

INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINA GAINZA: ON DIGITAL LITERATURE IN LATIN AMERICA

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Based in Santiago, Carolina Gainza worked at the Creative Writing Department at the Diego Portales University until February 2022. In March of the same year, she took office as Subsecretary of The Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation of Chile. Carolina Gainza's research about digital literature and culture has been circulating since the early 2000's, and includes reflections on digital activism, hypertextuality, and contemporary productions of knowledge. She penned the books *Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina: Producción literaria en el capitalismo informacional* (Ebook, Centro de Cultura Digital, Ciudad de México, 2018; Editorial Cuarto Propio, Santiago, 2018) and *La Batalla de Artes y Humanidades* (Ebook, 2020, coauthored with Matías Ayala). She holds a Masters in Latin American Studies from the University of Chile, a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from the University of Pittsburgh and she oversaw the research project *Critical Cartography of Latin American Digital Literature* at UDP's Laboratorio Digital.

Key Topics: Digital Literature; Latin American Literature; Hypertexts; Digital Activism.

Thank you for taking the time to discuss digital literature in Latin America. In the current issue on Latin American Digitalities, Diffractions has been connecting with researchers that deal with the digital modes of culture that shape identities in Latin American territories. It should be interesting to see how literary works play a part in the current digitalities.

Let's start by clarifying the term 'digital literature'. In your book, Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina: Producción literaria en el capitalismo informacional (Ed. Cuarto Propio, 2018), you make a distinction between the digital narratives/poetics and the e-books and digitalized texts. How do you differentiate these ontologies?

Carolina Gainza:

Digital literature is that which is underlaid by code language. This, which has been theorized by important authors in the field of electronic literature – such as Katherine Hayles or Claudia Kozak in Latin America – is the characteristic that gives it a particular form of existence in the digital format. Digitalized literature does not represent a structural change, but maintains the characteristics of printed literature, marked by a structure that obeys the material conditions of that format. Although it is possible to find experiments in the printed format that play with hypertextuality or introduce images and other languages, a linear and static structure predominates the printed format, which affects and determines the forms of writing. Thus, in digitalized books, writing is transferred from one format to another. Yet, since these literatures were not conceived for the digital format, the traditional structure of the book is maintained, as we see in E-book or PDF.

In digital literature, we can observe how the change of materiality affects the forms of perception and experience. This change occurs mainly through working with code language that interacts with the other languages (textual, visual, sound). This interaction between computer programming languages and natural-human languages has opened the door to various forms of digital creation: hypertexts, hypermedia, literature in social networks, and generative literature, among others. In literature and in social networks, we do not need to program, nor interact directly with code, unlike in other types of literature such as hypertexts, hypermedia, or generative literature. For hypertexts and hypermedia, however, we have recently seen the apparition of "friendly" applications that often do not require direct

programming (ex. the software Twine). The problem with these applications is precisely that they obscure the code; therefore, we do not know what is going on behind our screen. In this sense, I defend the need to know what goes on with this other language, how it works, and, from a literary perspective this raises the question of the modes of existence of a poetics of the code, which requires critical study along with the creative and scriptural possibilities of the machines.

Also, digital literature is subject to the changes that occur in digital technologies. Digital obsolescence affects the existence of the literary pieces, which are subject to the movements of capitalist technological innovation. It is a question, then, of writing conditions different from those of the printed format, which seeks to fix certain scriptural conditions and remain in time.

The academic publication about which we are currently discussing follows a model based on free access and sharing. This seems to be the case for some digital literature. To what extent does the digital process bypass traditional gatekeepers of production and distribution?

Carolina Gainza:

Most digital literatures circulate freely on the Internet. Many of these also do so for free. In this way, digital literature engages in dialogues with the conditions of its time. In the digital context, it is difficult to fix this literature down, as everything that is uploaded on the Internet can be copied, modified, distributed, and shared. According to Lev Manovich in “The Language of New Media”, this is because digital objects exist in a numerical language: the computer code. However, it is important to point out that free culture is not synonymous with “free”, or as Richard Stallman says in his famous phrase “Free as in freedom, not as in free beer”.

As I discuss in my book, these conditions of digital existence have introduced a change in the forms of cultural circulation. Where this has been most strongly observed, at least in the early days of digital culture, was in music. The large industries of traditional culture, associated with distribution in physical formats, broke down during the first decade of the 21st century in the face of emerging spaces of music distribution on the Internet. Free culture – that is, allowing music to circulate freely on the Internet by circumventing copyrights – hit very hard. Along with this, creative commons licenses appeared as an alternative to copyright

to protect authors and, at the same time, to maintain the freedom of cultural circulation that the Internet introduced. Subsequently, as we know, other industries emerged, such as streaming in Spotify among others.

What happened in music subsequently affected the film industry and literature as well. In literature, we have seen a change in the industry due to the popularization of the e-book format. At the same time, the entry of digitality into book production allowed lower production costs and a streamlined process, which has allowed the proliferation of independent publishers. However, what has happened in the field of digital literature is different. This type of writing still has no place in the traditional book industry, probably because it circulates in a different format and its production is different, requiring computer programming and specific knowledge. There, we still do not see the emergence of an industry in this sense, but we have seen authors putting their works on the Internet, skipping the traditional industry. In this sense, the Internet appears as a space where writers can not only circulate their works outside the publishing industry, but they can also experiment with digital languages and dare to discover other forms of writing. As I point out in my book, the structure of the traditional book industry, closely associated with the logic of copyright, simply does not work in the digital space but, on the other hand, has not made room for these more experimental projects that obey other conditions of existence.

The digital processes at the turn of the 20th century impacted academic production in various fields, including the theorization about audiovisual arts. Two canonical Latin American texts are often cited: Jorge Luis Borges' The Garden of Forking Paths (1941) (I recall the late Arlindo Machado's Pré-cinemas e pós cinemas, for instance) and Julio Cortázar's Hopscotch (1963). Would you say they reflect fragmented and hyperlinked modernities before the "post" or "late" modern era? What would be literary tendencies that contemporary digital texts anticipate for the use of technology or production of culture?

Carolina Gainza:

The titles you mention obey two different logics. Jorge Luis Borges imagines in *The Garden of Forking Paths* and other stories an infinite and hypertextual text. In this sense, there is no scriptural experimentation associated with the format but

rather, as I said, it is an exercise in imagination. Of course, this exercise opens up possibilities and constitutes an inspiration for the literary works that we can observe in contemporary digital hypertexts and hypermedia. As for Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, this could be considered a “proto hypertext”, because Cortázar not only imagines an extended text, but also carries out a work of experimentation with the format that derives in a poetics open multiple readings, or that, at least, has two possible ways of reading. Here, the reader is invited to choose his or her reading path.

The possibilities of hypertext explode with the entry of digital language. Whatever potential existed in *Hopscotch*, limited by the printed format, expands through hypertexts, hypermedia, and other experimentations with algorithms in the digital format. I think there is no direct correlation between these experimentations in the printed format or the Borgesian exercises of imagination, and the digital, but, of course, neither is it a total break between verbal and algorithmic writing. There are certain undeniable influences, but it is also important to investigate the phenomenon of digital literature in its particularity and in its difference, and how it signifies the emergence of new cultural practices, experiences, forms of perception, and subjectivities. In this sense, and from my point of view, we are at the center of the emergence of a new epoch; no longer even postmodern but properly digital and posthuman, obeying a new condition, which I call “digital condition”. This is what the pieces of digital literature anticipate: a new condition of subjectivity where computational and human languages, human and non-human subjectivities are intertwined, which we can appreciate with greater clarity in generative digital literatures and those that work with artificial intelligence.

Do you see any particularity in the use of metaphors by digital cultures in Latin America? What comes to mind is Leonardo Valencia's El libro flotante de Caytran Dölphe (2006, Ed. Funambulista), which, as you wrote, engages with readers on the internet through a metaphor of floating narratives and the shallow waters of Guayaquil. Have Latin American digital expressions been able to escape narratives created by the Global North, such as cyberspace, web and online?

Carolina Gainza:

Indeed, in some works of Latin American digital literature we can find certain Latin American themes, which some authors such as Thea Pitman and Claire Taylor have associated with magical realism, using Domenico Chiappe's *Tierra de Extracción* as an example. In Leonardo Valencia's work we can certainly find some topics associated with Latin American Literature and its territories. But I think that the “Latin American” particularity in digital literature is not restricted to the narrative topics. In my latest research, I have wanted to explore the hypothesis that the escape from hegemonic Global North narratives and technologies is found in the scriptural and literary forms tested and used in digital literature. This is what allows us to highlight the dominant uses of algorithms and digital technologies. The subversion is found not only in the “pirate” uses of software, a Latin American tendency to access the resources of industrial production and which continues in the digital space, but also in what I have called “cultural hacking”, that is, the possibility of using writing and copying, transforming, and distributing artistic productions openly on the Internet. This allows us to be aware of the materiality of the code. On the other hand, I have recently explored, alongside another researcher, Jhoerson Yagmour, how, in works such as *Unicode* by Michael Hurtado (Peru) and *Untitled Document* by Ciro Múseres (Argentina), there is a subversion of established forms. Here, the work generates a discomfort with the dominant digital languages and scripts, which leads us to wonder about the dominant uses and forms of algorithms. Nevertheless, this is a pending topic to be explored further.

Recently, visual artist Eduardo Kac told me that although he seldom publishes physical books, he has always published his work, in the sense that he has always made it public (in Portuguese: publicar/público). Considering the fruition of literature produced online, do you see major differences between reading groups - be it social media circles or those interested in cutting-edge art?

Carolina Gainza:

Digital literature presents a form of writing where verbal language loses its hegemony and other languages – sound, visual, and code – come into play. This, of course, invites us to “read” (if we can still call it that) in a different way. Digital literature requires interaction with a reader – which we could also call “player” or

“operator” – who must not only interpret and construct meanings regarding the content but must also perform an action of execution on the work that allows it to appear in front of his or her eyes. Other works invite the reader to intervene, from choosing paths to creating, writing, or extending the work. In this sense, the reader gains access to a puzzle that he or she must put together. The fact that these works are freely available on the web facilitates this task of interaction. But, beyond this, communities are formed, which we can mostly see associated with literatures that are created for social networks.

Digital literature is a cutting-edge type of writing, which invites readers to an aesthetic experience that goes beyond the traditional canons. In this sense, I do not see much difference between those groups that participate in online communities and those who are interested in avant-garde art forms. What relates groups interested in online and physical cutting-edge art is the search for a different experience.

In your chapter “Five Hundred Years of Struggle Enter Cyberspace. Neo-Zapatism and the (Old) New Insurgency” (2018, Routledge), you stress the modes of resistance that online environments might foster through the new logics of networks and connectivity. However, and not to oversimplify the discussion between utopian and dystopian views of technology, Latin America does not escape the proliferation of fake news and disinformation online. To what extent is the regulation of social media a counterbalance to these negative effects? Could this risk the very existence of contemporary insurgencies?

Carolina Gainza:

This is a very interesting question about digital culture. Every technology carries out a potential, but their positive or negative effect on us depends on how technologies are used. Of course, combatting fake news and disinformation requires greater regulation of social networks, but we cannot forget the importance of educating the public about practices related to digital culture. We can have as many regulations as we like, but if we do not invest in educating about digital culture, we will continue to be uncritical of the uses and consequences of technologies. We must empower us in our relation to technology, because we are not passive users.

Our use of technologies opens new possibilities, such as the social movements and actors that we have seen emerge in recent decades through online activism. In the case of the Chilean social outcry the freedom of the Internet and social networks allowed for the organization of citizen action and allowed what was happening in Chile to circulate around the world through videos, photographs, and information disseminated through social networks. From my point of view, any regulation of the negative effects of technology must not take away what is essential to the Internet: the free circulation of knowledge, information, and culture.

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