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# BODY of KNOWLEDGE

## **Critical Unmaking: Divination, the Algorithm, and the Practice of Automatic Writing**

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What exactly is automatic writing, and why, after 150 years since the Spiritualists put it into practice, does it still persist? Furthermore, how can a reclaiming of automatic writing put forward an alternate ontology that changes the way we interact with writing and the systems it empowers? This presentation will start by complicating ideas around creativity, automaticity, and the act of divination by comparing examples of classic automatic writers, such as medium Geraldine Cummins, with contemporary writing automata, such as Horoscope Bot. Borrowing Matt Ratto's term "critical making," I'll discuss how automatic writing offers a tactic of "critical unmaking": a radical act that revises, among other things, the range of perceived interactions between humans and technology. To do this, I'll examine cases where automatic writing has emerged from its habitus of parlour rooms and séances to appear in the theatres of law and cognitive science — here, its associations with divination and trance allow automatic writing to work as a disorienting force within these epic institutions, opening a space to unmake traditional systems. In her essay "Reclaiming Animism," Isabelle Stengers calls for a move to reclaim concepts such as "magic," for, she says, "magic undercuts any such version of the epic"; so, too, with divination and its embodiment in automatic writing, which resists explanation and is often gendered. "Long before our contemporary fascination with the beautiful possibilities of cyberspace," writes Jeffrey Sconce in *Haunted Media*, "feminine mediums led the Spiritualist movement as wholly realized cybernetic beings." In an age where 70% of Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk labour force is female, and where bots such as Siri are often tamed by being gendered female, is this "cybernetic being" as utopic as Sconce makes out? Or are different faculties of knowledge ready to be divined outside those that romance the (feminine) automaton?