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TITLE: Afterword: Paperless Text: Digital Storytelling in Latin America and Spain (1976-2016)

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ABSTRACT: This *Afterword* reflects upon issues of authorship and authority, interactivity and participation, as presented in the essays included in this special issue of *Letras Hispanas*. It also explores the relation and interdependency of the Internet culture with the cultural logic of multinational capitalism (Jameson) and draws connections with scholarship on consumer culture and marketing. The *Afterword* argues that the current cultural sensitivity and sense of “digital aesthetics” (Gainza) of our times have been molded by the very dynamics of multinational capitalist expansion to whose designs we voluntarily submit. Digital media creation and consumption is permeated by such dynamics; however, the *Afterword* also elaborates on the potential of digital storytelling to generate the “political art” (Jameson) of the future.

KEYWORDS: Cyberspace, Cyberliterature, Latin America, Digital Storytelling, Consumer Culture, Political Art, Marketing, Multinational Capitalism, Jameson, Contestatory Narratives on Cyberspace

RESUMEN: El Epílogo reflexiona sobre los temas de autoridad y autoría, interactividad y participación, que aparecen en los ensayos que constituyen la edición especial de *Letras Hispanas*. También explora la relación e interdependencia con la lógica cultural del capitalismo multinacional (Jameson) y establece conexiones con la discusión académica sobre cultura de consumo y mercadeo. El Epílogo también arguye que la sensibilidad cultural actual y nuestro concepto de “estética digital” (Gainza) han sido moldeados por las mismas dinámicas de la expansión del capitalismo multinacional a cuyos designios nos sometemos de manera voluntaria. La creación y el consumo de historias digitales están permeados también por tales dinámicas; sin embargo, el Epílogo también discute el potencial de las narrativas digitales para general el “arte político” (Jameson) del futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ciberespacio, ciberliteraturas, América Latina, historias digitales, cultura de consumo, arte político, mercadeo, capitalismo multinacional, Jameson, narrativas contestatarias en el ciberespacio

BIOGRAPHY: Hilda Chacón is Associate professor of Latin American literature and culture in Nazareth College, Rochester, NY. Her first career was as a journalist and she has experience in writing, as well as in radio and TV production. She has researched about cyberspace, political cartoons, US-Mexico cultural exchanges in the global era, and gender issues in post-war Central America. She has been a member of the MLA Division Executive Committee on Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature (2009-2014), and is currently Vice President of the Northeast Modern Language Association, NeMLA (2015-2016), and Vice President of Feministas Unidas (FemUn, MLA-allied organization) (2014-2016). She is currently completing the edited volume, *The Internet as a Contestatory Medium in Latin America* (forthcoming).

Afterword: Paperless Text: Digital Storytelling in Latin America and Spain (1976-2016)

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When I was invited to write the afterword for the special issue of *Letras Hispanas*, *Paperless Text: Digital Storytelling in Latin America and Spain (1976-2016)* I was in the midst of completing a book proposal and revising the Introduction of my own edited volume on contestatory uses of cyberspace in Latin America. Therefore, when the editors approached me with their request I was already in what I call “digital brain” mode, which is how I refer to those elapsed moments when I am in a sort of mental limbo reflecting upon what I have just read and/or seen/written/uploaded/downloaded/navigated through/interacted with on the Internet. In fact, as I write this foreword I am realizing that in the last decade I have spent a good amount of my scholarly endeavor reading, observing, and reflecting upon the constantly-evolving, ceaselessly-moving, and almost-impossible-to-grasp ways of creating meaning in cyberspace. On his lecture series on the History of Philosophy, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel affirms, “The modern world is this essential power of connection, and it implies the fact that it is clearly necessary for the individual to enter into these relations of external existence” (Hegel 169). Speaking on the philosophy of history, Hegel asserts that the obligation of the philosopher of his times was to observe the modern world in which he lived. I believe that the role of the philosopher of the 19th century that Hegel foresaw is currently being carried out by cultural critics like us, women and men

who attentively observe public reactions and responses to the advances and impacts of the global era in which we live. None of the great thinkers about modernity throughout the 19th century could have imagined the magnitude that such “essential power of connection” would attain at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. We are without a doubt presently witnessing the greatest paradigm shift that humanity has ever seen in the field of communications and global interconnections. The emergence of financial transactions in cyberspace and the massive use of the Internet in the last decade of the 20th century have no parallel in the history of humanity. For those of us who come from the Gutenberg culture of books and print media, who remember large tabletop radios with huge vacuum tubes and who recall when the first televisions arrived—among other “antique” memories, as perceived by our students—the instantaneous world-wide communications options facilitated by the Internet are certainly among the most amazing phenomena in the “modern world’s essential power of connection” in our own era.

As a writer and a scholar brought up in the literary tradition, I often find myself acknowledging that, relentlessly palpitating at the core of my thinking, there lies the question of how literary creation forms have been impacted and radically modified by cyberspace and its multi-layered systems of denotation—a reflection that guides the present publication. The selection of essays in this *Letras*

Hispanas special issue explores such transformations while the contributors navigate us through thought-provoking analyses of case studies of literary works and other narratives in cyberspace—a wide array of essays that straddles reflections on writers who foresaw the multilayered ways of thinking and writing before the Internet from Cervantes to digital storytelling (Gretter), novels in cyberspace and its clearly identifiable “digital aesthetics” (Gainza), cyberliterature, interactive fiction, flash poem, cyberliterary *genre* and blog-fiction (Cleger), the always evolving dialogue between electronic and print formats (Saum-Pascual), digital storytelling and migrant experiences (Ramírez), Twitter fiction (or Twitterature) and microblogging (Lowman and Correa-Díaz), and videogame culture and software development in Latin America (Penix-Tadsen). The timely intervention of this special issue of *Letras Hispanas* addresses existing lacunas in the scholarship on cybercultures and cyberliteratures of Latin America and certainly demonstrates, not only the pertinence but also the urgent need, to generate further dialogue across disciplines and scholarships in order to properly understand the reach of what I have identified in other publications as the key cultural hallmark of our times: cyberspace (Chacón, *Puede; Poética; Political*, 219); the volume is firmly committed to questions of aesthetics and cultural studies, including consumer culture and game scholarship on cyberspace.

One of the (very few) firm conclusions to which I have relatively safely arrived through my research, one that in my view the essays gathered in this volume confirm, is that the culture of our times is marked by the ephemeral, by the sudden appearance and disappearance of cultural goods that are available in cyberspace on a given moment and location; however, there is no guarantee for the consumer of culture that that particular item will be perpetually available for his/her consumption and pleasure. I have experienced the ephemerality of cyberspace when I designed a whole website to participate in an

academic forum in cyberspace; one day I discovered that the entire website had vanished overnight when the company that provided the support platform decided to eliminate the service—they assured me that customers had been properly notified of the change despite my arguing on the contrary. The sense of frustration that follows the sudden disappearance of vast hours of work in front of the computer, even within the reassurance that the product at some point *was* available online, is incommensurable; but that event made very evident to me the temporary nature of the Internet. The cultural goods produced and consumed online can actually disappear at any moment, and that possibility adds more stress to the already heartbreaking “waning of affect” (Jameson) that characterizes the culture of the multinational capitalism era in which we live.

In following Sergio Delgado’s proposal of consumer behavior/culture as a pivotal conceptual node under which societies have come to define themselves nowadays, I perceive Latin American cultural production in cyberspace as strongly intertwined with the creation of marketing niches which in turn, are dependent on, and are also influential in, societal patterns of online consumption; all of which adds new levels of complexity to the process of creating cybernarratives and to the means of designing digital storytelling formats. As the editors point out in their Introduction, we are witnessing a new era in which digital media have impacted and modified storytelling traditions, obligating producers and consumers of culture from our time to create new strategies of interpretation and interaction online.

Interestingly enough, some of the new digital creators of Latin America perceive the Internet as a *medium* that transcends its own temporality and provides the audiences with what is perceived as “infinite, eternity, ubiquity, and simultaneity,” as Chilean cyberauthor Carlos Labbé affirms (Gainza).¹ In fact, Gainza elaborates Labbé’s assertion and concludes that “the sense of the multiple and

the infinite manifest themselves in each *click*, which opens diverse reading options and textual paths to travel by.”²

Another fascinating aspect of these new trends and forms of creation in cyberspace is that the traditional figure of the Author (with a capital letter) has slowly blurred, opening way to other forms of collective authorship and new forms of cooperation to carry out the creative projects. The Authority of the Author (also, with capital letters) has been surely displaced by new patterns of authorship determined by consumer practices that dilute his/her authority into a rather collective dynamic of authorship often masked under anonymity and alternate identities (“avatar identities,” Serfaty 2004, Cleger 2010). In recognition of the over-presence of the Internet, the principal newspapers in all Spanish-speaking countries, for example, now have their online version and many of these include robust sections of blog-narratives that are assiduously visited, intervened in, and modified by the massive participation of readers/viewers/navigators at large. The expectations of the online reading/navigating audiences have transcended those of the traditional reader of last millennium, radically altering the very experience of articulating and conceptualizing storytelling and reading strategies. The reader/navigator/interactive consumer of digital narratives of our era not only expects but also demands efficiency (speed) and proficiency in multi-level narratives when navigating a given blog or webpage. Current readers/navigators/inter-actors in cyberspace anticipate a certain type of aesthetics in the platforms they visit, an expectation that Gainza identifies as a new digital aesthetics; they also expect that textual narratives interact with sound and moving images registered on an equivalent level in a way that was not present in the reading and writing patterns before “the advent of the Internet” (Penix-Tadsen).

This new set of assumptions and expectations on the part of the consumers of culture in cyberspace have definitely impacted

the way in which we all tell stories, as well as the way in which we listeners/viewers/co-authors on the Internet receive and perceive the information posted online. As Osvaldo Cleger elaborates in his essay “La creación ciberliteraria: definición, perfil y carta de navegación para orientarse en un campo emergente,” during The Golden Age of Spanish Software (1983-1992) many companies devoted their efforts to sale “interactive fictions” to the soon-to-be consumers of culture on the Internet. Furthermore, at that early stage some companies, such as Aventuras AD, started to explore a new format created at the crossroads of game aesthetics and narrative discourse (Cleger), sometimes even including community members’ input in the development of the software to be sold. In Cleger’s analysis, it is clear that the blog narrative opened up new dynamics of exchange and collaboration between authors and readers, and that the blognovel, for example, a *genre* intended for a—potentially—vast international public online, had a strong connection to the reality TV culture that was gaining tractions around the same time (Cleger).

Consequently, cybernarratives, yet when they demonstrate a high literary quality, can no longer avoid a certain kind of “contamination” with elements of popular culture, strongly attached to consumer culture patterns and marketing strategies. Without a doubt, we are witnessing what Colombian scholar Juan Manuel Acevedo perceives as “a major shift, a point of no return” in terms of literary practices in cyberspace in Spanish-speaking societies.³ I would like to revisit my initial question about the future of literature vis-à-vis the advancement of the Internet for a moment here. At this point, a noteworthy group of scholars from Latin American and/or specialized in Latin America has indicated the paradigm shift of Spanish-language literature in relation to the massive use of the Internet (Acevedo, Castillo, Chacón, Cleger, Correa-Díaz, Gainza, Delgado, Penix-Tadsen, Paz-Soldán, Taylor and Pitman, Weintraub).

To contribute another facet to the debate, I would like to argue here that the abovementioned paradigm shift is intimately connected to the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson), or the multinational economic project of globalization (Chacón, Puede). I believe that even in those cases when the attempt of the cybernarrative is to boycott and question the advancement of the globalization project, the cultural practices (*usos y costumbres*) involved on the Internet are intimately related to cultural consumer practices and dynamic ways of creating meaning and making sense that are suited for the successful expansion of multinational capitalism. Colombian theoretician Jesús Martín-Barbero, whose work on the re-appropriation of technologies in Latin America marked my generation, has elaborated in his recent writings on the impact of cyberspace and affirms, “it is an undeniable fact that the majorities in Latin America are being incorporated into modernity, not hand-in-hand with books, but hand-in-hand with the narratives, languages and writings of audiovisual industries and experiences;” in his view, this unique experience is marked by “navigation of the Internet” as a predominant societal activity.⁴

The essays gathered in the present special issue explore issues of authority and authorship as well: Who controls the authorship in collective creations in cyberspace? What is the author(s) role in these new forms of creation? Is the authority of the author subverted in any way? How? To what degree? Why? Also, how successfully can a group of authors actually be in challenging the advancement of the globalization project (Chacón, Gainza) when the means and *medium* of questioning are the very ones on which multinational capitalism depends for its voracious expansion?

We are in the presence of very new processes of creation in which not only the Canonical Artists intervene but, very interestingly, regular people with a certain type of sensitivity, sense of digital aesthetics, and suitable technological knowledge to engage in a process of collective invention that may

include different disciplines (from digital anthropology to graphic design, for example) in order to create an environment conducive to prolific collaboration among different skilled persons. Digital storytelling requires the full involvement of different individuals with diverse and complementary artistic and technologic talents in a specific relation that was not necessary before the Internet era. In this day and age, anyone with basic design and writing skills and proper Internet access can become an author if s/he can create a cultural product that is appealing enough to the cybernetic collective sensitivity of our culture—a sensitivity that has been molded by marketing campaigns that in turn, also shape our consumption behavior.

I perceive also in the essays collected in *Letras Hispanas* a key connection between the creative process (the process of producing a digital literary product for mass consumption) and the new digital networks of distribution and circulation of cultural goods online (Wasem), a network system that substitutes the role that a few decades ago was held by the editorial board of large publishing emporiums and the owners of the mass media. Any posting can become viral on the Internet without undergoing any kind of censorship—depending on availability of platforms and reliable networks of satellite service. I assume that this desire to have one’s postings go viral overnight includes the literary authors in cyberspace analyzed here, evidently permeated by the inevitable dynamics and cultural logic (Jameson) of late capitalism.⁵

In this collection of essays lies also a sustained interest on interactivity/interconnectedness due to the possibility for readers/viewers/navigators online to vividly (inter)act with the author(s), as well as with other readers/viewers/navigators through the many different types of digital narratives explored in this volume, and in doing so they also create new forms of collectivity with a great political potential attached to it (Gainza, Cleger).

Pioneering theoreticians of cyberspace studies, such as George P. Landow, have been

raised mainly within the post-structuralist tradition and focus on the analysis of the written word.⁶ As Penix-Tadsen demonstrates in his chapter, linguistic approaches are necessary yet insufficient to properly grasp the complexity of the multilayered languages that conform current digital narratives. In my view, what we are witnessing nowadays (and contributors to the special issue thoroughly demonstrate), is a different way of thinking, creating, imagining, and of making sense that has no precedent in the history of storytelling; today's cyberspace creations, although they still depend on written narratives, also include in equal level of importance moving images, sound, visual and sound effects, and interactivity, all of which transform the consumers' sense of temporality and corporeality when they engage in digital storytelling (the actual time in which two or more interacting participants engage with each other might be different in the geographic locations where participants actually reside, yet they all simultaneously converge due to their voluntary online rendezvous). As British theorist David Morley proposes, "the networks of electronic communication in which we live are transforming our senses of locality and community... [thus] new modalities of belonging are emerging around us" (3). I believe that such transformations include new digital aesthetics and innovative writing practices analyzed in the present volume.

Perhaps today it would be more accurate to conceptualize Internet users as "interacting/participating" actors, as Juan Manuel Acevedo proposes, as a community of readers/viewers/navigators (Chacón) "linked to forms of participation, interaction, exchange, and collaboration" (Gainza).⁷ The visual, the aural, the interactive, all collide and collaborate simultaneously with the written word, in a one-of-a-kind setting that was not available before the massive use of the Internet. It is perhaps now pertinent to ask ourselves, what do these new registries (visual, aural, interactive) add to the written word? Do they

question it? Do they invalidate the written word? Do they rather potentiate its reach? Do they complement it? If so, in what ways and to what degrees? If the written word denotes an impossibility, as Lacan proposed with his concept of 'the real,' and if language is simply the expression of a desire of that that is perpetually unreachable for us, then what happens with that impossibility of language in the Internet era? Does Internet have the capacity to interrogate such impossibility of the (written) word that so concerned Lacan? Does such impossibility of language evolve in any way when other registries of meaning (images, sound, interactivity) enter into play? In what sense and in what capacity? What could be the fate of the written word vis-à-vis the arise of the visual, the aural and the interactive in cyberspace?

To be certain, I have posed several questions for which I do not have answers. However, I do agree that it is possible for Internet users/viewers/navigators to "create new interpretative networks and subvert the existing ones" (Gainza).⁸ Furthermore, paradoxically, even those attempts to subvert the logic and content of the Internet (Gainza, Chacón) are yet closely dependent on the logic of cyberlanguages that were created with the overt intention to promote the rapid expansion of financial transactions in the context of multinational capitalism. This is, in my view, the trickiest paradox of subverting the cultural logic of late capitalism via digital storytelling.

Jameson asserts that the new forms of political art in the era of late capitalism, assuming that political art is possible, "will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at the present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion"

(54). As this collection of essays points out, it is possible that digital storytelling may entail this potential.

The present volume constitutes a significant contribution to the emergent fields of digital storytelling (Cleger), game studies (Penix-Tadsen), consumer culture (Delgado), and cyberliteratures and cybercultures of Latin America (Taylor and Pittman), the publication also steers current forms of creating sense and meaning on the Internet toward critical consciousness, leading the way to further observation and theoretical analysis on our ever-changing patterns of production and consumption of cultural goods in cyberspace. These practices have come to define our selves as citizens of the new millennium. After all, we can no longer escape the consumption patterns and consequent sensitivity and sense of digital aesthetics to which we have voluntarily contributed with our election of modes of consumption and navigation through cyberspace. This does not necessarily imply that we are indefinitely trapped by the *medium* of the global era; I want to be optimistic about the future. We are just beginning to grasp the Internet's language, its logic and its potential for including all possible voices and stories to tell. We might as well master its multiple possible ways of creating meaning and promote alternative sensitivities and patterns of consumption of cultural goods via innovative digital storytelling that might also herald better times for all.

Notes

¹This is my translation from the original citation in Gainza's article: "La narración hipertextual, en mi caso, tiene como punto de partida consciente para mí la imagen imposible de la multiplicidad, de la infinitud, de la eternidad, de la ubicuidad y de la simultaneidad."

²My translation from the original: "Así, el sentido de lo múltiple y lo infinito se manifiestan en cada *click* que nos abre diversas opciones de lectura y caminos textuales por donde transitar." (Gainza)

³My translation of original: "un corte, un punto de no retorno" (Acevedo)

⁴My translation of original: "es un hecho insoslayable que las mayorías en América Latina se están incorporando a la modernidad, no de la mano del libro sino desde los géneros y las narrativas, los lenguajes y las escrituras de la industria y la experiencia audiovisual"—y afirma Martín-Barbero que en estas narrativas destaca "la navegación por la Internet" (262) como actividad predominante.

⁵Sometimes I wonder what would be of *Rayuela* (1963) had Julio Cortázar had access to the Internet when he was planning on writing his famous game-like novel, or José Luis Borges's writing of collection of short stories *Ficciones* (1944).

⁶In fact, Landow talks about "readers" (200).

⁷My translation of the original: "se puede observar una subversión de los significados de las tecnologías digitales vinculada a formas de participación, interacción, intercambio y colaboración." (Gainza).

⁸My translation of the original: "crear nuevas redes interpretativas y subvertir las redes ya creadas" (Gainza).

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