

◆ **Afterword**

A Bookless Literature?

Luis Martín-Estudillo and Stephanie A. Mueller

A technical revolution is beginning to relegate paper copies of books into collectors' items. The development of computer-based technologies has brought about the most formidable transformation of our lettered culture since the invention of the movable-type printing press by Gutenberg. Writers and readers of all kinds are experiencing, and experimenting with, new practices of textual production and interpretation enabled by ever-evolving digital networks and devices, which are quickly marginalizing the traditional book, seen as "fixed, linear, noninteractive, and, most restrictive of all, essentially confined to a single medium" (Finneran ix). What does this relegation of the book to a fetish mean for "literature"?

The history of the condemnation of the written word (and, by extension, of the book) is a long one. Socrates and Jesus Christ are among the most famous and early known despisers of written texts. In today's popular imagination, it is the Nazis who occupy the premier spot as book haters, although their reasons for book burning differed from the objections posed to written matter by those two ancient and peaceful masters. At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, Franco's supporters also staged book burnings, one of which recently inspired Galician author Manuel Rivas's novel *Os libros arden mal* (*Books Burn Badly*), which can be interpreted as a vindication of the significance and power of books, regardless of their content. And even if the phenomenon mostly recalls older times such as those of the Inquisition (and Cervantes's subtle mockery of it in the scrutiny of Alonso Quijano's library in *Don Quijote* I, 6) or the heyday of fascism in Europe, this type of quintessential show of intolerance has not ceased: as recently as 2010, an obscure pastor in Florida garnered global attention with his stated plans to burn copies of the Quran. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries books have demonstrated an insurmountable resilience to intellectual, political and religious efforts to eliminate them.

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While it is evident that the book has endured different kinds of attacks since its birth in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, its current fate as an object in use seems to be much darker. For some, the threat of its extinction is paradoxically connected to a crisis of overproduction (R. de la Flor), which can only grow more challenging at a time when “publishing” content for a massive, almost limitless readership has become a rather simple enterprise. The channels of production, distribution and reception that were established in the 1700s have nearly collapsed. Anyone with a computer has become a potential publisher of global impact.

The essays in this volume analyze this new context and the creative mixing of older forms, aesthetics, or traditions and new technologies, in which writers build upon twentieth-century aesthetics using technology unavailable to their predecessors, or construct online settings that allow readers to participate in the narrative’s creation, mimicking traditional forms of collective storytelling. This analog-digital amalgam is also made apparent by the paradoxical presence of online texts written in an analog mode and books written with a digital sensibility. This type of hybridity marks the liminal position we currently occupy between print and digital cultures. As evident throughout this volume, the many ways that contemporary Hispanic literature is responding to and evolving within this transitional era disclaim to a large degree the often-mentioned “crisis of the humanities,” for storytelling has always adapted to changing technologies. Thus, contributors to this volume do not view the current, rapid advances in technology as a threat to literature, but instead rise to the challenge of determining the form that “literature” will take in the future. Consequently, this new landscape demands a redefinition of the practices of presses, critics, scholars and teachers; for, as Randolph Pope puts it, “the institutions that study literature have in general not kept up with the openness of the institutions that produce it” (100). Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that so little seems to have changed in our teaching and scholarly practices, a kind of inertia that has recently been questioned even within disciplinary areas and traditions anchored in philology and the study of textual transmission.¹ The question of the centrality of the book within lettered culture was addressed by Michel Foucault in a talk given in the 1960s, in which he stated that “in literature there is only one speaking subject, just one, and that is the book . . . which Cervantes, as you may remember, wanted to have burned; the book, . . . from which Diderot often wanted to escape in *Jacques le fataliste*; the book, in which Sade has been trapped, as you well know, and in which we are also especially trapped” (Foucault 80–81; our translation).² The disappearance of books may thus mean the extinction of Literature, but only if we mean the institution that emerged in the 1700s and was consolidated in the nineteenth century within a very specific social framework, as Wlad Godzich and Nicholas Spadaccini argued in the first volume of *Hispanic Issues*, dating back to 1987.

A look at the volumes published in *Hispanic Issues* in the last quarter of a century and the collaborative way in which they have been, and continue to be, produced also offers some insights into the changes that have taken place in literary and cultural production and its scholarship. While the initial volume in the paper series dealt with “the institutionalization of Literature,” the present one, published not fortuitously in *Hispanic Issues Online*, explains how information-age technologies are radically modifying traditional models for publication, promotion, dissemination, and reception of literary work.³ One might even argue that such changes could point to a re-institutionalization of literature, characterized by the rising primacy of the hypertext, multimedia, and connectivity.

Hybrid Storyspaces effectively captures and deals with this global phenomenon with an eye toward its Hispanic specificities. Laura Borràs Castanyer (in this volume) argues for a renovation in the way we approach and define the literary text in order to fully realize the creative potential of hybrid and digital literature. She contrasts the embracing of visual artists’ blending of various materials and media with the disapproval of such experimentation in the literary world, to the point that writers who employ new media are often perceived as being disruptive. Borràs argues that we must change the way we view literary tradition, by denaturalizing the seemingly unbreakable connection between reading and books; as she reminds us, the book, just like contemporary digital devices, is a technology, a kind of “machine.” Along these lines, Agustín Fernández Mallo (in this volume) argues that the conventional approach to studying literature through a temporal lens does not translate well to contemporary Web-based works, because online objects are linked to one another not temporally but rather through “topological space,” a new spatial format that offers novel ways of superimposing objects from various historical moments, transforming and distorting the juxtaposed objects and effectively changing the code according to which we read them.

These challenges have not gone completely unnoticed to people working in our disciplines, although it is fair to admit that in comparison with other areas of knowledge the humanities have been slower to accept and embrace the digital revolution. The need for this institutional and disciplinary rearticulation of the tasks of critics and academics *vis à vis* literature in the information age has more to do with scope than with goals. The aim is still to guide readers “in conscious, alert readings of texts—as opposed to facile consumption” (Martín-Estudillo and Spadaccini 2), regardless of the source or medium of dissemination of the content. Along these lines, Darío Villanueva (130–31) argues that “The only tool for the individual absorption of information and its transformation into knowledge is reading, which is an individual, creative activity, but one that can be instigated and taught by teachers,” in direct reference to the problematic balance between the

virtually unlimited availability of information and the sophistication needed for its apprehension and discretionary use.

However, it is not only “the institutions that study literature” that are struggling with the changing conditions that are reshaping the intellectual milieu. Creators of literature also feel the anxiety and uncertainty of this transitional time, and are renegotiating their own roles within this evolving context. José Enrique Navarro (in this volume), argues that the Internet offers the possibility of bringing back the writer-reader creative collaboration characterized by oral literature (before written literature and the modern system of printing and publication detached the reader from the creative process), challenging the present-day extreme commodification of books and branding of authors. A few of the authors who have most productively exploited the capacities of the new textual technologies are among the contributors to this volume: Jorge Carrión, Doménico Chiappe, Agustín Fernández Mallo, Vicente Luis Mora, and Germán Sierra. Along with a number of other writers such as Mercedes Cebrián and Eloy Fernández Porta, they have been grouped (by themselves and by scholars) under the label of *mutantes*, among others.

With their blending of high and low culture, word and image, and print and electronic formats, these authors are “disrupting traditional narrative practices, metamorphosing genres, exploding texts off the page into vast media landscapes, imploding times and spaces, and ingesting any and all cultural references along the way” (Henseler). Apart from acutely summarizing their aesthetic principles, Christine Henseler also underscores the fact that “they are largely publishing through indie houses like Berenice and DVD.” However, this seeming predilection for independence over commercial exposure might have been transitory, as illustrated by the fact that some initial works of the above-mentioned authors have been republished by larger and more established companies and their latest books have been issued directly by international giants such as Alfaguara and Mondadori. Moreover, in spite of the hint at the “indie” label attached to these authors, their position *vis à vis* capitalism seems to be one of integration rather than repudiation or critique. In fact, Germán Sierra disclaims the incompatibility between business and intellectual activity, observing that the new “humanistas científicos” (scientific humanists) of his generation are embracing the market by becoming efficient managers of their own knowledge, creating not only the product, but also “el espacio comercial/cultural para colocarlo en el mercado” (the commercial/cultural space for placing it on the market.) Therefore, according to Sierra, Spain’s new intellectuals can thrive only in a “verdadera libertad cultural y económica” (true cultural and economic freedom.) Thus, the changing structures are seen as an opportunity for better *marketing*. Sierra illustrates a position held by many of these authors, “new intellectuals” who embrace the corporatization of the lettered sphere. If the ideal for the implicit “old

intellectuals” was to participate in a debate of ideas or shake the art world with their work, for the “new scientific humanists” it is now a question of “managing a product” within “true economic freedom.” It is striking how someone so “indie” could sound so “Chicago-School.”⁴

Sierra (in this volume) takes a look at this group of *mutantes*, whom he deems post-digital innovators. He begins by describing the work of their American Avant-Pop predecessors, which was groundbreaking in its search for new ways of capturing technology that departed from and deconstructed the mass media’s construction of reality through technology. According to Sierra, the post-digital context grew out of this work, which changed the infrastructure of our perceptions and acclimated us to the blending of analog and digital sensibilities. Finally, Sierra catalogues the shared traits of the work of Spain’s post-digital *mutantes* writers, including the appropriation of digital technology’s “side effects”; the intermingling of linear narrative and database structures; the use of English and technical jargon as global codes as opposed to Spanish as a national language; the discovery of a science-fiction interface vs. “science fiction”; and the tendency toward spontaneous collaboration as opposed to individual authorship. On his part, Doménico Chiappe (in this volume) envisions the future of “post-literary” creation, which he suggests will transform language by employing the style of text messaging and informatics; renouncing the text as the central organizing element of a work; converting it into an art object; using video game functions like repetition, permutation, multiple plot alternatives, and corporeal interactivity to increase reader collaboration; and establishing author-reader reciprocity through a robot narrator. Chiappe calls for writers to create “enveloping literature,” a literature that, in its occupation of public spaces, would deem reader (and non-reader) interaction involuntary, resulting in a return to a time of collective reading. Another contributor who sees great potential for creative writers in digital tools is Rosina Conde. Dismissing concerns over the decreasing importance of literature and writing in the digital age, Conde maintains that Internet technologies have provided her with aesthetic and professional opportunities that she would have not been afforded otherwise, and predicts that it will continue to be a promising platform for literary innovation in the future.

In spite of these and other possibilities offered by digital technology, Navarro (in this volume) shows that not all writers are making productive use of the Internet; with their nonexistent or unfair treatment of readers who post comments on their blogs, avoidance of hypertext, and insistence upon the hegemony of single authorship, some writers continue to write in an analogue mode within a digital medium. For Jorge Carrión (in this volume), the case of Javier Marías is exemplary of those authors who reject the new cultural landscape facilitated by technological developments. In contrast to that “apocalyptic” position (to put it in Umberto Eco’s terms), Carrión argues that one of the main challenges of the “integrated” writer of the

Internet age is to achieve coherence through multidimensional uses of media.

The clashes between newer authors and more established writers, as they are depicted in Carrión's and Vicent Moreno's essays in this volume, seem to suggest that the Internet is an ungendered space. It seems necessary to have a more in-depth examination of whether, and in which ways, the writer's sex (along with his/her nationality) becomes irrelevant in digital literary creation. One could relate this notion to the disconnection of derivative, simulated identities from the underlying, gendered identities upon which they are based, exemplified by Lucía Etxebarria's adoption of her male characters' identities on Facebook, which is examined in Virginia Newhall Rademacher's contribution. Although women writers are listed among the "members" of the new groups of writers, the volume gives the impression that the protagonists of this literary rupture and the loudest voices determining its direction are mostly male. This may indicate that there has been, in fact, no rupture at all from the traditionally male-dominated "generation" paradigm in Spanish literature, in spite of the digital revolution (it would not be the first "revolution" that failed to dismantle patriarchal structures).

Etxebarria's experimentation with social media makes the author more visible while at the same time ceding control of the narrative (and even of her own public image) to the reading public. This relinquishing of textual authority is viewed by Newhall Rademacher as a reaction against the increasing privatization of culture and an attempt to return to the shared control over narrative and textual reproduction of folk culture. This hybridity of reality and fiction, in which fictional characters are mistaken for real people, biographers insert themselves in their subjects' life stories, and a writer's identity merges with her characters' (only partly by her own doing). These contemporary experiments with simulated identities, which form part of long tradition in literature, illuminate our understanding of identity formation in the Internet age, when social media increasingly substitute face-to-face interaction.

The essays in this volume also show that the coming together of aesthetic experimentation and promotion and marketing are key characteristics of digital-age literature. Writers are using blogs, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to transform literary language and narrative. In his blog-length contribution, Edmundo Paz Soldán defends Twitter as a legitimate medium for literary creation, pointing to Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza as a trailblazer in this new literary form. But writers are also using these platforms to promote their work. Moreno (in this volume) argues that these marketing techniques allow authors to undermine the extreme mercantilization of culture perpetuated by the dominant channels of marketing and distribution; although, as we have seen above, some of these writers seem to be rather comfortable working within the structures of digital

capitalism. Moreover, the use of new technologies to promote artistic endeavors outside of the dominant channels is certainly not exclusive to literature. (One example from the music industry is the British band Radiohead, who in 2007 began producing, promoting, and distributing digital copies of their albums, successfully gaining autonomy from their former production company through direct contact with fans on the internet. Of course, the band's "brand" had already been established previously.) A particularly intriguing example of this aesthetic-promotional hybrid is the robot narrator mentioned by Chiappe in this volume. The robot narrator would personalize a narrative based on the reader's personal information and preferences, much like the way Pandora and Grooveshark select songs based on listeners' musical preferences, or the way YouTube allows users to contribute and view content unavailable on cable television. While these platforms apparently break from dominant modes of promotion and distribution, Google has also used this same strategy of personalization to revolutionize advertising. We are only beginning to witness the interplay of powerful global institutions and resistance to them in the digital realm.

One should emphasize that we are no longer dealing with a "culture industry," but rather with "content" or "creative" industries, a dynamic, decentralized and interconnected model (Martel 419) which tends to coopt the innovations that are not generated from within. But there are many instances of resistance to, and criticism of, this model, some of which are brilliantly analyzed in this volume. According to Claire Taylor (in this volume), Eduardo Navas's online animation trilogy *Goobalization* (2005–2007)—a remixing of images obtained from the corporate giant Google—can be interpreted as an attempt to resist the hegemonic forces of globalization through reappropriation of its contents. She links this kind of work to the longstanding carnivalesque tradition of the copy in Latin American cultural production, in which the colonized mock the colonizers through appropriation of their signs. Finally, Taylor asserts that *Goobalization* grants the reader agency by requiring active engagement and shared creation of meaning.

Other essays in the volume stress the tensions and synergies existing at the contact points between markets, cultures, and the people who operate within their inescapable realities. Irene Depetris Chauvin links what she interprets as writer and filmmaker Martín Rejtman's characters' desire to escape from the restraints of language to the films' representation (through the placement of random objects and brand names) of an all-consuming market economy that renders communication meaningless. Tori Holmes (also in this volume) traces the production and dissemination of *Terra Boa*, a blog piece written by a resident of a Rio de Janeiro favela, where Internet use has increased remarkably in recent years. More specifically, she focuses on how this text, the original version of which is territorially embedded in the favela (through authorship and colloquial vocabulary, for example)

changed as it was reposted and republished on many different websites as well as in print. Through her examination of how *Terra Boa* and its reception evolved as it “traveled,” Holmes makes broader observations about the fluidity and mobility of texts and the creation of new meaning through circulation. She also asks whether a local text can avoid being de-situated when it spreads globally, experiencing minor alterations in content and being viewed by readers outside of the local context of its production. Finally, Holmes’s study asks whether a text, in the age of globalization, is ever purely local.

In this sense, enterprises that focus on and advance “digital Humanities” and related scholarly initiatives such as this volume and the series that hosts it are a good example of the kind of work which can both explain and benefit from the creative possibilities of the new media. These media are nevertheless considered to be “new” for those whose education and socialization took place mostly before 1995, when the Internet started its real spread beyond the circles of scientists (Castells 17). The latest cohorts of creators do not look at these technical developments with the amazement of the “new”; rather, they see them as just another component of their lives’ landscapes. Just as avant-garde texts that sang the wonders of electricity and airplanes in the first third of the last century can only be read now with a mixture of archeological and patronizing curiosity due to their naïve embrace of “modernity,” some of the literary artifacts that have tried to explore and play with the formal characteristics of our latest fin de siècle could be starting to feel . . . a bit timeworn. Aesthetic concomitances can be found in the creative responses to these two moments in literary history, as shown by Eduardo Ledesma (in this volume). By showing how the innovations of digital poetry by poets of the Spanish-speaking world are descendants of the aesthetic experimentation of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics. Ledesma aims to eradicate the false barrier between paper-based and digital literary texts, the first of which is conventionally thought to be static and the former dynamic. He shows that poets engaged in using moving graphics to effect an emotional response in readers, such as Joan Salvat-Papasseit in the 1920s and Joan Brossa in the 1960 and 1970s, lay the foundation for the digital kinetic poetry produced by contemporary poets like Ana María Uribe. J. Andrew Brown (in this volume) also looks into the origins of these approaches, arguing that Paz Soldán’s experiments with digital sampling constitute a new kind of intertextuality, but one that has its roots in paper-based literature like Rodrigo Fresán’s. In the end, the fascination with speed and immediacy, or its demonization, vanishes quickly when the celebrated or deplored technology becomes outmoded.

As Henseler and Castillo remind us in their excellent introduction, “it is not technology per se, then, that makes any difference at all in the world of literature, but it is the continued creation of good work as it may or may not reside, communicate, or translate different digital programs and applications

into new storyspaces.” These various “hybrid storyspaces” are productive in that they reveal and dismantle the binaries that structure traditional narratives and ways of reading, opening up the possibility for literary innovation. In the end, as we move closer toward a bookless literature, we realize that literature has always been “hybrid.” For within it, and regardless of the moment in which it was produced, and the medium in which it is disseminated, we find a constant and ever-renewed hybridity of voices, approaches, and techniques. When at its best, innovation does not preclude respect and use of tradition, and at the same time it can point out many of its dark spots. But it also does not guarantee that the inequalities and perverse dynamics that have been reproduced for centuries will be erased with the stroke of a computer key.

Notes

1. Namely, Spanish Studies in many of Spain’s universities. Since traditional philology is noted for paying very careful attention to matters of material textuality, it was eye-opening to listen to Víctor Infantes’s talk about the carelessness of critical editions of *Don Quijote*, including the most recent ones. Infantes called attention to the fact that, of the twenty-odd surviving copies of the first edition of Cervantes’s novel, most editors were satisfied using just a few (or, in some instances, one); and often not the best-preserved ones. Infantes and his *PrinQeps* team have demonstrated that the variations among copies are substantive and consequential.
2. The quote is from “Langage et littérature,” a lecture given by Foucault at the Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis in Brussels. While the text remains unpublished in French, it was translated and published in Spanish in 1996.
3. *Hispanic Issues Online* is a free-access publication consulted several thousand times a month from over one hundred countries, extending beyond the US, Latin America, and Europe.
4. As Pablo R. Balbontín has observed in relation to the paradoxical self-placement of these emerging authors within the commercial publishing world, “la renovación literaria que se propone pasa por una suerte de *laissez-faire* cultural, en que la libre relación del escritor con las formas de la sociedad postmoderna consistiría en su imbricación con la lógica del capitalismo, sin que en ella medie preceptiva literaria alguna” (the proposed literary renovation demands a sort of cultural *laissez-faire*, in which the free relationship of the writer with the forms of postmodern society consists of his or her imbrication within the logic of capitalism, without the mediation of any literary precepts).

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