

## Twenty Years of Internet Exploration

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How can we still write literature in a world where practically everything has been said? How can we play with genre when the avant-gardes of the twentieth-century made possible every form of experimentation with language, structure, themes, and characterization? How can we write an “original” text that catches the public’s eye when music, video, film, supported by radio and television have taken over mass communication? How can we distribute a creative work when it is not published in commercial press and we don’t have the economic means to promote it on radio, film, or television?

The writers of my generation, those of us who arrived after the Latin American Boom, were told that there was nothing left to be done; everything had already been accomplished and it was impossible to imagine we could become a Cortázar, a Borges, a Rulfo, a García Márquez. Nevertheless, even if we are not competing for a seat in that crowd, since the 1980s we writers have been responding that, in fact, not everything has been said and not everything has been articulated. In art, as in science and technology, humanity is always discovering new scenarios and new worlds as well as new support mechanisms to archive information. Similarly, we writers can always continue making innovative propositions.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when I conceived of my novel *La Genara*, the Internet had still not made inroads into all circles or geographic points of the globe; it occurred to me that I could write an epistolary novel that used every form of communication known at that point: fax, email, airmail, telegraph, messaging, and business cards (in those days, social networks still had not come onto the scene, something that would have given me even more material to work the central plot). In those years, my sister living in France was sending letters to my parents by fax, and thus had found a way to communicate with them instantly without having to rely on the

delays of the postal service—which in Tijuana was famous for being deficient, slow, and insecure—and to do so at a relatively low cost.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I was translating the manual for an email program by some friends in San Diego, and my boyfriend, who had just visited an assembly plant with top of the line technology, told me that he saw how one of the heads of the business had received correspondence through a computer. Thus, all these circumstances gave me the idea of including these means of communication in my novel, even though the general public was not familiar with them.

My novel, *La Genara*, had a very unusual development in the way I wrote it, unlike other texts I had written at this point.<sup>2</sup> When I wrote it (January-June 1992), I did it for the Sunday supplement of a Tijuana newspaper whose editor, Humberto Félix Berúmen, had been complaining that the tone of the supplement was very grim, owing to the fact that most of the contributors were sending in essays and there was very little creative work in its pages. He felt that what was needed was to relax the discursive tone a little bit; I got the idea that I could write a novel in installments, using techniques borrowed from writers of the eighteenth—and nineteenth—centuries who published serial novels in French newspapers. Humberto liked the idea and I immediately began to work on the first chapter of my text. Since I had to publish something every weekend, I had to plan out my story so as to maintain the interest of the audience and give them a cliffhanger for the next installment. Thus, I had to take various aspects into account.

First, I had to decide on the theme and the language to use, based on the audience to whom I was addressing this text. Humberto told me that the supplement's readers belonged to a Baja California university-educated middle class, mostly in the Humanities, and mostly studying Communication, Literature, and Philosophy. Since at that stage of life, young people are making decisions about their future life-partners as well as their first linguistic reflections about their future careers, I realized I had to find a theme and use a language matching theirs. That's why I decided to make the novel about a relationship conflict and use educated language at the university level. Nevertheless, I didn't want to use standard Spanish because I love to work with regional languages, so while I wanted to use an educated linguistic register, I also wanted to work in the light and colloquial language that would allow me to explore the linguistic features of the Mexican northwest. The letter, thus, provided me with the ideal genre to work in an intimate discourse that would lend itself to colloquialism and gossip without falling to vulgarity. Years earlier, when I was a student at the UNAM in Mexico City, I had enthusiastically read *Dangerous Liaisons* by Pierre Chordelos de Laclos and so I was familiar with the epistolary genre, despite the fact that in those years (in Mexico) letters had fallen into disuse because of the popularity of telephones and the bad reputation of the national postal service. It occurred to me that a familiar and private

correspondence could be given a new impetus, thanks to the new communication media. In fact, that is what has happened.

I then had to decide about the structure of each episode—to think about how to open and close each Sunday so that the readers would want to come back the following week. I had some background in linked structures since I had read numerous chivalric novels, which are based on these structures. But it seemed to me that they were a little obsolete when working in a relatively new genre, so I decided to watch a telenovela with my mother, and chose a popular Colombian one that was getting a huge following not just locally, but nationally. I noted how each chapter began, how the sequences lead up to a climax, how it remained open at the end so as to link up with the next chapters. This gave me the model to begin writing the first chapter of the novel, which begins with a letter that Genara receives by fax. Up to this point, with respect to genre, I had mixed a traditional one (the epistolary novel) with a new one (the telenovela) and, with respect to the communication media, I had combined two contrasting technologies: the fax, which substitutes for the postal service to transmit a personal letter.

Since I hadn't planned the development of the novel and really didn't know where my character was going, I started to construct it on the fly. Fortunately, something odd happened. Since the letters were addressed from Tijuana, took place in Tijuana, used the language of Tijuana, and were dated close to the publication dates of the supplement, the readers who didn't know me thought that they were real letters by someone who mischievously sent them to the newspaper. Readers started to talk about Genara as if she were a real person living in the city. Obviously, they were influenced by the fact that they had not previously read any fiction written in "Tijuanan," since all the literature they read in school and had found in bookstores was by authors from the center of the country or from abroad. Thus, they could not imagine that the letter could be "lies," as several readers commented to me later. The letters were full of local scenery (Tijuana and Tecate) and in them they spoke of current urban problems of people who lived in the city.

Thus, on Sunday afternoons or on Mondays, I ran into people in the street who were talking about my characters. Many readers offered opinions about how the couple should respond or how they should behave, and that gave me ideas that I began to incorporate into the novel and ways to play with their discourse. Nevertheless, many of the commentaries that the readers made seemed to me to be too conventional, so I realized I needed another voice to add an element of shock, and that is where I got the voice of Luisa, the sister studying for her Masters in Mexico City at the UNAM's College of Arts and Sciences. With her, I began a dialogue that contrasted the opinions and linguistic registers of Tijuana with those of Mexico City: between Genara and her sister, the mother, and the friends (and enemies) of both of them. Then Genara did what the readers wanted, and Luisa scolded them and broke the schema. In this sense, the creative process was fun

because the readers took sides: some got mad about Luisa's commentaries and others supported her; some got angry at Genara's stupidities and others agreed with her; some took the husband's side, or the mother's, and I found myself caught up in a ludic game in which, without the readers realizing it, I was practically writing a novel "to order," since I was satisfying their demands on giving them what they wanted on both sides.

Unfortunately, the newspaper fired Humberto and closed down the publication of the Sunday supplement, and for that reason I also stopped writing *La Genara* even though the newspaper wanted me to continue to publish it in another section of the paper. Once the game with my readers came to an end, I lost motivation and didn't finish the novel. Shortly after that (1993), I moved to Mexico City and in some respects the project was forgotten. Besides that, the diskettes where I had saved the novel were destroyed. Five years later (1997), Alfredo Álvarez Cárdenas, the then-director of the Cultural Center of Tijuana, asked me for permission to publish it in the form of a book, and I had to transcribe the chapters from the newspaper and begin the work of concluding it.

So that the conclusion would not be entirely outside the dynamic of a dialogue with readers, I reworked the novel in the context of a multidisciplinary group called *Los Comensales del Crimen*, directed by Lourdes Hernández Fuentes, with whom we work-shopped creative texts, and with whom I had met every Tuesday since my arrival in Mexico City in 1993. My novel was nothing like the type of literature we worked on in our sessions, since as the name of the group indicates, it was focused on the noir side of crime fiction; nevertheless, my friends agreed to read it, and made very useful comments, especially Felipe Ehrenberg, who made numerous very interesting suggestions that I took up almost literally. Of course, in the final draft I tried to take into account the concerns of my original readers, so that the characters would get themselves out of the hole they had dug themselves into. I took advantage of Luisa's sharp comments so that Genara could take advantage of her discourse and assume a position, and I buried Luisa in an existential crisis so that Genara could get her out of it. Finally, she was my protagonist, and for that reason had to achieve independence and personal self-sufficiency.

I have to admit that my relationships with my fellow workshop members, especially with Felipe Ehrenberg and Lourdes Hernández, were very important to my development as a writer and as an interdisciplinary artist, despite having already a trajectory of eighteen years in the profession, and being somewhat known in Mexican and United States artistic circles. When I began writing, my colleagues criticized me because I had the tendency to introduce linguistic registers that were new to them, as well as to work in different genres. Since I came from a background of musicians, artisans, and businesspeople, it seemed to me very normal to do a number of different kinds of things in a single day, to transition between one discipline

or task and another. Nevertheless, I told myself that I had to decide once and for all what I was going to do with my life, and they criticized me for studying in the university, for singing in a rock group, for couture designing and sewing, for editing academic books, for offering English and literature classes, for writing stories and poetry, for making cakes and jams. Thus, when I found people like Felipe Ehrenberg and Lourdes Hernández in the writing group, and the controversial singer Astrid Hadad in the performance space, I reached the conclusion that I was OK. Thanks to them, I am able to continue working with confidence on whatever I feel like doing and to combine disciplines without worrying about the critics (as I do in my performance piece *Señorita Maquiladora*) as well as looking for other forms of expression and communication.

As one of my activities since the end of the 1970s has been editing, designing, and publishing books and academic and cultural journals; in the middle of 1996 I was invited to join a group of editors for a magazine for CompuServe users and to participate in the first Latin American-based Internet journal, published by the same company. Unfortunately, that company didn't last very long in Mexico, and both projects were cancelled. However, this background led to me being invited in the beginning of 1998 to work with the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education as an academic advisor and the cyber-editor of the international cooperation section of their webpage, a job I kept for two years. The experience I gained working on the editing of that webpage has allowed me to keep up with the advances in technology and to design my personal webpage.

At the beginning of the millennium, I designed a page to upload information to cyberspace with a very young friend from *Los Comensales del Crimen*, Francisco Rocha, who in those years had also begun to make his first incursions into the web.<sup>3</sup> I did my accounts, and realized it was much cheaper to hire a technician and a company to host a webpage to promote my creative work than to print business cards, CDs, brochures, etc. and to pay a messenger service to deliver them, or to mail CVs and pay for faxes and long distance. In practical terms, it's much easier to maintain contact by email with people who seek me out on the net.

From the very beginnings, I tried to make sure my page included the maximum amount of information about my creative work (I still don't include my academic trajectory) and that it would have many links. On Francisco's advice, we designed the page in a very simple program that would not require too much bandwidth so that it could easily be opened from any computer, independently of how updated or how obsolete their software. Since we wanted many links, from the very beginning my webpage had a main page and twenty-one html sections, more than eighty photographs, fourteen mp3 songs, various hyperlinks and a contact link. Besides my artistic and literary resume, I included information about my books and CDs,

samples of my literary and design work, texts of my performances with visual and taped material, fragments of recordings and live presentations—something that allowed me to promote my work two years before the invention of Youtube. In fact, one week after launching my site in cyberspace, I received my first invitation, from the state of Sinaloa, to give a presentation and teach a course at the Universidad de Occidente.

Because of my artistic, editorial, and teaching activities, I constantly receive national and international invitations for poetry, short story, novel, photograph, and music competitions as well artistic and cultural information about book fairs, congresses and writer's conventions, invitations to concerts, painting, photography, or sculpture expositions, book launches, dances, theater, recitals, etc. such that along with my page, in August 2004 I opened a Yahoo! list for information that I think would be of interest to my subscribers. I do not subscribe users to this list or send them information indiscriminately; I invite those who are interested to subscribe, and if anyone is interested, I send them the invitation. At this time there are about 230 subscribers, mostly artists and writers living in different cities in Mexico, to whom I have resent about 2800 messages. Many of them tell me that the list has allowed them to remain current with what is going on in cultural circles in other states, and that thanks to the list they have access to calls for contributions that they might not have seen in other media.

The fact that I have been working with the Internet since the beginning of my creative work, both in narrative and on my webpage, has garnered me both positive and negative critique. In Mexico, for example, some people have complained that the novel is “inexact” because it works with characters who use email at a time when that technology had supposedly barely entered the country, even though the characters are daughters of a prominent businessman, the owner of an assembly plant with cutting-edge technology (these critics forget that the literary is not a sociological or historical treatise; if it were, science fiction or fantastic literatures simply would not exist). One critic (whose name I will not mention), after praising *La Genara* effusively, blamed me for historic errors in that the Internet was not in wide use at the end of the 1980s and that faxes “had a more industrial than personal use.” Besides the technological issue, he blamed me for using references to Almodóvar's movie, which, he said, could not have been known in Tijuana. At the same time, he excuses me, because “the errors are ones the reader can ignore if s/he does not focus on the dates of the letters.”

Likewise, on numerous occasions I have been accused of being vain for including so much information about my creative work on my webpage, but I prefer not to comment on this point. Nevertheless, beyond the negative critiques, what is true is that this work has allowed me to explore propositions and innovations in the creative field, to get my work known in my country and abroad, and to establish relationships with many people with whom it would have been very difficult to enter into contact by other means.

We still live in an environment in which creative people, especially women, have to work against the grain.

Many people in Mexico think that literature (that is written creative texts) are disappearing under the influence of aural mass media such as radio, film, and television; at the same time, some complain that written language is losing importance and that letters are about to disappear because of the influence of the telephone and Skype. Nevertheless, the Internet has shown that written communication remains vital and that neither letters nor literature are going to be forgotten, even when the support platform changes—that is to say, when paper gives way to the computer screen. In fact, in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, various other epistolary novels have been written, including *Cartas cruzadas* (1995) by Colombian writer Darío Jaramillo Agudelo, *La amigdalitis de Tarzán* (1998) by Peruvian Alfredo Bryce Echenique, and *Ajena* (2001) by Venezuelan Antonio López Ortega, even though these novels don't exactly use the Internet as the method of communication. At the same time, several Mexican authors have begun to incorporate the language of computation and the presence of social networks in their literature. Poet Ruth Vargas Leyva, for example, published her *Poemas del ordenador* (2006), in which, metaphorically, she uses technical terms from computer lingo and the Internet to write erotic poetry. Additionally, Luis Zapata has just introduced social networks in his theatrical adaptation of his novel, *De pétalos perennes* (2011), not so much as a means of artistic expression, but rather as a resource his characters use to communicate, to make plans to meet, to converse, to make love. In this sense, the Internet, rather than negating artistic forms of expression, is accelerating them.

## Notes

1. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, faxes were used exclusively for transmitting documents and except in the case of my sister Patricia, were hardly ever used for letters.
2. I began writing in the 1970s, and to publish in 1979.
3. In those days interfaces were not as dynamic as they are today, although a few artists already had webpages or blogs, including *Mastuerzo*, the founding musician of the legendary Mexican rock group, *Botellita de Jerez*.

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