An unremarkable beginning: I had been making pitchers of martinis in anticipation of my fortieth birthday. That day had drawn too near and, along with it, thoughts of death, so I resolved to enjoy myself a bit too much. After connecting to the Internet and locating two poetry websites, I nipped from the long-stemmed glass in my right hand, ran fingers through graying hair with my left, and slipped mawkishly between pictures of the gone world and intimations of immortality: in one breath, remembering how “she would smile and look away / light a cigarette for me / sigh and rise / and stretch / her sweet anatomy / let fall a stocking” (Ferlinghetti); in the next breath, finding “Strength in what remains behind; / In the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be; / In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering; / In the faith that looks through death, / In years that bring the philosophic mind” (Wordsworth). A little beat-romanticism never hurt anyone, I told myself, and, then, while poised in the drunken, hypermedial balance between spent youth and cumulated age, I did all I could to tip the scales toward bathos and the grave. I activated my computer’s “media player” program, loaded Sinatra’s “How Old Am I?” into CD-ROM drive d:\, turned up the volume control, got a little sloppy, and sang, in faltering tones, “If I make you happy today / I’m the perfect age. / As for tomorrow, / turn the page.”

An unexpected reversal: The computer’s media player disrupted my crapulent, sentimental, all-too-human celebration of gradual, relentless, biologic aging by auto-connecting to the Internet, informing me that a newer version of my media player program had become available, asking
me if I wanted to download the program upgrade, waiting for me to click "okay," and then replacing both the program and me with a brand-new, short-lived, soon-to-be-upgraded version of this human-machine composition, "my" cyborg "self."

And so it began, my consideration of cyborg aging and its impact on cyborg composition. That is to say, I started my study of cyborg gerontology in hopes of appreciating how networked computer-human cyborgs (Acronym: NCHC; Pronounced: nick-hick; Spelled: nikhic) get composed and the kinds of things that nikhics (Definition: networked computer-human cyborgs) should be composing. I had long since understood that computer-enhanced life exists for us when we become self-regulating organisms that combine the natural and artificial together in one system; when we become the amalgam of our hearts, motherboards, circulatory and operating systems, program applications, neural networks, stored text files, mouse roller-balls, and on-screen pointers; that is to say, when we submit, however intermittently, to the power of hardware-driven software prostheses to publish the invisible file systems, iterated computer interfaces, and random on-screen movements that are all, quite literally, appendages of complexly prosthetized nikhics. But, for all this, I had failed to account for the compositional influence that regularly upgraded software appendages must exert on our abilities to compose stories about something so basic as human aging. When that strange evening began, I believed that unequal parts of ethanol, hypermedial intertext, and eternity would combine in my performance of "thanatophobia, denial, and the middle-aged dipsomaniac" to produce a pleasing, decidedly bittersweet affair with human life in the shadow of death. What I did not anticipate was that, at the height of my revels, my human affair with death in the cradle of the eternal would combine with an equal dose of computer instrumentality to produce an alternate, incommensurate, nikhic sense of life-in-time, one driven by the compressed, posthuman rhythms of endlessly renewable nikhic prostheses. But that is what happened, and that is how I came to understand that when we allow ourselves to be composed as nikhics, we cannot help but experience the compressed cycle of "death" and "life" that emerges through the ongoing process of program upgrades, overwrites, and erasures. It is also how I came to see that the more intimately involved we become with our computers, the more intense this posthuman experience must become for us, the more the ideology of "computer renewal" will overwrite the ideology of "human aging," and the more this conflict should become the subject of nikhic compositions.
Convinced that composition studies should forge a connection with politically inflected cyborg gerontology, I am recommending that we thoroughly acquaint ourselves with the cyborg body electric, its culturally constituted cycle of "death" and "life," before continuing down the path cleared by such notables as Pamela Gilbert, who, in "Meditations on Hypertext: A Rhetorethics for Cyborgs," suggested that we rely on self-knowledge to resolve a whole range of ethical dilemmas she associates with hypertextual reading/writing. "Although it is not always possible to 'know' the other voices in a hypertext in the richly contextualized, long term fashion prescribed by the feminist care-respect model," Gilbert concludes, "it is possible to know one's own selves in that way — that is, to narrate the selves . . . in a way that is consistent with one's own narratives of self and Other and which maintains them in a caring manner" (267; emphasis added). To be sure, Gilbert makes an interesting point where she argues that "self-knowledge and self-expression become not merely a right but a responsibility" for hypertext readers/writers who understand that issues of identity and ethos are always involved in their various encounters with electronic text (267; emphasis added). But I would quickly add that nikhics at the time of this writing must fail to live up to the responsibilities that Gilbert establishes for them because present-day nikhics lack self-knowledge; because they cannot know themselves; because none of them can answer even this most basic of questions: "How old am I?"

Of course, if we hope to answer this question and, in the same breath, approach rudimentary nikhic self-knowledge—an affective/intellectual state that has been established neither as a cyborg right nor as a responsibility—then networked scholars, critics, and teachers must begin the hard work of perceiving and, thereafter, interrogating the fundamental social unit of networked computer-human society: the regularly upgrad­ing nikhic. When we ground our cyborg-oriented propositions on state­ments, or assumptions, to the effect that the "liberatory potential" of networked computer technology is "only actualized to the extent the human user is able to do so" (255; emphasis added), we do something other than, for example, establish a "cyborg rhetorethics." We demonstrate that self-identified "human" scholars, critics, and teachers (1) recognize "human computer-users" when faced with networked mem­bers of the cyborg body politic; (2) develop weak theories about computer-prosthetized life that make the least of historically specific, culturally constituted, categorical differences between human beings and nikhics; and (3) socially justify knowledges about networked composi-
tion that diminish our capacities for making strong cyborg interventions into any of the ongoing conversations about computers and composition. Then, too, we call attention to the fact that “cyborged” human educators often publish essays that stand on the problem of “cyborg composition” but stumble where they fail to perceive or privilege their faint perceptions of historically realized computer-human frames of cyborg being—essays like Gilbert’s “Meditations” and, as we shall see, those devoted to “Literacy and the Body Electric” in Todd Taylor and Irene Ward’s *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*.

My immediate goal in writing this essay will be, of course, to redress this weakness in composition studies: to toughen the relationship of compositionists to cyborg theory; to press for acceptance of the idea that “human being” and “nikhic” are culturally differentiated experiential categories; to advance nikhic self-knowledge by demonstrating that posthuman “nikhic aging” comes hard on the heels of frequent program upgrades, overwrites, and erasures; to point out that “nikhic aging” pressures nikhics to vacillate schizophrenically between moments of “resurgent youth” and “accelerated decrepitude”; to argue that ongoing nikhic vacillations between “resurgent youth” and “accelerated decrepitude” amount to yet another peculiar expression of postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism; and, finally, to propose that nikhics not only identify “accelerated decrepitude” as the dominant face of “nikhic aging” but, also, respond to it by composing what might be called “The Universal Order of Gray Cyberpanthers.”

To substantiate these positions, I propose to investigate the following. I shall examine texts by Beth Kolko, Cynthia Haynes, and Raúl Sánchez (*Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*) for further evidence that compositionists either fail to perceive or to privilege their perception of the nikhic. Next, my study will revisit this evidence in light of Monique Wittig’s findings on historical and biological experiential categories: first, biological categories—like man, woman, lesbian, heterosexual, human being, human lifespan, nikhic, and nikhic lifespan—are, instead, historico-discursive categories that one may resist and change; and, second, the “natural” body, being a historico-discursive category, is a cultural apparatus for producing politically contradictory, oppressive, and contestable renditions of something called “the body.” Suddenly free to arrange “human” and “human lifespan” alongside “nikhic” and “nikhic lifespan” as two agonistic historico-discursive frame sets for producing “the body,” I shall explore the way that cultural “speed,” or human “rates
of information exchange,” erases the contradictory understanding that rapid information exchange is the “natural” expression of nikhics caught in the tight rhythms of prosthetic “aging” and “renewal.” After having noted that prosthetic “aging” and “renewal” not only emerge within the networked cyborg’s computer-human “frame of being” but, also, appear to us as stable “activity genres,” or “forms of life,” that give historical concreteness to nikhic identities, I shall then look to David Russell’s “activity theory” for a means of justifying the idea that current “human” compositions of “the body” should be revised in the light of a new, highly reproducible, social activity genre: the aging nikhic. A return at this juncture to Jameson’s “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” will allow us to see that our freshly justified cyborg body responds powerfully to the cultural pressures that produce postmodern schizophrenia and, predictably, breaks into tightly wound, alternating flows of “resurgent youth” and “accelerated decrepitude.”

Bearing this in mind, and depending upon whether one defines the “nikhic lifespan” singularly, in terms of the computer-specific rhythms of nikhic upgrade, overwrite, and erasure, or dialectically, in light of the contradiction that exists between the nikhic’s “computer” (read: compressed) and “human” (read: extended) lifespans, one will finally be able to supply an answer to that most basic of cyborg questions: “How old am I?” For those seeking a singular, computer-specific, prosthesis-localized solution to the problem, the answer amounts to the quantification of postmodern schizophrenia—that is, one-zero-one-zero-one-zero. For those willing to forgo the allure of this appealing but nonetheless premature solution and, thereafter, to solve the problem in terms of the computer-human “age” dialectic, their answer should come to an unquantifiable “old.” Although nikhics of position and privilege—for example, Bill Gates—should find it easier to withstand the geriatric force of cyborg accelerated decrepitude, the cyborg body politic—being subject to the logic of late capitalism—will always contain more citizens who lag behind the upgrade curve, contain masses of obsolete prosthetics, grow weary from the posthuman pace of “cyborg renewal,” and become “old” (that is, culturally obsolete) at “human age” forty-seven, thirty-seven, twenty-seven, or seventeen. And this, of course, informs my reason for believing that networked educators and their students should begin to work out the rules and play the serious game of transforming politically disorganized, geriatric nikhics into “The Universal Order of Gray Cyberpanthers.”
Composing the Nikhic Body

Before we can effect any of these changes, we will need to determine why compositionists have either failed to perceive or privilege their momentary perceptions of the nikhic body. Essays by Beth Kolko, Cynthia Haynes, and Raúl Sánchez, comprising that section of _Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet_ devoted to “Literacy and the Body Electric,” make clear why compositionists have struggled to perceive the nikhic body and, on the strength of this, advance strong cyborg interventions into the ongoing conversations about computers and composition.

For Kolko, the computer prosthetic is a tool that human beings use to invent virtual identities, not an integral component of the nikhic body. Knowing as she does that activity in virtual space impacts physical bodies, Kolko requires that we interject accountability into the idea of cyberspace as a place of multiple textual selves. She points out that those who create dialogic, electronic voices often argue that physical selves have “no claim to and no responsibility for the words” they throw into “virtual environments,” even though online interaction evokes visceral reactions, affecting “the meat left behind” (62, 65). Troubled by anything that might weaken our crucial sense of writing as expression with impact and consequence, Kolko recommends that we reconcile multiple selves with accountability for words and actions by adopting strategies of discursive resistance. We should use multiple subject positions online to interrupt the very notion of the unified self, thereby creating social structures and political formations that benefit the living body, while they demonstrate that language can be used as a political, consequential tool. Sound as this advice is for the “human” “computer” “user,” it does and can do nothing to acknowledge or respond to the existence of a nikhic subject.

Haynes comes closer than Kolko to presenting her reader with a picture of self-regulating nikhics but stops short of turning her faint perception of the cyborg body into a bona fide cyborg intervention into the ongoing conversation about computers and composition. Hoping to establish that rhetoric and composition will thrive in a postdisciplinary matrix of “rhetorical and textual writing technologies,” Haynes points out that artificial intelligence in the form of “intelligent agents” may transform computer applications and even writing classrooms into intelligent computer programs that will learn the habits of their human authors, “troll databases,” and do student-directed research, or, perhaps, even “learn the habits of other ‘authors’” and help students to plagiarize (88, 89). Still, she passes on her clear opportunity for merging students
and computers into a population of nikhic bodies. Instead, she forces the students she discusses to remain separate from the machines that will do work for or upon them by undermining the power of "prostheses" to merge with human bodies in the creation of nikhic subjectivities. Haynes uses the word "prosthesis" to mean everything from a profound and anguished recognition that we have losses we cannot regenerate; to tools we use ("prosthetic extensions" of human beings); to employees of the academy ("prosthetic agents"); to ways of communicating ("prosthetic rhetorics"); to contents that we teach to students ("prosthetic rhetorics of critical literacy") and, finally, to feelings that teachers have toward technology—namely, the sensation that teaching with computers is like wearing a prosthesis and the fear that technology amputates the self (79, 81, 85, 87). Without a stronger cyborg orientation toward the range of fully integrated computer-human prosthetics, Haynes has little chance of pressing her faint perception of the nikhic body into a sustained treatise on embodied cyborg subjectivities.

To his credit, Sánchez comes the closest to making a genuinely helpful contribution to a cyborg theory of writing, even though he, too, falls short of perceiving the living nikhic. By pointing out that what usually passes for multiple subjectivity in a MUD is in fact the "illusion of a unified Enlightenment subject trying on different roles" but nonetheless "maintaining the idea of a core being that exists apart from discursive exigencies," he arrests compositionists in their tendency to reinscribe the "centuries-old split between mind and body" (103, 94). He criticizes computer-oriented writing pedagogies that draw upon a "mind/body dualism that thus far has characterized many of our visions of cyberspace" (95). Although he makes no effort to collapse the human/computer dualism that characterizes our theoretic and practical encounters with nikhic citizens, he refuses to sanction the idea that changing one's name, description, or behavior in "cyberspace" extends the mind beyond the limits of "the body," which he insists, following Judith Butler, is not an "ontologically prior" category that falls "beyond the purview of discourse, of representation" (96).

This tactic of his is, as I have suggested, a potential help to the cyborg theorist. Because he denies the biologic primacy of the organic body while preserving "the body" as the discursive limit for that which we call "the mind," Sánchez rightly establishes that "the body" is an historic, discursive construct; that the boundary for this historico-discursive "body" is both arbitrary and an imaginary overlay that conforms, more or less, with the limits of that which we call "the organic human body"; and
that "the body," once established as an arbitrary, historico-discursive limit, must be considered a well-defined, non-dualistic container for that which we call "the mind." Given that "the body," as Sánchez describes it, is both an arbitrary construct and, thereafter, a well-defined container, the idea of "the body" may be used by cyborg composition theorists to advance the following perspective: the arbitrarily established, well-defined, historico-discursive boundary that we call "the body" may and should be reestablished at a different arbitrary, historico-discursive limit when circumstances demand that we recognize and respect the presence of a new well-defined, non-dualistic container for "the mind."

The trick, of course, at this point is to establish that current circumstance is, in fact, pressing compositionists to reestablish "the body" at a new historico-discursive limit and, at the same time, to refocus our vision so that we can perceive the unbroken outline of the nikhic body. Unless we reach these ends, compositionists will have good reason to continue down the capable path they have already cleared, interjecting accountability into the idea of cyberspace as a place of multiple textual selves (Kolko), advancing the idea that rhetoric and composition will thrive in a post-disciplinary matrix of rhetorical and textual writing technologies (Haynes), resisting our pedagogic tendency to reinscribe the centuries-old split between mind and body (Sánchez), and maintaining our narratives of self and Other in a caring manner (Gilbert). After all, if a new "body" is not being pressed into existence and this new "body" is invisible to the discerning eye, then compositionists may as well follow those who have described the undivided human mind/body that uses computers, thrives in a post-disciplinary matrix, takes responsibility for the impact and consequences of its computer writing, and exercises care when constructing hypermedial narratives.

As the saying goes, if it ain't broke . . .

Yet, as I have suggested, we have both means and reasons to perceive and respond productively to a new historico-discursive embodied limit— the nikhic.

We have, in the first place, Wittig's politically inflected critique of "natural" experiential categories to help us establish grounds for making visible the new embodied limit. According to Wittig, systems of domination are built upon material and economic divisions that the Masters abstract, turn into concepts, and present as naturally occurring divisions of labor. For a slave class to resist its oppression, it must work to expose the social oppositions that ground the seemingly "natural differences" that "justify" oppression. Wittig takes women as her example of a slave
class that must expose a "natural category," in this case "sex," as being the product of a system of domination that casts society as being, for example, fundamentally heterosexual and an instrument through which women are forced into heterosexual roles that include the compulsory reproduction of the species. Seen from this perspective, "sex," the historico-discursive category, does not concern "being" but relationships, and it explodes the idea that women's oppression is both biological and historical. Proceeding from this awareness, Wittig argues that women should work to constitute themselves as the subjects of their own history, one that liberates both men and women from the man/woman system of social opposition and oppression even as it disallows the continued existence of "man" and "woman"—that is, the "natural" two-gender system that shackles women to "heterosexual biology" (1-20).

What Wittig says has obvious importance for women, but cyborg theorists should recognize an instrument in Wittig's general theory of "natural categories" both for reestablishing "the body" at a new historico-discursive arbitrary limit and for gauging the nikhic's need for such redefinition. After all, nikhics, following Wittig, find themselves bound by a system of domination that naturalizes differences not between man and woman but between human beings and computing machines. Nikhics exist within a system of domination that forces them to support the "natural" division between humans and machines; to exist within a society that is fundamentally human; to valorize the human penchant for protracted aging, biological death, and gradual decay; and to suppress the computer's upgrade-related, alternating flows of "resurgent youth" and "accelerated decrepitude" that need to be recognized as contributing to the cyborg's sense of life-in-time.

Some may object at this point, saying that my pretense of subjecting inanimate machines to ageist practices does nothing either to disprove that "age" is essentially a biological matter and "ageism" a cultural concern, or to justify expanding "the body" to a new computer-human limit. People grow old, and machines are machines, the counterargument might begin. And then it might continue, "We have long since understood that age plays a vital role in current systems of oppression. We know that the combination of industrialism and advanced capitalism often results in older people losing their jobs to younger people, that age discrimination is a deeply troubling component of the human world, but, also, that the troubling existence of ageist practices does nothing to shift the rate at which bodies age from a biological to a historico-discursive category."
Such objections, however, miss the point entirely. The rise of networked society has exposed the ideological limits of those who believe that “ageism” is a cultural concern and “age” a natural course that we may attempt to influence only through, for example, pharmaceutical (cyborg) interventions. If a cyborg’s computer-influenced sense of life-in-time gets produced by that easily discernible, ongoing practice of program upgrades, overwrites, and erasures—a sense of life-in-time that embodies the compressed, posthuman rhythms of endlessly renewable cyborg prostheses—then the nikhic’s “computer age” comes in opposition to its “human age,” and, more importantly, the nikhic’s age/age self-contained system of domination and oppression becomes historically and discursively established as something other than a naturally occurring division of labor. What might have seemed like a naturally occurring division of labor when it emerges within the “human” community becomes a culturally occurring set of contradictory posthuman aging “realities” when it emerges within the “nikhic” community.

If one needs additional proof, perhaps an obvious display of this pervasive computer-human system of domination and oppression, I hasten to point out that the structural concreteness and reach of historicodiscursive systems of domination and oppression are often best grasped through attention to erasures of difference rather than their manifest presence. The absent presence of strong cyborg perspectives from treatises on, for example, the problems of cultural “speed” (high rates of information exchange) should be sufficient to demonstrate the extent to which the nikhic’s “computer age” has been erased from contemporary discourse and, as such, justify an overwriting of the “human” with the “nikhic” body.

Fredric Jameson’s “The Antinomies of Postmodernism” is my case in point. Jameson argues that “speed” creates “time” in postmodern culture. Through their rapid turnover of images, representational apparatuses—like cameras, projectors, televisions, and computers—produce the seeming speed of the outside world in postmodern culture and make a serious “demand on reality.” A “reality” that is constantly being photographed/printed, filmed/projected, and digitized/pixelated must “scramble” to keep up with representation, with the effect being that we read our subjectivity off the outside of things/representations. The effects of this, Jameson says, are manifold. The old opposition between “clock time and lived time,” between “measurement and life,” drops away. Opposing feelings of external transience and slow internal permanence die out, and we (read: human beings) find ourselves living in a period of
"change without its opposite," an age wherein space and time (object and subject) seem to be identical. Creating a new postmodern subject, Jameson suggests, requires merely that one be willing to refurnish rooms or "destroy them in an aerial bombardment." A new identity will appear in the "ruins of the old," proving that subjectivity has become what Jameson calls "an objective matter" (51–52).

What Jameson says about the shaping effects of "speed" on postmodern culture is essentially correct and, for this, will inform the closing moments of this essay. But it is also true that Jameson's reified use of "speed" to account for changes in the temporal, affective dispositions of postmodern subjects, rather than "prosthetic upgrade, overwrite, and erasure," masks the way in which "change without its opposite" describes the upgrading nikhic's highly compressed cycle of computer "death" and "life," and "informational speed" translates directly into "communication between nikhics who grow old and young, at least in part, through their specialized habit of 'communicating' software upgrades, overwrites, and erasures throughout nikhic activity systems." More importantly, because we, like Jameson, have grown accustomed to reifying postmodern "speed," we fail to recognize our hand in suppressing very real differences between nikhic and human subjects, not the least of which has to do with the manner in which nikhics grow old and young. In other words, we force nikhics (read: ourselves) to participate in an age/age oppositional system of domination and oppression, wherein nikhics are constrained to age like "humans" and to discuss the speed-driven formation of postmodern "human" subjectivities, when they might be better off working to understand the nikhic aging process and to publicize and politicize the more apt study of cyborg gerontology.

Surely, there can be no doubt that software is material to the nikhic, that informational "speed" is a function of nikhic activity, and that nikhic activity produces in part a highly compressed, regenerative cycle of "death" and "life" through iterated patterns of program upgrade, overwrite, and erasure. The unshakable reality of the situation seems a genuine, even pressing reason for compositionists to reestablish "the body" at a new historico-discursive limit. But the question of "how" still remains. How can we train ourselves to "see" this body long enough and often enough to permit us to respond to it in our theorizing and pedagogy? How, indeed, can we set our sights on the unbroken outline of the nikhic body and, at the same time, convince ourselves that the compositionist's job must now expand to deal with the politico-ontological, as well as the politico-rhetorical, compositions of composing cyborgs?
In this instance, compositionists are fortunate to have a ready solution at the heart of contemporary composition theory. David Russell’s activity theory, when calibrated to work with the cyborg problematic, allows us to perceive both the nikhic’s “body” and “lifespan” as social activity genres, or “frames for social action.” According to Russell, the influence of sociology and anthropology on composition studies has provided a fresh way of looking at writing. While he maintains that genre in the traditional sense of a static category of texts that share certain formal features is still important to any principled analysis, he argues that “genre” refers to something much greater than textual forms with definable features—namely, “forms of life,” “ways of being,” or “frames for social action.” Genres, he says, emerge out of activity systems, which, he explains, are collectives (often organizations) that cohere for indefinite periods of time; share common purposes, objects, and motives; and use certain tools, both mechanical and discursive, in certain ways. Through routine tool-use, individuals and collectives within activity systems create, re-create, and temporarily stabilize a range of activity genres, from identities, to objects, to motives, to material and discursive tools. Understood in this context, “genre” is the result of social activities, or, the tool-mediated ways that individuals in a discreet or linked social activity system interact purposefully and dialectically with others in the same discreet or linked activity system. Appearing as they do within diverse environments, ranging from family units to corporate settings, genres may be everything from grocery lists, to environments for learning and teaching, to the socially constructed lifespan of heavily prosthetized nikhics.

Cyborg-calibrated activity theory provides compositionists with a useful tool for framing both the nikhic “body” and “lifespan.” It allows us to see that someone sitting in front of an upgrading computer exists within the nikhic frame of being, replete with its “human age”/“computer age” dialectic. It makes us fully capable of perceiving the wide range of nikhics that take shape across ranges of both isolated and linked nikhic activity systems. It even sensitizes us to the fact that different activity systems produce different versions of the nikhic’s “body” and “lifespan.” On the one hand, we recognize that members of the technological underclasses who rarely upgrade their prostheses will tend to forge casual relationships to their nikhic bodies and lifespans. For their part, citizens of the Third World who may have little or no contact with networked computers will have no regular means of creating, experiencing, re-creating, or annihilating what is personally unavailable or unimportant to
them: temporal and embodied frames of nikhic being. On the other hand, we recognize the existence of a nikhic *esprit de corps* among those economically privileged citizens who tend to reside in the technologically advanced First World, who connect regularly to the Internet, who upgrade their software prostheses frequently, and who experience the rhythm of upgrade as a more or less stable genre that appears across a range of highly differentiated but nonetheless linked activity systems.

And, for our having gained the power to see such things, we, as self-identified nikhic compositionists, can accept that the compositionist's job must now expand to deal with the ontological, political, and rhetorical compositions of composing cyborgs. That is to say, we must begin to work with our nikhic students to help both them and us to recognize and compose intelligently about, for example, the social oppositions that constrain nikhics to suppress "computer" generated "accelerated decrepitude" and "resurgent youth"; to valorize "protracted human aging," "biological death," and "gradual decay"; in other words, to erase the dialectical play of computer-human "age" genres that are at the core of nikhic being and, for that, constitute such things as the nikhic's ontological, epistemological, and affective cultural dispositions.

**Composing Answers and Reply**

So, we return to the point of origin. Equipped now with tools, on the one hand, for creating human and nikhic "bodies" and "lifespans" as frames of being, or social activity genres, replete with historically constructed arbitrary limits, and, on the other hand, for identifying the "human" age/"computer" age oppositional dialect that generates the nikhic's sense of life-in-time through the regular suppression of disqualified "computer" age by natural "human" age and the regular disruption of natural "human" age by disqualified "computer" age—we may attempt to quantify the First World nikhic's dialectical polyrhythms of "death and life" (read: computer aging) and "life and death" (read: human aging) that, one night not so long ago, disrupted my celebration of "biologic," "gradual," "relentless," "human aging and death."

As I stated earlier, one's answer to the question will depend entirely upon whether one calculates nikhic age singularly, in terms of the computer-specific rhythms of upgrade, overwrite, and erasure, or dialectically, in light of the contradiction that exists between the nikhic's "computer" (read: compressed) and "human" (read: protracted) lifespans. My understanding is that one has no choice but to read the nikhic's internalized age/age dialectic when attempting to quantify any nikhic's
age. Because, however, the singular approach produces an answer that amounts to the quantification of postmodern schizophrenia and, as such, resonates with critical assessments of postmodernism, not the least of which is Jameson’s “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” I would like to begin by solving for the nikhic’s “computer” lifespan.

Taken by itself, the ongoing process of “computer” upgrade instills a discontinuous private temporality in the living subject and, for that, imparts a “schizophrenic” identity structure. If Jameson is correct in suggesting that identity is a function of language and that coherent identity occurs when living subjects are able to arrange statements about themselves in unbroken chains of coherent syntactical units, then we may conclude, with him, that living subjects become schizophrenic when their syntactic relationship to themselves breaks down, when the links in their personal signifying chain snap into “heaps of fragments”—that is, when subjects can no longer unify the “past, present, and future” of their own biographical experiences or psychic lives. When this happens and living subjects appear amidst a “rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers,” these subjects exist in a time of the present that cannot focus itself on “activities” and “intentionalities” over time. The present of the world, Jameson explains, comes before schizophrenic subjects with heightened intensity and engulfs them with overwhelming vividness, bringing with it a “mysterious charge of affect,” either negative or positive. Typically, schizophrenic subjects experience negative feelings of “anxiety and loss of reality” or positive feelings that come on with euphoric, “intoxicatory,” or “hallucinogenic intensity” (“Postmodernism” 71–73).

Viewed from this perspective, nikhics—composed through an ongoing process of program upgrades, overwrites, and erasures—have, as a matter of course, their own biographical signifying chains broken, restarted, and broken again, resulting in a fragmentary, emotionally charged practice that passes easily for postmodern schizophrenia. In this context, nikhic age can never advance beyond “one” because frequent upgrades force nikhics to set their prosthetic clocks back to zero. When calculated in this way, a fair response to the nikhic question “How old am I?” might be “one-zero-one-zero-one-zero.”

Additional proof that a schizophrenic binary accounts for the lived experience of upgrading nikhics comes from the additional fact that frequent upgrades, overwrites, and erasures bring with them the heightened intensity, vividness, and charge of positive or negative affect that Jameson binds to the experience of postmodern schizophrenia. Intoxicatory
or hallucinogenic intensity capable of freeing nikhis from their own biographical experience or psychic life surfaces in a fascinating Usenet post by Michael Soibelman, unabashed champion of the SuSE Linux operating system. In his post to alt.os.linux.suse, Soibelman writes ecstatically about the revitalizing, hallucinogenic experience that comes through a program of frequent upgrades, overwrites, and erasures:

Hey everybody,

Here I go again... I finally got a paycheck and just bought 7.2 Professional... I've been upgrading ever since 6.0 (gave up on RedHat by then since its hardware detection wasn't very good and didn't care for Gnome much)... Now I'm just a SuSE junkie... Gotta get the next one... and the next... This stuff is great...

It's now about 1:00 P.M. and I'm rebooting to DVD...

Since I always manually select my packages I should be back this evening provided I don't take too many breaks... a 25 mile bike ride sounds good.

Mmmmmmmmm... Take a deep breath... breath out... breath in...
... relax...

REBOOTING>>>>>>>>):)

By his own admission, Soibelman experiences the euphoric feeling of resurgent youth that erupts out of the nikhić's "computer age" genre. A self-described SuSE junkie, he cannot wait to have his identity disrupted with a new version of the same program. The experience is all the more exciting for him because he likes to dig in and commit himself to rebuilding himself: he always manually selects his packages (that is, programs). This is not the first time he has done this, nor will it be the last. After all, rebooting for Soibelman is more than a little like sex, the little death, with all the iconographic force of ejaculation ">>>>>>>>" and tremulous satisfaction ":) :)">

Yet, feelings of resurgent youth are only one side of the nikhić's "computer age" genre. The other side is dominated by feelings of accelerated decrepitude, or, what Jameson refers to as "anxiety" and "loss of reality." In his "Too Old to Write Code?" James Lardner makes a strong case that counterbalancing charges of negative affect, concretized as feelings of accelerated decrepitude, erupt when nikhis compose
themselves through frequent upgrades, overwrites, and erasures. For Lardner, the problem begins with the “critical shortage of computer programmers” that seems to be haunting the computer industry. Having noted that there seems to be a real shortage of software engineers, with estimates that “core” jobs in the computer industry outnumber computer-science majors 3:1, Lardner points to an anomaly in the system. Ageism strikes software developers at a peculiarly young “human” age. Even if new computer skill sets are comparatively easy for programmers to learn, software industry careers tend to be short-lived, with the half-life of a software or hardware engineer being only a few years and with careers that have the “life expectancy rivaling that of a pro football player.” Lardner brings this point home by quoting a twenty-seven year old Hewlett Packard programmer, who says, “We’re all scared.” “First there’s a shortage—then people respond, and,” he says, “you get kind of a glut with the particular skill.” The problem for this programmer is that a newer technology always comes along and takes its place. “The new skill may not be that hard to learn,” he says, “but the perception of the industry is that you can’t learn it. There’s a whole marketing mantra that goes with it, even if it’s not really that new.” From this, he predicts, “only half-jokingly,” there will be programmers out on the street a few years down the road “carrying signs that read ‘Will Code for Food.’”

The fact that Lardner’s interview reveals that programmers, with life expectancies rivaling those of pro football players, are “scared” and imagining the day when they will “code for food” demonstrates the power of upgrade to break the signifying chain that composes the nikhic identity genre and, in this instance, to produce feelings of panic in the face of an inescapable, accelerated decrepitude.

The appearance of a predictable, double-faced, upgrade-related charge of affect underwrites the logic behind adding resurgent youth (age 1) to accelerated decrepitude (age 0) en route to a schizophrenic solution (one-zero-one-zero-one-zero) to the nikhic question, “How old am I?” The problem with this solution, however, is that it is partial. Nikhics contain not one but two “age” genres—the “computer” and the “human”—and they “age” according to the dialectical play of these oppositional genres. Nikhics, it would appear, compose their sense of life-in-time through what I have already called the regular suppression of their disqualified “computer” age by their natural “human” age and the regular disruption of their natural “human” age by their disqualified “computer” age. In other words, nikhics privilege their humanity, believing as they often do that fortieth birthdays deserve to be celebrated with a little too much
drink, a little too much poetry, a little too much song. At the same time, they cannot help but feel the disruptive charge—both positive and negative—of their suppressed "computer age" genre wherever it erupts. More importantly, they must tend to experience this charge as negative affect in the concretized form of accelerated decrepitude whenever it erupts in the increasingly computer-intensive work environments that are consonant with business practice in the age of late capital. That is to say, computer upgrade, or the activity genre that produces nikhic feelings of insurgent youth, is thrilling, but it cannot insulate even the nikhic esprit de corps from the economic forces that drive the pace of "computer upgrade" and the feelings of accelerated decrepitude that frequently accompany the computerization of professions and work environments.

And what is the upshot of all this? Simply put, if trained professionals in high-tech work environments cannot keep pace with the rate of information exchange (read: nikhic communication) that forces reality to "scramble" to keep up with representation and constrains postmodern subjects to exist in a time of change without its opposite (see Jameson, "Antinomies"), then what hope is there for the rest of us? What hope is there for the collective of nikhic compositionists, who may well lose their collective rights to tenure because tenure only "makes sense" when one uses the human "age" genre as the basis for composing "life-time" contracts; because schools and universities are being run increasingly like and by corporations; and because "human" compositionists will never be able to keep pace with the daunting corporate version of "nikhic" upgrade, overwrite, and erasure that already haunts other systemically linked members of the nikhic esprit de corps? Indeed, what hope is there for our nikhic students when there may be little or no hope for us?

The truth, finally, is that there is really only one viable, nonspecific answer to the nikhic question, "How old am I?" We as nikhics are all born "old." Nikhics can be rendered obsolete, or at least dislocated, at "human" ages ranging from thirty-seven to twenty-seven to seventeen to seven. Even worse, we are born "old" into the course of a protracted "human" lifespan, an experience that cannot help but express the corporate driven collision of incommensurate "computer" and "human" "age" genres except through the eruption of schizophrenic moments that amount to what Jameson calls the underside of culture, the "blood, torture, death and horror" that mark all of class history ("Postmodernism" 57).

What then, given this, is a nikhic compositionist to do? There are no easy answers to this next most basic of nikhic questions. But I can suggest
that we begin to work toward an answer by adapting a page from Wittig’s “book” and accepting this as our charge: nikhics must work to constitute themselves as the subjects of their own history, one that liberates them from the computer/human dualism that hides the system of social opposition and oppression that makes this shocking demand on reality: youth, middle-age, and old-age must all be gray. We must accept that the unshakable reality of our situation demands that we reestablish “the body” at a new historico-discursive limit and, more importantly, that we recognize that ageism has now become a pervasive, systemically invisible virus of epidemic proportions. We have no alternative but to dispense with the notion that we have the right to be “young” on grounds that an unjustified, systemically oppressive reverence for youth is tantamount in the right cultural moment to suicide or murder. We must accept the “fact,” at least for now, that we have all become “old”; that a profound and unmarked social contradiction thrives in every nikhic frame of social being; that “accelerated decrepitude” in this and then this and then this schizophrenic moment, must unite against “resurgent youth”; that we, as geriatric nikhics, must take an aggressive stand against the way that this culture manufactures and disposes of its old/young/old; that, finally, we must identify ourselves as belonging to the Universal Order of Gray Cyberpanthers, if for no other reason than that we would prefer to age and die with protracted dignity.

Or, perhaps, we should simply look the other way, concede the battle, have another drink, read a little poetry, and sing, once more, in still faltering tones: “If I make you happy today / I’m the perfect age. / As for tomorrow, / turn the page.”

University of Massachusetts
Dartmouth, Massachusetts

Works Cited


