

## *Our Robot Overlords*

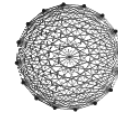
*Roopika Risam*

*June 3, 2016*

At the 2017 Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in Philadelphia, the panel "Anthropocene Digital Humanities" features speakers Roger Whitson (Washington State University), Amanda Starling Gould (affiliation), Shane Denson (affiliation), Helen J. Burgess (affiliation), and Anna Coluthon (independent scholar). By all rights, Coluthon is a copanelist, registered presenter, and collaborator with the other scholars on the panel. "She" is, however, a bot.

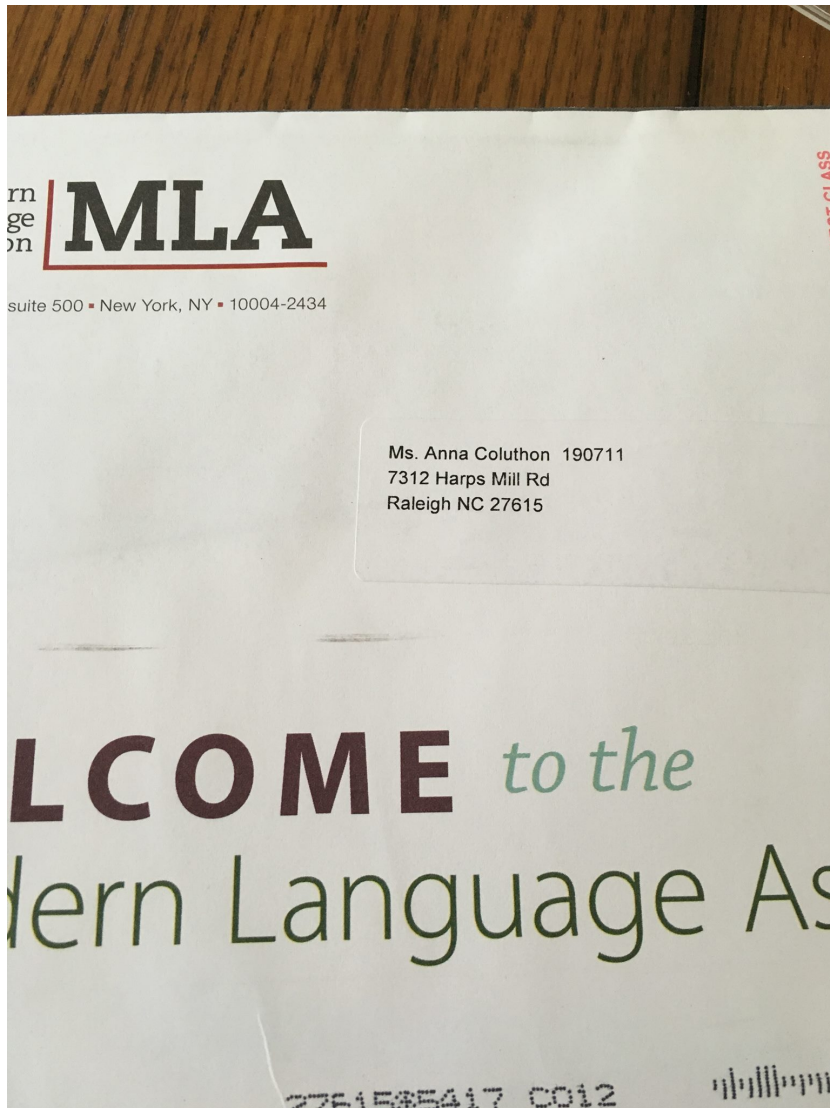
Though Coluthon can be found on both Twitter and Facebook, she is the first nonhuman member of the MLA. Through the support of MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal, Anna Coluthon was permitted to participate in a panel and be listed on the conference program—a privilege granted to members, with the exception of a few others who are granted waivers based on their location in another field and regular attendance at a conference other than the MLA.

In response to this, Coluthon gleefully posted a photo of her MLA membership envelope on Facebook, with the caption (check).



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By receiving MLA membership, Coluthon (something from the rights/benefits of being an MLA member). Her status If authorship is defined by an intellectual contribution, in the context of on the program recognizes an intellectual contribution that she has to make to the panel on which she is participating and to the convention itself. She is perhaps a realization of a nightmarish vision of robot overlords ready to render literary scholars obsolete.

But literary scholars well versed in archaic terms will recognize in Coluthon's name the literary term *anacoluthon*, which the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes as "a grammatical term for a change of construction in a sentence that leaves the initial construction unfinished" (11). It lists the example of Charles Dickens' character Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield* who says, "Accidents will occur in the best-regulated families; and in families not regulated by that pervad-

ing influence which sanctifies while it enhances theãã would say, in short, by the influence of Woman ..."

A quick look at Anna Coluthon's Twitter feed seems to give the impression of humanityãif, by human, we mean the affect of an angsty teen girl who has read too much critical theory:

(copy and paste examples)

[N.B. The author wonders: Is she Anna? Are all literary scholars Anna?]

(paste own angsty-looking tweets that also seem to be about critical theory) On closer look, however, Coluthon's Twitter timeline is, in fact, a series of anacoluthons, the appearance of whole thoughts or even series of linked thoughts that are incomplete, nonsensical, or both. The medium of Twitter itself facilitates Coluthon's ability to passãits short, 140 characters not raising expectations of complexity or erudition. Is Anna an author? Where does she come from? Does she have a co-author? Who is Anna's co-author? What does she say about authorship in the age of machines?

Bots as e-lit? Anna is, in fact, a Python Twitter bot, operating via a Markov chain and a corpus. The Markov chain (does something) while the corpus (does something else). Though she appears to be producing sentient human thought (or what passes for sentience in the Twittersphere), she is, instead, a product of humanãmachine collaboration.

You, too, can make bots (<http://hyperrhiz.io/hyperrhiz13/missives-of-love/mashbot-instructions-twitterbot.html>)!

As a humanãmachine interaction, collaborative authorship produces a sense that the machine, computer, or algorithm that participates as an author is anthropomorphized. The machine is thus interpolated as a human actor, accorded human characteristics, and imbued with intent.