

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

e-ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Generative AI and the Future of the Humanities: Reading, Writing, Teaching, Labor, by Dana J. Gavin. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2025. viii + 116 pp., ISBN: 978-3-032-06533-9.

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss4.15463

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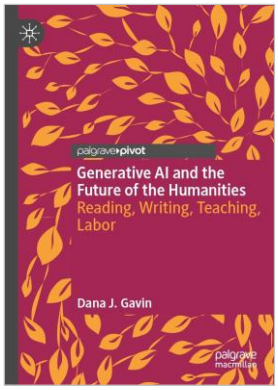
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Received: 01-08-2026 Accepted: 25-10-2026 Published: 30-10-2026

Book Review

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Generative AI entered the composition classroom as a fait accompli, and a torrential downpour of academic and non-academic commentary followed soon after with the same urgency: reactive and only slowly theoretical. Dana J. Gavin recalls that the initial response to generative AI was pure alarm: "The College Essay Is Dead," *The Atlantic* reported just over a week after ChatGPT was publicly released. This was quickly followed by a backlash of "toxic positivity" (5). Subsequent books written in reaction to this crisis have organized themselves along disciplinary lines and targeted audiences. For example, Naomi Baron's *Who Wrote This?* (2023) presents a linguistic approach to the crisis through cognition and literacy. Similarly, Shannon Vallor's *The AI Mirror* (2024) offers a philosophical account of the crisis as a challenge to human capacity for moral decision-making and rational thought. John Warner's *More Than Words* (2025) is intended for the general reader who seeks to learn about the changes composition is undergoing because of AI. In contrast, the integrationist wing of composition studies can find a common point of reference in *TextGenEd* (2023), an open-access collection edited by Annette Vee, Tim Laquintano, and Carly Schnitzler. Gavin writes from yet another position, that of the writing center. Her *Generative AI and the Future of the Humanities* offers a perspective similar to Warner's but adds a historian's viewpoint. The author serves as Director of the Writing Center at Dutchess Community College and has taught first-year composition at four institutions (18). Her dissertation research concerned the nineteenth-century steam-powered printing press (2). She has also studied Victorian fiction such as *The Moonstone* and the Sherlock Holmes stories (29), all ventures that afford her an exceptionally broad scope when viewing a phenomenon that has been continuously described as unprecedented. Gavin's contribution therefore falls squarely within the domain of composition and rhetoric as opposed to linguistics or philosophy. Her book is the result of that dual formation, and while that particular disciplinary address is one of the project's strengths, it is also one of its limitations.

Gavin describes her goals as follows: "to raise questions, offer suggestions, and ultimately argue for action rather than passivity" (1). Gavin argues throughout her six-chapter book that generative AI is less a novel disaster than an accelerator of what she calls "a mass illiteracy event" (56) that has been occurring for decades, due in part to the failure of the humanities to articulate the value of what they teach. Two figures organize Gavin's book. The first figure is pollution. Gavin uses the smoke-tainted wine of California's 2017 wildfires (4) as her metaphor for an art form poisoned from outside; she returns to this theme throughout the "polluted assemblage of knowledge" that generative AI represents (13), in the dual senses of pollution as desecration and pollution as contamination (14), and in the "slop" and "rot" of the subsequent chapters. The second figure is the Luddite. Using economic and policy scholarship on the Luddites, Gavin transcends the rudimentary understanding of the Luddites as technophobic

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anti-modernists and reclaims them as skilled artisans protecting the quality of their craft from low-cost, low-effort "cut-up stockings" (7). Gavin makes the analogy directly applicable to machine-generated text: "slop poisons the well for everyone" (79).

Chapter 1 establishes these conceptual frameworks; Chapter 2 delves into writing and memory; Chapter 3 examines reading, trust, and the material costs of using generative AI; Chapter 4 turns to labor and what she refers to as "incapacitating technocapitalism" (13); Chapter 5 discusses pedagogy and the plagiarism panic; and Chapter 6 proposes coalition building.

The steam press anchors Gavin's historical position. By drawing upon Jane Bennett's new-materialist *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964), Gavin views both the nineteenth-century steam-powered press and large language models as "vibrant assemblages of human and non-human materials" (10). The frame enables Gavin to view John Walter's covert installation of steam-driven presses at *The Times* and the threat of violence from the press workers (9-10) as a structurally rehearsed version of today's standoff among developers, educators, and displaced expertise without reducing the two moments to equivalent positions. The account is brief, about three pages (8-10), but it is critical to an understanding of Gavin's methodological approach as she expands the assemblage framework into authorship in Chapter 2. Her main target is the "lone genius," the Romantic writer who operates "alone in a room" (30). Gavin suggests writers are always community-based, shaped by teachers, editors, previous readings, and physical instruments. Writers, she asserts, invoking Donne, are never "an island" (31), and therefore citation should be employed as "explicit transparency with respect to our information assemblages" (32) instead of a proprietary boundary. The author disputes the often aestheticized mythology of the solitary writer, not individual ability: "The focus for me is the 'lone' part of the myth, not the 'genius' part" (30). The chapter also introduces sustained attention to disability, from assistive technology designed to help students with dysgraphia (22) to Friedrich Kittler's description of how Nietzsche turned to the Malling-Hansen writing ball when his sight began to fail (27-28). Accounts of writing technology continue in subsequent sections focused on hiring software (42-44) and accessible pedagogy (97). For a writing center director, the practical implications of the book are clear: the argument shifts plagiarism anxiety away from seeing it as a matter of individual dishonesty and toward viewing it as a symptom of an ideology of sole proprietorship.

The third chapter is the longest and conducts the book's most extensive synthesis. After an introductory reading of Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" (37-39), the chapter examines AI as a product—Super Bowl advertising, a multiplicity of transparency regulations, and HireVue's explainability statement (40-44). The chapter then focuses on the cost of materials: examining data-center power consumption using Jevons's paradox, including the examples of Meta's proposed Louisiana data center and Ireland's strained grid (44-51); and the labor behind model training—from Kenyan workers earning less than $2 an hour to reduce toxicity in ChatGPT (53), to underage data-taggers hired from Pakistan to the Philippines (54). Only then does the chapter reach its epistemic core. Gavin argues that reading relies upon a "two-way trust street" between the reader and the author (55), where trust enables a reader to enjoy watching Holmes break a substitution cipher, or recalling that the Enigma was broken by Polish and British cryptographers (55). Using Emily Bender and her co-authors' "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots" (2021) as the chapter's sharpest analytical instrument, Gavin explains that a language model combines words into phrases "without any reference to meaning," resulting in a "stochastic parrot." Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, all comprehension derived from it is "an illusion arising from our singular human understanding of language" (qtd. in Gavin 55). Gavin follows this with a reading of Frederick Douglass's

Narrative (1845) and Maryanne Wolf's *Reader, Come Home* (2018), arguing that literacy can be understood as a form of liberation rather than a functionally instrumental skill. "What he most dreaded, that I most desired," Douglass writes concerning his enslaver's fear of his literacy (qtd. in Gavin 59), and Gavin worries that generative AI arrives before many readers have become the "expert readers" this level of trust requires (61). The chapter concludes by returning to Bennett and to Sarah K. Burriss and Kevin Leander's "Critical Posthumanist Literacy" (2024), in a section of the book (64-67) to which I return below.

However, an issue arises from Gavin's omission regarding existing theoretical positions. Gavin's case against the solitary author revisits debates that have already been worked through. This topic has been explored at length in two bodies of literature. First, in literary theory, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) argued that a text's meaning is produced during the reading activity itself rather than being guaranteed by an "Author-God," and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969) posited that the author is a historical construction ("author-function") rather than a natural fact of written works. Neither piece appears in Gavin's reference lists or anywhere in the book's chapters. Second, Gavin fails to cite a substantial body of scholarship developed within her discipline (composition studies) that challenged the notion of solitary authorship during the late twentieth century. These include Linda Brodkey's "Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing" (1987), which critiques modernist images of writers who create alone in a garret; Karen Burke LeFevre's *Invention as a Social Act* (1987); Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* (1990); and Rebecca Moore Howard's *Standing in the Shadow of Giants* (1999), which addresses plagiarism and patchwriting, among other works. Not one of them is cited in the book. While Gavin references Kittler's media theory effectively (27-28), she fails to provide the reader with any account of why she is taking an assemblage-theoretical approach via Bennett and McLuhan instead of drawing on the apparatuses established by her own field to dissolve notions of solitary authorship. As it stands, the claim reads like a rediscovery to anyone trained in literary studies or composition studies.

The Barthes omission matters most in Chapter 3, where the question of authorial intention becomes structural. The assumption of an intending author is central to Gavin's understanding of reading as trust. Gavin states that this is sustained by "a belief that the author of the text is trying, in good faith, to put forward something coherent" (12) in addition to "a bone-deep trust that someone is trying to tell me something" (63). Additionally, Bender and her co-authors point out that comprehension is an illusion if one party to the communication has no intention to mean anything (55). This is precisely what Barthes's essay claims is dead with his relocation of meaning to the reader; in other words, the book dissolves the solitary author in Chapter 2 and calls it back as the guarantor of meaning in Chapter 3. While these two positions are not strictly contradictory, since a writer embedded in communal assemblages could still have intentions, the book commits itself to an intentionalist theory of meaning. Literary studies have been contesting this for decades, and Gavin provides no defense of this position. Since she argues in Chapter 3 that generative AI is "untrustworthy" (37) based upon an intentionalist theory of meaning, the gap in perspective is not merely academic, and the omission is more than a theoretical nicety.

A related concern arises when Gavin turns to Burriss and Leander. Gavin agrees that placing generative AI in the writing assemblage allows us to "think about 'writers' as confederations rather than individuals" and trace texts to "human–non-human assemblages rather than singular human authors" (66). However, she resists "treating generative AI as a singular entity with discrete agency of its own"; she prefers instead to "break down the assemblages within the assemblage of generative AI" (66). This disaggregation is entirely consistent with Bennett's philosophy. The difficulty lies in the justification she gives for the remaining asymmetry between generative AI and human agents. She opts out of treating generative AI "with the same

wholeness as the human being" because "generative AI is not an approximation of a discrete unit in the way a human comes closer to manifesting" (65-66). In other words, she makes an ontological assertion that is presented rather than argued. The rationale she develops elsewhere in the chapter for this asymmetrical treatment is political-economic: a chatbot appears to be a complete unit but conceals scraped texts, underpaid moderators, and data centers (44-54). For this reason, *Vibrant Matter* is not a suitable source for the ontological statement since Bennett's project is to refuse clear distinctions between human and nonhuman actants. Foucault's author-function, which Gavin never uses, could easily have supplied the distinction Gavin's prose keeps reaching for. Had she applied this concept, she could have granted generative AI a role in the writing assemblage but denied it proper authorship. It would also have allowed her to ground the denial of authorship in the social and legal practices of attribution that inform her political-economy argument instead of grounding it in which entities are more nearly whole.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn Gavin's focus outward to the university at large and to the ways "technocapitalism" affects it. To Luis Suarez-Villa's definition of "technocapitalism" in *Globalization and Technocapitalism* (2012) as the fusion of corporate power and technology (76), Gavin adds a qualifier of her own to define the concept further: "incapacitating technocapitalism," or technology used "for the enrichment of the few that also has a useful numbing effect" (13), based upon McLuhan's interpretation of Narcissus as narcosis. Her question—"Who benefits from a populace that can no longer read and write effectively?" (76)—leads to the chapter's culminating claim that an illiterate public is easier to control. Her most incisive labor example is not the most obvious one. A UCLA medievalist had ChatGPT generate course material as well as breakout session content for her teaching assistants. The true cost was borne by the graduate students who were denied the opportunity to engage in the formative labor of creating them (78). Gavin is similarly critical of AI-generated feedback and recommendation letters: a high school teacher advocating for using AI to give instant feedback on over 140 students' drafts is, according to Gavin, an argument for smaller ratios (83); and letters drafted by AI can end up having "generative AI 'talk' to generative AI" (84). Gavin presents her darkest case study of incapacitating technocapitalism through the co-optation of the NaNoWriMo program. Originally a grassroots writing project, the organization had by 2024 a leadership that dismissed criticism of AI use as classist and ableist, despite a resigning board member pointing out that an AI-powered writing tool had become a sponsor (76-77). The chapter's most crucial section is "Communicating Value" (79-88), in which Gavin turns on her own discipline. Fields that "authentically believed in the necessity of the skills developed through their practice," she argues, "would not have permitted the casualization and de-professionalization of the profession" (80). Her solution for auditing humanistic skill development in the workplace and reporting those findings to the public (79, 81) is perhaps the clearest expression of the book's central premise, though more blueprint than edifice.

In Chapter 5, Gavin shifts her attention to the relationship between teachers and students. Gavin examines detection software, from Turnitin's huge databases of stored student papers (95) to modern AI-based detection tools that are "presented as entirely reliable," while their own terms clearly indicate that they are "in no way foolproof" (96). What is distinct about Gavin's position vis-à-vis both surveillance technologies and AI is that she rejects each with equal vigor. Gavin views the retreat to blue books and pencils along with the abandonment of Universal Design for Learning as a pedagogy of "domination through penalty" (97), and she explicitly rejects "forcing students to hand write essays in class" (102). Instead, she suggests making students' "metacommentary the primary assessment object, rather than the final draft" (101). Of the book's specific suggestions, this is probably the most exportable to other educators

and administrators. The conjunction of anti-AI and anti-surveillance positions lends Gavin's perspective a distinctive edge.

The book's remaining limitations are chiefly a matter of evidence. First, the frame of reference for Luddism is narrower than its central position warrants; Gavin's use of this frame (6-7) is primarily based upon Gary M. Anderson and Robert D. Tollison's "Luddism as Cartel Enforcement" (1986); this public-choice economics piece uses the cartel frame in a way that does not fit well with Gavin's heroic view of the Luddites. Moreover, she does not mention the labor-history tradition that has reclaimed the Luddites, from E. J. Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson to Brian Merchant's *Blood in the Machine* (2023). Second, Gavin's empirical base is uneven. She uses survey and agency data when possible—for instance, the PIAAC and NAEP literacy results (56-57), the International Energy Agency's projections (45-47), Alexandra Sasha Luccioni and her co-authors on rebound effects (51)—but many of the facts supporting her political-economy arguments rely on journalism, corporate reports, newsletters, and podcasts; and some of these facts and figures reach the reader at several removes. For example, the claim that training a single model can produce "more than 626,000 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent" appears via a *Forbes* column reporting *MIT Technology Review* (11), although the original source was a 2019 study cited by Gavin elsewhere through Bender and her co-authors (44). This is understandable in a book written from inside an ongoing controversy; however, many of its factual elements will date in a way its historical and educational elements will not.

Third, Gavin's use of the Douglass passage relies on a comparison that bears too much weight. Although the legal and violent repression of literacy in chattel slavery and the underfunded and algorithmically distracted degradation of literacy education now are each real, they do not exist on a single continuum. Gavin later recognizes this distinction—"we do not have the same kind of threat to literacy as Frederick Douglass faced as an enslaved man" (111)—although the acknowledgment occurs approximately fifty pages after the comparison has done its rhetorical work, and the passage that uses Douglass the most (59-60) does not include it. The book also shows signs of rushed editing, including the erroneous spelling of Maryanne Wolf's name as "Wolfe." The slip is minor, but a second edition should correct it.

The book's hybridity of genres constitutes both its appeal and its primary structural limitation. Gavin writes as memoirist and polemicist as much as scholar. The majority of her chapter titles are directly extracted from 1 Corinthians, Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dante, and Robert Frost, and the chapters vary greatly in focus. For instance, Chapter 3 ranges from Louisiana and Irish data-center strain to effective altruism and Peter Singer's "drowning child" to Jevons's paradox before concluding with trust and literacy. To a sympathetic reader, this will appear to be richly detailed; however, to one looking for a consistent, sustained argument, it may seem digressive. The book concludes similarly. Chapter 6 rewords Frost's "A Servant to Servants," whose speaker admits that she "can see no way out but through" (qtd. in Gavin 105); Gavin changes the word "out" to "forward." She states: "This is why I rather wantonly reworded Frost's beautiful poetry, to change the word 'out' to 'forward.' I do not believe there is an 'out' here" (107). Gavin offers tangible, if modest, examples of coalition building. These include unionizing, summer round tables with K-12 educators, pending state legislation, and even European and Australasian car safety assessors pushing back against touchscreens in favor of physical controls, offered as an unlikely precedent for walking back bad design (107, 110-12). Her use of a personal register grants the book accessibility as well as pedagogical authority; however, it also means that claims are asserted rather than developed across the chapters into a cumulative case.

Generative AI and the Future of the Humanities is ultimately a document that captures the AI discourse's present moment, written from the front line with genuine expertise. The book will likely be most valuable for writing center professionals, composition and rhetoric scholars,

and humanities faculty members who seek a usable framework as well as concrete classroom strategies. Scholars who want to theorize authorship or the ethics of AI, by contrast, will need a more systematic treatment. Gavin's work is strongest when she is grounded in her own institution-based roles: the writing center, the first-year composition classroom, the union negotiation table. Composition studies is where Gavin has authority to speak, but she does not draw on the theory of social authorship that composition studies developed decades earlier; therefore, her contribution to the theory of authorship she alludes to remains an opportunity rather than a resolution. Gavin ends with an imperative—"Be bold and go deep, because others will follow" (113)—and the book's truest achievement lies in modeling this confidence even if the book's theoretical foundation has yet to catch up to its conviction.

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