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I have to be honest: I have been waiting for this book. I am a fan of Matt Kirschenbaum. He learned from the best (Jerome McGann) to fuse textual studies with literary interpretation, and his work demonstrates the inseparability of literature and media studies. In *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (MIT UP, 2008) and his writing on born-digital archives, Kirschenbaum has explored the nature of digital inscription and electronic writing across electronic literature, digital archives, and storage platforms. I have been awaiting his history of word processing. I preordered it, and when it arrived, I was a bit surprised but not at all disappointed.

I expected a history of “hardware and software for facilitating the composition, revision, and formatting of free-from prose as part of an individual author’s daily workflow” (xiii). Perhaps I had such expectations because in *Mechanisms*, Kirschenbaum applied forensic media studies to literary studies and showed how deep, excavatory reading practices push literary analysis beyond form to considerations of platform and hardware. *Track Changes* instead explores the complex gerund “word processing” as an ambiguous site for human-computer interaction and textual creation.

The phrase signifies a cybernetic collaboration between human and machine as well as a genre of software enabling this interaction and which possesses fascinating history that has much to tell us about the marketing of computers and the evolution of office work. Kirschenbaum prompts us to “remember that, computationally speaking, ‘processing’ is an intermediary state: it is something that happens in between the systems’ input and output, and thus always in large measure out of reach” (247). He pursues a focus not on the tools and the technologies but on their use in this “intermediary state” as a way of exploring the ever-evolving and “out of reach” concept of “word processing.”

*Track Changes* “seeks to narrate and describe in material and historical terms how computers, specifically word processing, became integral to literary authorship and literary writing” (xiii). Kirschenbaum “pursues a reverse chronological trajectory” in telling stories of word processing by way of a history of it (xv). This is a strategic decision, one aligned with media archaeology (which Kirschenbaum exemplified in his first book); it is a choice that “helps me avoid the temptation of lapsing into easy or self-fulfilling narrative soft technological progress” (xv). The book shows word processing to have multiple histories and entry points for examination. Indeed, *Track Changes* is as
much a mediation on how history (and media history more specifically) is written as it is a history of writing with word-processing technologies. While Kirschenbaum admits that his “methods are imperfect and idiosyncratic,” I would call them human and even humanist.

Kirschenbaum crafts a material history of word processing based on stories about specific people, writers, and their personal reflections about using computers in the writerly process. From Stephen King and Peter Straub’s use of an IBM Displaywriter 6580 to collaborate in writing *The Talisman* (1984) over long distance to a reconsideration of Amy Tan’s role in starting a Kaypro users’ group called Bad Sector, to Douglas Adams’s use of Nexus and Samuel R. Delany’s Kaypro II installed with Perfect Writer in 1983, Kirschenbaum provides fascinating details about the specific experience of using machines in a particular moment, prompting us to “remember the actual conditions of computing at the time” (124). Such conditions include the sounds and heat radiating from machines like Redactron and MT/ST (154) as well as the fact that the killer apps of the early personal computer era were actually just spreadsheets and word processing software programs (140). This is a material history and materialist study that illuminates the cultural contexts for digital tools.

Looking at word processing this way allows us to see the actual spaces (offices), purposes (paperwork), and people (female secretaries) involved in the history of word processing and, indeed in, computing. Building upon Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell’s important collection, *Literary Secretaries / Secretarial Culture* (Ashgate 2005) about females secretaries in the nineteenth century, Kirschenbaum shows how “the managerial regimen of word processing was about the regulation of female bodies, both their tasking and their situation” (146). He argues, “For word processing’s crucial formative period—from the early 1970s on through to the early 1980s, when it made the transition from office equipment to killer application for the personal computer—this backbone was upheld by a social tissue of embodied—gendered—relations” (243). We come to understand that word processing was not imagined as a literary tool or action, just as the Internet was not intended for social networking and email (as Janet Abbate shows in *Inventing the Internet* [MIT Press, 1999]). Tracing the early tracks and changes of word processing as it developed, Kirschenbaum helps us to see “the widespread promotion of a new organizational model known as word processing in the business literature of the day” (145). We also see the inseparability of office work and literature, secretaries and authors, texts and word processing. We are thereby invited to reconsider how we think, write, and process the relationship between them.

Kirschenbaum asks, “Why does a literary history of word processing matter?” (6). The answer is that by focusing on word processing, we learn how to think about the
partnership between humans and machines in the production of the literary. In language that resonates with Katherine Hayles’s writing on the posthuman cybernetic feedback loop, Kirschenbaum states, “Word processing may thus be a literary subject, but word processing also shapes and informs literary subjects” (29). Track Changes explores the material, technological, and humanistic aspects of posthumanism by considering specific instances of computer-mediated thinking and creativity. This includes the work not only of creative writers but also of literary critics (and Kirschenbaum nicely returns our attention to the important work of early thinkers such as Michael Heim and Mark Poster) and literary tools (WordPerfect, ETC). Track Changes opens new horizons for reading between and across different types of literary genres, media-specific practices, and office work, for practicing what Hayles and I have elsewhere called “comparative textual media studies.”

Track Changes opens up new focal points for exploring histories of literature, media, and more. In the style of Janice Radway, Kirschenbaum spends more time with innovators writing science fiction and other popular genres than those that attract an “academic focus on the avant-garde,” a focus, which, Kirschenbaum claims, “has risked obscuring our recollections of a much wide, albeit more quotidian, history of writing on screens” (25). As one guilty of such a focus in my own research, I applaud his ability to show how attention to “word processing,” rather than “literature” or “the literary,” enables us to see the social contexts as well as the textual products. Namely, in this work, we see the culture of organizational labor and office work that “was the climate that created word processing as an organizational (as opposed to strictly technological) concept” (146) and the gendered power structures that are constitutive of this climate. For Kirschenbaum, “the managerial regimen of word processing was about the regulation of female bodies, both their tasking and their situation” (146). In the context of media studies and technocultural examination, Track Changes builds upon Alan Liu’s examination of the culture of “cool” in The Laws of Cool and Lisa Gitelman’s study of nonliterary print culture in Paper Knowledge. “To fully articulate what is at stake,” Kirschenbaum writes, “we have to recognize that these are profoundly humanistic concerns” (8). It is this humanistic perspective and awareness that distinguishes this book.

Track Changes is more generative than conclusive, and this is a good thing. It is a timely thing as well. I see this book as a response of sorts to recent claims by such thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Rita Felski who implore critics to do more than just critique. Kirschenbaum writes that he hopes his book, “constructively, even joyfully—extends our imagination of what writing is by illustrating the variety of ways in which all manifestations of that activity coexist and cohabitated with technology” (30). What compels this study is, at least in part, what compels the larger study of literature and
literary history of which it is part: a desire to understand creativity, how and when it works. Kirschenbaum writes, “close up against the chasm between composition and inspiration we find—always—material things and technologies” (9). We find these things in *Track Changes*—the specific details of John Hersey’s interactions with the Yale Editor program in the early 1970s, for example—but they are neither the purpose nor payoff of this book. Of word processing, Kirschenbaum writes, “I prefer to think of it as an ongoing negotiation of what the act of writing means” (23). As a study of word processing, *Track Changes* does what its title says: it explores some of the tracks left to us from the recent history of using computers to write. Reading these traces through Kirschenbaum’s astute media archaeology, we see how this book inspires us to look differently at computer history as a rich site for understanding the contemporary literary moment.