by intelligent machines” (1999, 287). These would not operate according to any human teleology and thereby would free humans from the bias of autonomous will. However, the seemingly utilitarian proclivity of Hayles’s ecological Benthamism—avoidance of systemic pain in the form of “the mistakes of the past”—is haunted by the absence of any systemic pleasure that might “emerge” from the “dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines” (1999, 288). According to Antonio Diéguez’s account of transhumanism,

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed yet concise description of the differences and similarities between the various manifestations of posthumanism—transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, critical posthumanism, etc.—see Francesca Ferrando (2013).

this absence results from a correlation between the transhumanist rejection of human teleology and the lack of a transhumanist desire with regard to understanding one's place and direction in life, both in ethical and aesthetic terms (2017).

In contrast to Hayle's cyborganic metaphor, Haraway's vision of an enhanced transhumanist future does not rest on the alleged advantages of the unprejudiced judgement of artificial intelligence. Quite the contrary, the fusion of the biological and the technological in her metaphor of the cyborg is not only "completely without innocence," but is "resolutely committed to partiality" (1985, 67). To her, transhuman enhancement results from the exercise of an autonomous will that can freely design its own monstrous, heteroglossic articulations unrestricted by any previous teleology because it is unfaithful to its origins. Because the transhuman teleology envisioned by Haraway is enhanced by the exercise of autonomous will, to her, transhumanist aesthetics "celebrat[e] *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" (1985, 66; italics added). However, her blatant rejection of natural configurations of the human body and her celebration of its "dangerous possibilities" is based on uncontrolled programmed obsolescence, a "building and destroying [of] machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories" (1985, 101) that she qualifies as utopian (1985, 100). Thus, Haraway's transhumanist metaphor not only makes individuals responsible for the articulated configurations and reconfigurations of their fluid embodiments, but also for the material and informational (social) waste they continuously discard as obsolete. Despite their radical difference, common to both Hayles's and Haraway's transhumanist metaphors is their digital and technological *laissez-faire* and the uncanny realization that cyborganic fusions make human beings dependent on—or even addicted to—the codes and technologies they claim to instrumentalize. Lin's picture of transhuman existence in *Taipei* includes elements that are present in both Hayles's and Haraway's utopian metaphors for transhumanity in that he also focuses on the often conflicting nature of such elements—the desire to be in total control of one's identity and experience versus the surrender of autonomous will to the enhanced judgment of technologies, as well as the pleasure in blurring and transgressing boundaries versus the lack of pleasure in the face of the absence of a teleology to conform human desire.

As an artistic persona, Lin represents himself as an embodied metaphor of transhumanity. He has been described as "one of the first writers to have been formed not through traditional page and print culture but *in and through* social media and the internet" (Sansom 2013; italics added). Since he contextualizes himself "within a new media machine" (Grady 2011), Lin's compositional process can be fruitfully surveyed through the lens of Kim Cascone's analysis of computer music, which according to him, involves using "the internet both as a tool for learning and as a method of distributing [the artist's] work" ([2000] 2004, 397). Lin not only composes and distributes his work online through several social media platforms, but he also presents himself as an author ambiguously positioned between the human (biological) being and his embodiment as a discursive technology. In *Taipei*, Lin uses

a narcissistic “bloggy” style (Sansom 2013) to construct his protagonist Paul, who shares enough biographical details with Lin himself to suggest that he is a narrated extension of Lin—Paul is also a young, Asian-American writer who goes on the same book tours, is interviewed in a style that is reminiscent of real-life interviews with Lin, has an intense online life and expresses himself in the same style as Lin.<sup>2</sup> Through the transhumanist metaphor that Lin composes for his main character—and himself—the borders between the bio-logical/graphical and hypertechnological are consistently blurred to build a sort of transhuman novel that fuses author, reader, medium, tool and text—including character, plot and setting.

Lin’s transhuman metaphor includes the most salient features of mainstream transhumanism, such as a concern for human enhancement through the (bio)technological expansion of the human body and mind so as to best adapt to a transhuman context. Paul’s existence is pervasively mediated by the use of digital technologies, not just to communicate with people who are physically distant, but also with his friends and wife even as they sit in the same room as him. In the novel, the quality of his social relations is often assessed by the frequency and character of his social media interactions, including texting, emailing, receiving likes and site visits. Since he spends most of his life online, his personal identity and experience of the world are often indistinguishable from his digital self-image and the information he finds on the internet. Aided by digital technologies and brain stimulators like amphetamines, Paul not only has access to unlimited information, but to a more focused use of his brain and for a longer time. His enhanced mental activity allows him to weigh the many perspectives on and possibilities of any given situation before he makes the most rational decision about it, which often involves not making one, lest it might be biased by some condition beyond his control.

With no clear purpose in life and apparently unable to find pleasure in his leisure, Paul relies on pharmaceutical technology to cause, enhance and determine the nature of his pleasure—heroin, LSD, oxycodone and methadone—as well as to reduce the pain and anxiety he feels in uncontrolled social situations—opiate pain relievers, alprazolam, clonazepam, ecstasy. Since the novel is written using a homodiegetic free indirect style, readers have no access to any description of Paul or his environment that is not already mediated by the fusion of his human consciousness and the drugs or digital technologies that prosthetically enhance it. Despite his obvious addictions to technology and drugs, Paul predominantly perceives his embodied transhumanity as a means of gaining self-control over his thoughts, emotions, artistic creation and projection, fitness, desires and self-image in general, and he considers others who lack such a degree of self-control as inferior.

In addition to his exploration of Hayles’s and Haraway’s utopian metaphors for transhumanity, in *Taipei* Lin also seems to align his views with some of the premises

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<sup>2</sup> The novel includes an episode that is very similar to a real-life interview of Lin by Rachel R. White (Lin 2013b). As its title indicates, the interview took place at night while Lin was high on amphetamines.

of critical posthumanism as theorized by Herbrechter in 2013. Herbrechter sees transhumanism as the latest turn in an ongoing development of uncritically complacent humanist universalism that has asymmetrical or hierarchical dehumanizing tendencies (2013, 71-73). To him, this humanist universalism is a failed ideal that has managed to perpetuate itself from “its tender beginnings in Greek and Roman antiquity” to “the contemporary posthumanist age” thanks to the remarkable adaptability of its utopianism and commonsense logic (72). Instead, Herbrechter suggests that critical posthumanism should formulate “a deconstruction of humanism in its current globalized and technocultural posthumanist form” in order to provoke “an opening towards a radically different, nonhumanist, post-anthropocentric view” (72). In this sense, critical posthumanism would work through a “strategic misanthropy” (73), which Herbrechter presents as the last hope before the “perversion of inhumanity” inherent to the humanist paradigm takes completely over (72). Herbrechter’s strategic misanthropy diverges from Hayles’s and Haraway’s views in its critique of utopian technological redemptiveness (52) and as regards their embodied transhumanist metaphors.

I contend that Lin’s *Taipei* articulates a strategic misanthropy through its depiction of its main character’s embodied transhumanism as being a perversion of inhumanity. Paul’s transhuman self-image is doubtlessly endowed with large doses of self-esteem that are often related to self-empowering self-control. However, the novel suggests that this perception is an illusory one by exposing Paul’s self-induced, supposed enhancement to the—potentially hostile—criticism of other characters and readers. In fact, readers need to make a considerable effort in order to identify with the calculated risk of Paul’s inconsequence, selfishness, boredom, manias and addictions. Paradoxically, the self-induced enhancement that Paul actively seeks through his continued use and abuse of digital and pharmaceutical technologies renders him a somewhat dislikable character because it makes him seem unable or unwilling to emotionally engage with others.

This apparent emotional detachment or inhibition, which is also present in Lin’s “neutral” poetic style (Moore 2011), has been described as “autistic” in its resistance to signify, which is signaled by its lack of differentiation of subject from object and self from other (Hsu 2016, 205). However, I would contend that the resistance of Lin’s style to mark clear boundaries between the subjective and the objective gains a stronger significance against the backdrop of transhumanism. In *Taipei*, Paul’s emotionally neutral style does not so much point towards the pathological as it does towards some existential “desire-less[ness]” (Hsu 2016, 205) resulting from his machine-like failed attempts to express the complexity of human emotion. The opiates and psychedelics that he supposedly uses in order to enhance his leisure activities never actually make him experience any form of pleasure. Instead, he obsessively records and analyzes their effects, describing in detail his pathetically ridiculous, random behavior while high, which makes one wonder whether the original purpose of using drugs was really to experience their effects or merely to record them. As it perfectly adjusts to the transhumanist premises of human enhancement through fusing the human and the

technological, Paul—as Lin’s embodied transhumanist metaphor—gives a critical account of the perversions of inhumanity that such fusion entails.

Through an agential materialist lens, Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) turns the common notion of accountability into a critically specific tool to interrogate universalist claims such as those propounded by transhumanism. As she discusses the famous Albert Einstein-Niels Böhr debate regarding the reliability of objective empiricism in the field of quantum physics, Barad sides with Böhr and extends his conclusions to the analysis of critical discourse. Contrary to Einstein’s views, Böhr argued that universal objectivity is not limited by uncertainty, but by the indeterminacy of the participants prior to the act of observation itself (Barad 2007, 152). One of the main consequences of Böhr’s approach is that all phenomena precede and determine their causes, making these causes accountable for their own determinacy (Barad 2007, xx). Another consequence is that objects, observation technologies and observing subjects are entangled in their reciprocal agency and determinacy, and that none of them can be naturalized in universal terms, or rather, that nature is redefined as always inherently technological (Barad 2007, xx). When considered under the light of critical discourse, the notion of accountability thus becomes relevant for a critical posthumanist analysis of the ethical and aesthetic implications involved in transhumanist metaphors and views of technology.

### 3. ACCOUNTABLE METAPHORS AND THE POETICS OF FAILURE

The development of posthumanism itself has been traced back to the Einstein-Böhr debate in the early twentieth century, when the uncertainty resulting from relativity and quantum theories signaled the failure of both scientific reductionism (Pepperell [1995] 2003, 162-69) and humanist universalism. Almost a hundred years later, Barad’s application of the notion of accountability to the analysis of critical discourse problematizes Hayles’s and Haraway’s transhumanist metaphors by revealing the technological dimension of suspicious agencies behind Hayles’s naturalized picture of emergence, pointing to the limits of autonomous will in Haraway’s technologically programmed obsolescence and making individuals accountable for each heteroglossic, cyborgian configuration (Barad 2007, xx). Accountability thereby becomes important as an ethical and aesthetic misanthropic strategy for a critical posthumanist contestation of embodied metaphors of transhumanist technological enhancement.

In *The New Human in Literature: Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900*, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen justifies his study of the contribution of literature to the “contexts and issues arising from the idea of a posthuman or new human” (2013, 2) on the basis of the aesthetic dimension inherent to the typically evolutionary traits of posthumanism. In this context, he coins the term *new human* to designate “changes in human mindset and culture,” while he uses *posthuman* to refer “to a break with the human species at a genetic level” (2). As he suggests, “aesthetics possesses an ethical

dimension when it connects imperfection and beauty,” since “ideas of improvement entail questions about the essence of beauty” (11). Yet when he claims that within the still dominant frame of modernist aesthetic values, beauty does not entail idealized perfection, but rather a “more inclusive, and ultimately more ethical conception of aesthetics” (11), Thomsen seems to engage in Herbrechter’s critical posthumanist project against humanist universalism rather than to be participating in transhumanist utopianism. He adds that through its form, literature on the new human “includes inherent arguments for an aesthetics of imperfection that has revealed itself throughout the twentieth century” through an attachment to an idea of the beautiful “even against the backdrop of the looming meaninglessness” (216-17). Embodied metaphors of transhuman perfectibility and transcendence such as those attained through artificial intelligence, genetic modification, pharmacology, neuroscience, life-extension or nanotechnology relate to forms of aesthetic transcendence—such as the sublime or the eternal.<sup>3</sup> However, according to Thomsen, these forms are ultimately accountable for noncommunication, boredom (216-17) and inherent purposelessness, and thereby stand in contrast to the figurations of what is emotionally and ethically worthy and desirable to be found in forms of aesthetic innovation matching the new human (218, 221).

Thomsen explores how the literature of the new human has produced accountable metaphors of transhumanity involving dystopian features such as “potential boredom,” “social isolation,” “new layers of uncontrollable elements” (217), emotional detachment and cultural amnesia (219), estrangement (221) and unethical social and political regimes (223). According to him, a new-human poetics of imperfection can account for the new-human ethical and aesthetic dilemma “without trying to resolve it” (222). This advocacy of imperfection as an ethical and aesthetic model for the new human can be traced back to the modernist concern for the failure of language to communicate that became the central axis of certain forms of modernist poetics such as the theatre of the absurd. Crucially, rather than striving to transcend human language in a search for universal forms of aesthetic perfectibility like the sublime or the eternal, a poetics of imperfection instrumentalizes failure in order to create a space of critical articulation against universalist conceptions of beauty.

Marcin Tereszewski interprets Samuel Beckett’s aesthetics of failure as the expression of a metaphysical project targeting ontological absence in language as “the nothingness and silence that the texts disturb and defer” (2013, 25-26). Tereszewski lists Beckett’s techniques for verbalizing linguistic failure, which include a refusal “to accommodate the traditional requirements of fiction, such as character, plot and linear narrative” and “silence” (25) and the “disintegration of grammatical structures” (26). In Beckett’s plays, the absence of a central character that could serve as a unifying principle signals the dissolution of a solid sense of subjectivity—which is replaced by disembodied,

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed genealogy of transhumanist ideas of transcendence, including Catholicism, see Diéguez (2017, xx).



dispossessed human figures on stage—while a similar absence of plot suspends verisimilitude, temporality and space as it points to the “futility and purposelessness of texts” (26). Beckett’s poetics of failure resists the teleology of plots and denies characters an autonomous self, thereby signaling a profound distrust of and unfaithfulness to the constructed nature of the traditional requirements of fiction. In so doing, it resonates with concerns that are central to Hayles’s and Haraway’s transhumanist metaphors. But underlying this resonance, there is the deeper connection between Beckett’s humanist modernism and Hayles’s and Haraway’s transhumanist metaphors, a common yearning to transcend the limits of humanity and to believe in its perfectibility. In this sense, it could be argued that unlike the new-human poetics of imperfection, a poetics of failure is grounded in a humanist aesthetics of success.

However, in her analysis of aesthetic failure in performance theatre, Sara Jane Bailes claims that “failure can be understood not simply as the evaluative judgment of an outcome—its ‘disappointment’—but rather as a constituent feature of the existential condition that makes expression possible even as it forecloses it” (2011, 1). To Bailes, the discourse of failure can be instrumentalized beyond an ontology of absence and its resulting existential impotence to challenge “the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world” (2). She notes that the increasing use of a poetics of failure is currently mapping a countercultural space of “critical articulation, in which conventional standards of virtuosity are challenged and methods of practice scrutinized and re-worked” (2).

Similarly, Cascone discusses the function of the aesthetics of failure in the field of contemporary computer music, suggesting that the creative process of online collaborative computer music seemingly illustrates a transhumanist aesthetics of success corresponding to Ray Kurzweil’s Singularity, where human creativity and expressiveness are enhanced by transcending “the limitations of our biological bodies and brains” in an interconnected transhuman network (Kurzweil 2005, 25). However, Cascone argues, it is actually failure, and not success, that guides evolution: “it is from the ‘failure’ of digital technology that this new work has emerged: glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise, and even the noise floor of computer sound cards are the raw materials composers seek to incorporate into their music” ([2000] 2004, 393).<sup>4</sup> Typically, the outcome of this aesthetics of failure would qualify as “unintended” (Cascone [2000] 2004, 396), “unanticipated” or “unpredictable” (Bailes 2011, 2), which matches Hayles’s transhumanist advocacy of the idea of unpoliced patterns emerging out of randomness and Haraway’s subversiveness against normative boundaries. That said, there are two features in Cascone’s description of the creative process of failure in computer music that seemingly contest both Hayles’s and Haraway’s utopian transhuman metaphors. First,

<sup>4</sup> By “new work,” Cascone means “the ‘post-digital’ aesthetic [that] developed in part as a result of the immersive experience of working in environments suffused with digital technology” ([2000] 2004, 393).

according to Cascone, no matter how random detritus, by-products or background material might be, their selection is bracketed by the artist's "purposeful attention" ([2000] 2004, 13). Second, all of these random materials are failures resulting from the use of technologies in composition. Rather than impotence in the face of technology—as in Beckett's case—or total reliance on it—as in Hayles's and Haraway's transhumanist metaphors—the new-human, or critical, posthumanist artist of failure makes glitch relevant and even significant through an aesthetics of imperfection that runs contrary to notions of transhumanist perfectibility and the relativist reliance on the possibility of transcending human subjectivity through its fusion with technology.

#### 4. AESTHETICS OF ACCOUNTABLE FAILURE IN *TAIPEI*

Lin's novel consistently targets the universalist utopianism of transhumanist metaphors by means of a poetics of failure that presses on the tensions between the control and surrender of autonomous will and notions of aesthetic pleasure that rely on the absence of a teleology and the transgression of boundaries. His work has been generally defined as "toeing the brink of discomfort," as "placing a foot in glitch territory" and as self-hack (Grady 2011). It has also been noted that it deliberately incorporates "failed" techniques to resist authority through poetic malfunction, including authorial vulnerability and diminishment, neutrality of expression, diminishing aesthetic resources, deflating linguistic choices, child-like language, aesthetic exhaustion, constant qualification of expression, incoherence and boredom (Moore 2011); overexposure to the unpredictable (Willems 2015, 230); abuse of "inconsequence," affectlessness, fragmented thoughts, disassociation, self-exile and boredom (Sansom 2013); and, in general, "resistance towards the master signifier" (Hsu 2016, 204). Although Jennifer Moore has related these features of Lin's style to Beckett's idea of aesthetic failure (2011), a comparison between their different uses of failure reveals divergent aesthetic conceptions of art that are grounded in different visions of posthumanism. While Beckett's struggles with linguistic ontological absence target an objectivist ideal doomed to uncertainty, Lin constructs a metaphor of transhumanity that accounts for the possibility of its own existence and is aligned with Bailes's idea of a current poetics of failure as a countercultural space of critical articulation (2011, 2).

To Tereszewski, Beckett's attempt to convey linguistic ontological absence is paradoxically obliged to express itself through linguistic mediation—an impasse that Beckett "solves" by using a self-erased language that expresses and performs its own erasure (2013, 25-26). This Derridean paradox is irresolvable by objectivist means and ultimately tends—like Einstein did—to resolve its resulting uncertainty by turning to an objective imaginary that claims to be free from linguistic mediation. In Lin's novel, however, the visibility of linguistic failure breaks the suspension of disbelief—it denaturalizes representation—by underlining the constructed nature of language as a technology, but this visibility is exploited in order to account for its own necessary intra-

action in textual construction. Linguistic visibility as a medium is mostly conveyed through excessive syntactic and lexical accuracy, in addition to irrelevance. Instead of being invisibly instrumental in building a coherent narrative, language interferes with cohesion and coherence by means of superabundance and repetition. In the following passage from *Taipei*, repeated coordination, extended modification and negation obstruct comprehensibility through exhaustive and exhausting accuracy, not nonsense:

Because his Mandarin wasn't fluent enough for conversations with strangers—and he wasn't close to his relatives, with whom attempts at communication were brief and non-advancing and often koan-like, ending usually with one person looking away, ostensibly for assistance, then leaving—he'd be preemptively estranged, secretly unfrienable. The unindividualized, shifting mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he'd project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination. Because he'd appear to, and be able to pretend he was, but never actually be a part of the mass, maybe he'd gradually begin to feel a kind of needless intimacy, not unlike being in the same room as a significant other and feeling affection without touching or speaking. (Lin 2013a, 15)

As may be seen, proleptic subordination extended by juxtaposition, parenthetical clarifications and coordination delay the main content of the sentences beyond the reader's skill to retain information, while adverbial, prefixal or suffixal negation combine with lexical choices indicating elusion, disconnection, inconclusiveness, hesitation and seemingness. Instead of the "disintegrating grammatical structures" found in Beckett's work (Tereszewski 2013, 26), Lin's grammatical failure is conveyed through a textual self-conscious, complex accuracy that accounts for the necessary presence of linguistic technology in literature, as the technological and the human intra-act to bring about the emergence of textual signification. Instead of vacillating "between affirmation and denial" (Tereszewski 2013, 25), Lin affirms through negation, which stands as a necessary impediment not to reaching an ulterior, impossible meaning, but rather to accounting for linguistic mediation in its embodied technology. Instead of using silence to signal the human capacity to mean before or beyond language (Tereszewski 2013, 25), Lin makes language overdefinite not as an interfering, but as an *intra-fering* technology, replacing an otherwise resulting uncertainty with accountability. Furthermore, although the form is the most exact and appropriate to indicate Paul's thoughts and feelings in this passage, the general picture conveyed is intentionally confusing for the reader, who must struggle with the technology of language—rather than use it—to extract meaning. Yet, even if readers manage to attune themselves to Lin's exhausting accuracy across the novel, its content indefectibly turns out to be utterly irrelevant for plot, character and setting, except in so far as it contributes to depicting them as accountable metaphors of transhumanism.

Moore has pointed out that Lin's use of quotation marks in his poetry foregrounds the mediation of linguistic technology by calling "attention to words and phrases as

linguistic units or ideas rather than as given facts” (2011). In the following passage from *Taipei*, a similar effect is conveyed through the insistent repetition of the word “backpack,” which stands out as a linguistic technology operating simultaneously as a meaningful word, a meaningless signifier and a symbol of everything Paul hates in Erin, his wife, thus resisting and suggesting irrelevance as well as potential relevance. Secretly disturbed by Erin’s dirty backpack, Paul raises the topic pretending it is a random change of topic in their casual conversation:

“Backpacks,” said Paul a few minutes later about a vat-like container of generic-looking backpacks, outside a footwear store. “What do you think of these?”

“They seem good. Simple.”

“Your red backpack [...] is really dirty,” said Paul, and laughed nervously.

“It only looks dirty. I clean it a lot.”

“Backpack,” said Paul touching a black backpack. (Lin 2013a, 191)

Here, the backpack itself is irrelevant as an object; it does not contribute to plot development nor does it have any special significance or symbolism in the novel. Still, the insistent repetition of the word to underline that Erin’s backpack is or looks dirty triggers in readers the intuition that the backpack is somehow relevant beyond the fact that it is dirty, as often happens in Beckett’s plays with objects that have an ominous significance. But Paul’s alliterative, rhyming, tongue-twisting repetition of the word “backpack,” which the narrative voice redoubles with “black backpack” at the end of the passage, calls the readers’ attention to its relevance as a linguistic technology, which stands out more visibly than the possible significance of the backpack for plot development.

When quotation marks are used in *Taipei*, attention is directly called to the potential agency of language as a self-conscious system operating at the same level as characters: “Paul asked if she could think of a newer word for ‘computer’ than ‘computer,’ which seemed outdated and, in still being used, suspicious in some way, like maybe the word itself was intelligent and had manipulated culture in its favor, perpetuating its usage” (2013a, 167). In this quotation the word “computer”—as a linguistic technology that represents a physical technology—seems to have developed a subjectivity that operates according to a survivalist (humanist) teleology. As a technology, language in Lin’s narrative is as central as it is in Beckett’s drama. Yet, contrary to Beckett, Lin does not discard its referential connection with extralinguistic reality—since both of them (linguistic technology and extralinguistic reality) are embodied in a common immediate virtuality that still remains suspicious of linguistic mediation.

To Tereszewski, the pervasive virtuality of Beckett’s “false images and fictions deprived of an extralinguistic and logocentric anchor” makes linguistic ontological absence the focal point of his texts (2013, 25). Conversely, when it comes to Lin a no less pervasive virtuality stands out as ontological presence, intra-actively generated by embodied technologies. In order to circumvent the phallogocentric technologies or

biological constrictions that would police their free random creativity, Paul and Erin are continuously high on different drugs that either inhibit the interference of normative technologies such as self-consciousness, or enhance their perceptual possibilities beyond the limitations of their biological bodies. However, unable to account for performances of which they are a part and that must, therefore, remain asignifying practices, they record themselves on their MacBooks or iPhones to be able to “remember” these performances, which only become endowed with signification when they watch them later. The eccentricity and nonsense of their “higher-than-conscious” performances thus fail to signify by themselves, much as Beckett’s absurdist theatre does, yet they do not point to the linguistic impossibility of signifying. Instead, by inhibiting the self-consciousness that would restrict their objectivity, Paul and Erin’s failure to communicate becomes more accurate or newly sincere than merely “objective” uncertainty, because this failure accounts for the intra-action between humans, drug-induced randomness and pattern-formation computer technologies in a virtual and physical context. In the signifying process of video watching, interfering—selectively restrictive—human memory is replaced by computer storage systems, and human agents Paul and Erin play a—mostly—passive role as—mostly high—interfaces. The process only fails to signify in terms of purpose, which is intentionally absent from the equation. The apparent randomness of Paul and Erin’s transhuman—cyborgian—communicative acts has the advantage of bypassing the limitations of human subjectivity. As a result, the accuracy gained by exhaustive accountability occurs at the expense of a signifying purpose.

The embodied virtuality of Lin’s transhuman metaphor fails to transcend linguistic ontological absence not because it never strove to do so, but rather in order to account for its presence as part of the metaphor itself. Beckett’s nihilistic utopianism ultimately desires death—the only objective “outside” that transcends linguistic technologies and can therefore endow them with signification. At the end of Lin’s novel, when Paul faces the possibility of having already died of an overdose, he contemplates death in a radically different way. Rather than involve transcendence, it is a metaphor for the enhanced signifying technologies in which he is still a participant—a metaphor that should be accounted for rather than naturalized. Like that of his life, Paul’s experience of death is mediated by drugs and technology, which makes his life and death undistinguishable for him, as well as for readers. Unable to distinguish death from sleepwalking, “unsatisfied and worried,” Paul asks Erin—who he is not sure might be a projection of his conscious dead mind—“Is there any difference? Am I dead? [...] I think I’m dead” (Lin 2013a, 244). Later, in the bathroom, the virtual “feel” of things he should have regarded as real suggests that he might in fact be experiencing death as just another metaphor for transhuman intra-action with technology:

his hand idly turned a knob, and was surprised by the rupture and cracking of water, its instantaneous column of binary variations. [...] Paul realized he felt less discomfort and could breathe easier and that the surface of things was shinier and more dimensional from greater

pixilation, all of which he viewed as evidence he was successfully convincing himself—through an increasingly elaborate, skillful, unconscious projection of a reality he would eventually believe he was exploring—that he wasn't dead. With an eternity to practice, he realized, he would forget everything he had thought or felt while dead, including his current thoughts and feelings; he would only believe, as he once had, that he was alive. (247-48)

The novel concludes leaving the possibility that Paul might have died unresolved, not because neither Paul nor the reader can be objectively certain of whether Paul has actually died or not, but because the difference is, in fact, irrelevant in terms of making any signification possible by differentiating life from death. The possibility of extending human life beyond death by uploading human consciousness to digital storage systems is a familiar transhumanist metaphor that Lin's prose accounts for in this passage by making it undistinguishable from a living human consciousness that emerges from its intra-action with digital technology.

As mentioned earlier, among Beckett's techniques to verbalize aesthetic failure Tereszewski includes the refusal to accommodate character, plot and linear narrative as traditional requirements of fiction, which is typically achieved by enacting the dissolution of subjectivity, verisimilitude, temporality and space through the absence of a central character or plot that can function as a unifying principle for his plays (2013, 24-25). In *Taipei*, in contrast, there is not only one central character, but the whole narrative is organized as a traditional Dostoyevskian or Jamesian psychological novel. In stark contrast, and like in contemporary computer music, there is also a pervasive use of glitch. By zooming in on narrative technologies and self-consciously focusing on the errors and the unintended background noises and their by-products, Lin's narrative glitches "can produce wondrous tapestries of sound" or, perhaps more appropriately in this case, "slabs of dense, fitting *textures*" (Cascone [2000] 2004, 393-95; italics added) that account for compositional processes as much as their results.

In order to highlight the failure of omniscient narration as a linguistic ontological absence, Beckett uses dramatic techniques that do without such omniscient narration and points to linguistic failure in the way he reflects or expresses the thoughts of his characters. Lin, however, problematizes free indirect style by ostensibly blurring the subjective borders between the author and the main character, who intentionally share life experiences whose construction is pervasively mediated by the same technologies. Their cyborg-like existences, which Stephanie Hsu compares to an autistic or drug-induced nondistinction between subject and object (2016, 202-203), coincide in a virtual continuum "overdwelling in the body" (2016, 203), not outside of it. Rather than dissolving, Paul's subjectivity as a character is accounted for in its intra-action with intratextual, intertextual and extratextual technologies such as author and literary conventions or other narrative elements such as plot, setting and metaphor constructions. Although readers might initially be tempted to separate them, the intricate intra-related tapestry of these compositional elements will almost certainly

force them to give up trying by midnovel. Distinguishing how much of the plot action or character interaction occurs inside or outside Paul's mind, or how much they are the result of technological or drug mediation, is relevant for the reading experience of the novel only inasmuch as it points to the fact that readers must try, and fail, to make these distinctions. The reading experience in *Taipei*, in fact, depends on this failure, since its emphasis on glitch requires "a very particular kind of bond [...] with the reader: a form of masochistic collusion" (Sansom 2013).

Like Lin's use of a central character and omniscient narration, his use of plot and linear narrative, as well as temporality and space, is also quite conventional. The plot is perfectly linear, simple and clear; the time scope and settings are described in accurate detail. The plot describes Paul's life over a two-year span with no flashbacks or flashforwards, except for brief passages where he remembers his childhood. Events are perfectly located in time and space and placed in order one after the other. However, the repetition of a familiar pattern in episode construction, together with the above-mentioned irrelevance of each event, makes them almost undistinguishable from each other. Typically, Paul buys and uses drugs, alone or in the company of exchangeable others—except, perhaps, for Erin, who becomes distinguishable only because he marries her—videorecords or reports what he does or thinks while high, then watches what has been recorded; he sleeps or wakes, eats or fasts and has sex or not. However, there are details that make each episode particular—an object, a conversation, a metaphor, a new character or a different context. None of these details, though, conditions what follows; they simply fit into the linear plot through juxtaposition, yet they are still connected. Neither the fact that Paul attends a particular party nor the events that take place at that party—his internet searches, the videos he records or the drugs he takes—have any causative effect on the passage that follows. Still, new characters or places are introduced in detail as if such details were to become somehow significant later in the novel, which allows readers to trace who these characters or places are when they appear a second time. Whatever sense of epiphany Paul might have through these episodes is, however, of no consequence and causes no change in his routines or the lives of others; he does not seem to learn anything or achieve anything. His transhuman existence aims at perfectibility by desiring nothing, yet this perfectibility is neither utopian nor dystopian, because its failure to desire makes it perfect—in terms of accountability—by denying any teleology. While the novel's linear plot seems to follow a random direction in that it does not build on any previous cause so as to lead to any particular conclusion, there is a sense of obligation and repetition—iteration—that conditions it, but that is also the result of Paul's self-conscious choices.

This sense of random linearity is also conveyed through the use of space in the novel. Action takes place in all kinds of physical settings—rooms, elevators, streets, restaurants, metro stations, airports, libraries, universities—all of which are irrelevant because they are temporary and mostly public or somebody else's home. Yet, this physicality is also rendered virtual by Paul's mediated perception and intra-action with such places. Setting is also irrelevant or inconsequential for plot or character development in the sense that

action could occur in any such place with no effect on either, the exception being the city of Taipei. The significance of Taipei seems to reside in the fact that Paul can account for it, unlike his largely blurry childhood in suburban Florida, which makes it the place that might have the potential to trigger and explain character configuration and plot action:

Before Paul visited his parents twelve months ago [...] he had no concept of Taipei's size or shape or layout, only an *unreliable* memory [...]. After using the MRT [Mass Rapid Transit, i.e. the Taipei metro system] and idly studying its maps on station walls and Wikipedia, then walking between stations [...] he had, with increasing interest, begun to view and internalize Taipei less like a city than its own world. [...] The muffled roar of traffic [...] had been *mnemonic* enough [...] for him to believe, on some level, that if a place existed where he could go to scramble some *initial momentum, to disable a setting implemented before birth*, or disrupt the out-of-control formation of some incomprehensible worldview, and allow a kind of settling, over time, to occur [...] it would be here. (Lin 2013a, 164; italics added)

It is the sense of not distinguishing between the physical and the technological, the present and the remembered, the perceived and the imagined, that makes Taipei accountable as a transhuman city—its “failure” to stand as a naturalized fiction and “success” as an accountable metaphor.

Unlike Beckett's work (Tereszewski 2013, 25), Lin's transhuman aesthetics of failure do not represent the dissolution of subjectivity or verisimilitude. Instead, human subjectivity is denaturalized by accounting for the embodied technologies—digital and pharmacological—that intra-act in its cyber-consciousness—transhuman self-consciousness. Similarly, rather than being dissolved, verisimilitude in Lin's novel is enhanced by making its transhuman metaphors accountable for the fusion between the human and the technological, while engaging readers in an embodied experience of them where the naturalized humanistic perception of the “real” is enhanced through a transhuman defamiliarization that makes “the surface of things [...] shinier and *more* dimensional *from greater pixilation*” (Lin 2013a, 248; italics added), that is, a humanity based on posturing. In this sense, in Lin's novel the failure of representation is not signaled by silence as linguistic impotence, but by the pervasive overrepresentation of a hyperreality that is accounted for by compulsive recording and refuses to become a humanist universal. Aesthetic failure as disappointment indicates the perpetuation of an ideal, not its failure, which explains why the transhumanist paradigm seeks perfectibility as a continuation of anthropocentric Darwinism. In contrast, an approach to aesthetic failure that instrumentalizes the strategic misanthropy of critical posthumanism targets the humanist ideal of universalist and objectivist transcendence, redefining failure as self-referential accountability. Kendall Grady and Bailes coincide in perceiving the subversive potential of an aesthetics of failure that resists authority (Grady 2011) and “contribute[s] to an anticonformist ideology” (Bailes 2011, 2). In Lin's novel, however, the unpredictable outcome of glitch instrumentalizes uncertainty



as a calculated risk (Willems 2015). When Moore interprets Lin's faux-naïf poetry as a defense mechanism against both criticism and poetic exhaustion, the implication remains that Lin's purpose is to verbalize and control emotions and not to account for the transhuman intra-actions that make it definite. By interpreting Lin's aesthetic proposal in *Taipei* as an experiment in autistic *jouissance*, Hsu seems to suggest that Lin's intended effect is to restore a certain desire for an aesthetic ideal by means of an instrumental use of an aesthetics of the ugly—the intentionally glitched beautiful—that is vaguely reminiscent of Haraway's antagonistic cyborgian monsters (2016). At the other extreme of this aesthetics of the ugly lies Hayles's "flickering" aesthetics of inconsequence, which only misses universalism through contingency.<sup>5</sup> A transhumanist aesthetics of failure does not deny but accounts for its own possibility by incorporating its own critique; it does not reject or relativize any normative ideal that it could not escape anyway, but resists the naturalization of such an ideal; it does not transcend the human by reaffirming anthropocentrism, nor does it replace univocity by silence, uncertainty or heteroglossia. Rather, a transhumanist aesthetics of failure makes itself more accurate by accounting for its own failure.

As an accountable transhuman metaphor, *Taipei* qualifies as much more than simply a social media novel. Although its main character experiences his existence through social media to a large extent, the details and subtlety of Lin's descriptions in the novel create a style that, unlike his poetry in *Selected Tweets* (Lin and Gonzalez 2015), does not adjust to the size and syntax of social media interaction. Instead, *Taipei's* exhausting, inconsequential accuracy seems to account for readers' desire to submit to anthropocentric technologies and universalist claims of transcendence. Reading this novel requires an effort to overcome discomfort (Grady 2011) that goes well beyond the skimming and scanning required by the programmed obsolescence of social media interaction. Yet, instead of promising transcendence, the novel simply accounts for it. I conclude by contending that Lin's poetics of failure is the literary expression of Herbrechter's notion of critical posthumanism, which transcends the humanist ideal rather than humanity through accurate, self-critical accountability. His poetics of failure is therefore transhuman only in as much as it stands exposed and accountable for its own possibility as an aesthetic project.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hayles describes *flickering signifiers* within the context of posthumanism as follows: "Carrying the instabilities implicit in Lacanian floating signifiers one step further, information technologies create what I will call *flickering signifiers*, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions. Flickering signifiers signal an important shift in the plate tectonics of language. Much of contemporary fiction is directly influenced by information technologies; cyberpunk, for example, takes informatics as its central theme. Even narratives without this focus can hardly avoid the rippling effects of informatics, however, for the changing modes of signification affect the *codes* as well as the subjects of representation" (1999, 30; italics in the original).

<sup>6</sup> The research underpinning this article was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the University of Zaragoza through the research project "Trauma, Culture and Posthumanity: The Definition of Being in Contemporary North-American Fiction" (FFI2015-63506).

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Received 4 May 2020

Revised version accepted 23 September 2020

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