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CHAPTER 17

Writing Communities on the Internet: Textual Authority and Territorialization. *

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The fact that we can speak of an electronic or digital culture announces a transformation, although it might be too soon to understand its implications and consequences. The literary system as an ensemble of cultural practices that involve the production, circulation, and consumption of written texts, with the critic's classical function as mediator between production and consumption, has apparently lost the social relevance it enjoyed in the past.[1] As access to the Internet and the presence of "literature" accessible via the World Wide Web increase, the crisis of "the literary" as a space of cultural production, and its precarious position with respect to mass media, must be reexamined.

On one hand, a tacit consensus downplays the Internet's literary system, a resistance grounded in a classic reluctance to accept new technical bases for "the word," a vision of technology as dehumanizing and mass media as an instrument of social control,[2] and a concern that such media produces the "trashification of culture" and "the loss of the real referent"[3]. In the face of the prejudices against a mass media explosion, Antonio Negri (l992b) maintains that: "never before has the relationship media-spectator been so demonized. . . . Everyday life is presented as dominated by the media monster, in a scene populated by ghosts, of zombies imprisoned by a destiny of passivity, frustration, and powerlessness."

On the other hand, an optimistic criticism could envision a

mass media appropriation of the literary system as a movement toward the democratic and utopian space rehearsed in the well-known movement "Against Literature."[4] A critical distance from this media inspired utopianism--forgetful of cultural capital's distribution problems, and the exclusions emerging from technological illiteracy--of course, should not be articulated as a reactionary call for "literature again."

A third position focuses on the study of hypertextuality, only to conclude with a eulogy of avant-garde pyrotechnics, maintaining both a low and a high register, a Literature and a literature. The success of these interactive experiments in the Spanish language is questionable; although widely unread by the general public, they pass as the object of study for most cultural criticism about "cyber-literature."[5] This kind of theorization overemphasizes hypertext, even though the creation of sophisticated textuality neither *necessitates*, nor is *constituted by* the electronic medium. Problematically, these “theoretical” selections canonize a narrow section of electronic cultural production on the grounds of its technical gymnastics. Hypertext has yet to materialize itself in the kind of intertext proposed by Kristeva (36-63): a universal text where everyone is connected and everything participates. The key authorial questions--who is speaking? Whose text is this?--have not re(dis)solved themselves in a projected orgiastic collective text.

The following considerations refer to the practices of writing, reading, and criticism of short stories in Spanish on the Internet.[6] *Proyecto Sherezade*, an e-magazine, will serve as a pre-text for the present discussion, thus avoiding performing an empty criticism.[7] Hosted by Princeton University's server, *Proyecto Sherezade,* has published more than one hundred short stories by authors from 27 different countries in its mere three years of its existence. The magazine began in February 1996 as a home page in an attempt to bypass the limited circulation and high costs of a printed magazine.

The initial impulse for the publication was to provide a venue for the numerous "writers" hiding in the world of Hispanic American literature departments at North American universities.

This original purpose, still recognized yet now forsaken by the magazine, was surpassed by an unexpected response: people from other countries began sending their comments and short stories. These early readers/writers provided the project with a political tenor, as many expressed concern over English's predominance in cyberspace. Today, the project defines itself as "a virtual space for promoting an exchange of narratives between Spanish speakers through the publication of unedited short stories and the readers' comments" (*Proyecto Sherezade l997*).

Unhindered by the costs and limitations of paper, reaches thousands of readers with minimal initial investment. In March 1996, Princeton's server reported an average of 200 monthly readers. Today the number has increased to over 4000 and includes readers not only in the US, Spain, and Latin America, but also (to name a few unexpected countries), in Thailand and Australia. [8] There are many linguistic "exiles," voluntary and involuntary, who provide the occasion for the (re)construction of a cultural geography in the silicon world.

It might be too early to evaluate how new electronic media transform the writing process. The most visible and revolutionary result of this new technology is its wide textual distribution and reproduction. The Net-massification processes allow texts to be infinitely reproduced and available at a very low cost (once having access to a computer. Paraphrasing Benjamin's idea (217-251), we can say that the work of art in the age of cyber-spatial reproduction has lost its aura or, better yet, is born without it. The classical model, based on the exclusivity, originality, and scarcity of the work of art, becomes unstable on the Internet, where an accelerated, vertiginous, and fertile circulation cheapens and dehierarchizes texts.

The significant editorial success of *Sherezade* is largely contingent on the fact that the short story, despite its elusive definition, is a narrative form that lends itself to the medium and to its public, demonstrating--perhaps because of its brevity and largely popular origin--great advantages over its printed form.[9] Whereas poetry and novels have been increasingly marginalized in the Internet, the short story, or rather, storytelling, is enjoying a

notable revival. As in the case of e-mail's post-modern version of an epistolary renaissance, the Internet offers the appropriate conditions for the production, circulation, and consumption of stories. Storytelling, the art of communicating experience, which as Benjamin thought, suffered a decline in the beginning decades of this century (86-89) has found in the Internet a new opportunity.

The magazine calls itself literary, resorting to certain conservative practices of authorization, for example a regular and consistent publishing schedule, a deliberately traditional design that "quotes" printed publications, and the editorial selection of material. These reflections have a conservative tone, but they express the symptoms of what we have called the *search for textual authority* and *virtual territorialization*; in other words, the mimicking of certain practices of the printed world as a response to the loss of cyberliterature's aura, to its deterritorialization and fleetingness.

Published every month, the magazine maintains a readily available archive of all published stories. Its regularity defies the labyrinthine and ephemeral textual acts characteristic of the Net. As in the printed form, consistency and permanence authorize the publication. The Internet, however, demystifies the appointment with the book as a fetishized object and facilitates access and textual availability. In regard to the magazine's "traditional" design, it is important to point out that although the publication employs a permanent design collaborator, it has avoided technical and graphic complexity and the use of frames and erratic links in its presentation (see figure 17.1). The general trend for Spanish-language literary magazines, including those that initially jumped onto the technical sophistication bandwagon, is actually simplification.

Figure 171.: Homepage of *Proyecto Sherezade*, http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~fernad4/

It is worthwhile spending some time examining the relationship between the magazine's layout and the process of authorization. Literary publications of a certain prestige, such as *Sherezade*, *Badosa*, *Internauta*, *Letralia,* and *Espéculo*, search for a textual authority by inscribing themselves within the genealogy of printed books and magazines. "Literary" texts on the Internet imitate print media in the same manner as the first printed books, the *incunabula*, imitated handwritten manuscripts, adopting the same tricks and mannerisms used by medieval copyists in order to appropriate the signs of prestige. E–publications' mimetic design, however, is not always nostalgia for the printed world, but a simulation of the materiality and structure of a book; it is a pragmatic quotation, an appropriation. This textual authorization procedure is not radically innovative: it involves the *quotation*, a strategy for authorization that establishes a certain communicability with tradition. It is a matter, then, not of remaining faithful to past systems, but of bringing them to the present, of actualizing them.

A voting committee selects three short stories out of 20 to

30 monthly submissions for every issue. Selection criteria (of course) are subjective, yet correspond to the general outlines established by the editorial policy (*Sherezade* l997). Since the online or digital world can be characterized as an open and unregulated publishing medium and offers itself as a space "freed" from authority (critics, editors, and experts), any kind of editorial control, as it orients the reader through the selection and presentation of material, necessarily comes to restrict textual circulation and creative autonomy. This selection process (an "authoritarian" system) legitimates (authorizes) the text for both writers and readers.

In *Sherezade* the readers actively participate in the construction of the magazine. Statistical programs keep track of readers' activity, allowing editors to take reading patterns into consideration when making editorial decisions, as recognized in "Criterios editoriales": "In the electronic medium of the Net, the story, like Scherezade, is at the mercy of the caliph cyberreader, who can 'decapitate' the story with a simple click that instantaneously takes him/her to another destiny" (*Sherezade* 1997). Moreover, the readers post their comments and critical observations alongside the published story. In this manner, hypertextual technology enables a spontaneous critical practice outside an academic or specialized center. This much transited space is not simply a matter of feedback; the page/screen becomes a narrative assembly/ensemble where critical spontaneity shares the space with the short story (the pre-text). The reader, now a critic, participates in the textual system influencing both the construction and reception of the text.

There are conflicting impulses in this dynamic. Along with the aforementioned conservative gestures, the ruinous rings of Angel Rama's "Lettered City" become permeated and flexible. As a matter of fact, the increasing success of cyberliterature, in this case storytelling in Spanish, implies the possibility of multiplying encounters between displayed material and its readers. Certainly, this is not the answer to the crisis of "the literary" that makes editors, critics, and writers so worried. Yet, its influence is quite relevant as it exponentially increases the possibilities of

reading (*Sherezade's* readers are not necessarily readers of books and magazines).

Gage Averill criticizes a "prophetic criticism" that prematurely announces the death of the nation state, ignoring the majority of identity politics that still carry the traces of at least some version of nationalism. Without a surrogate of the nation in sight, everything seems to indicate a continuity of national states (208-209). This leads to problematizing the common assumption that in cyberspace, communities are not geopolitical but defined by evanescent interests. Within this line of thinking, Fajardo states that:

> In *cyber-identity*, transactions occur, not between people, but between simulacra. . . . Inside these cyber-spatial dimensions, we could be dissolving modern concepts or belonging and participation. Belonging to a place, a city, or a nation, linking ourselves to the virtual and global nets that contribute to the construction of a geopolitical simulacrum, a cyber-politic where boundaries are erased.

As a working hypothesis, it can be proposed the survival of a cultural geography, and furthermore that a certain national space, and a new kind of Latin Americanism are all being reconstituted in the online digital world, just as these very concepts (nation, Latin America, and Hispanicity) are in perceived to be in crisis within a globalized world whose icon is precisely the Internet.

Sherezade has three indexes (chronologic, country, and author). According to statistics of the first three years, 9 out of 10 readers first turn to the country index and read their compatriots' work, and only then move on to "foreign texts." Thus, the magazine appears to participate in the construction of social spaces or "villorrios" that fracture the totalizing metaphor of the global village, where authors, readers, and texts--all exiled and deterritorialized on the Net--recognize themselves as part of an *imagined community.* This concept developed by Benedict Anderson apropos of the national literatures of print capitalism, can be extended to the associations formed on the Internet, since these relationships do promote the experience of simultaneity that Anderson discusses (37-46). They are not, however, identified

with national states, or emergent capitalist social formations. Neocorporate tendencies should also be excluded from this configuration.

When exiled Colombians, Chileans, or Venezuelans religiously read their country's or city's news, subscribe to mailing lists focusing on their country of origin, or habitually engage in "chat-room" conversations, as if by these communicative practices they could participate in (perhaps they do) the experiences from which they are exiled; they are founding villorrios, as we call the places where these practices of recognition occur, allowing virtual communities in exile to invent themselves, experience the national, and engage not only with other exiled nationals, but also with permanent residents. A new social space is constructed, where, as Martín-Barbero argues, "new ties of belonging are woven" and "new ways of being together, recreating citizenship and reconstituting society" are enacted (xii). News, chat-rooms, discussion groups, and certainly literary publications like *Sherezade*,create circuits of identity representation. Nationalism does not disappear, but it is no longer bound by statist inscription[10].

An electronic medium, states Martín-Barbero, "does not limit itself to the transmission or translation of existing representations, nor act as a substitute, but begins to construct a fundamental scene for public life" (xvi)--a space for the national and later on the Latin American scene. In the silicon global village, *Sherezade's* narrators are virtual story tellers: "Technology is the bonfire around which we keep telling our stories," (Laurie Anderson quoted in Proyecto Sherezade 1997b). For Clifford Geertz, culture is an intricate fabric of meaning, both a product and determinant of social interaction (145-250), and the articulation (and reading) of the stories we tell about others and ourselves. We can rehearse an operational definition of Internet culture as a narrative exercise inside an accelerated and interconnected space of unlimited growth, relatively free and uncontrollable, made possible by digital technology, and information and communication systems. One of the implications of this notion is that this arena is constructed in an area of negotiation and representation of

identities (such as the aforementioned national imagined communities). Subaltern groups enjoying different levels of cultural legitimacy resist the imposition of hegemonic social signifiers and struggle for social space. Increasingly, associations formed on the Internet have become a source of empowerment where thousands of people can voice their economic, religious, ludic, racial, and sexual interests. When speaking of these groups, we do not refer only to the usual "victims" that come to mind when speaking of minorities, of resistance and subalterity, but also of groups interested in racism, sexism, xenophobia and the like, who have found in the internet a safe haven impervious to the policing and censuring mechanisms of "political correctness."[11]

Yet, without being apocalyptic, it is necessary to remain critical of utopian discourses about the Internet, for they obscure aspects such as the expansion and invasion of consumerism inside the home, the reconfiguration of transnational powers, and the reproduction of differentiation pertaining to access, use, benefit, and enjoyment of the Internet. Moreover, corporate market research (management and interpretation of consumer patterns and online traffic) exceeds any surveillance system imagined by Orwell, and fosters a kind of corporate feudalism that violently threatens the boundaries between the public and the private.

To emphasize the all-inclusiveness of the Internet is to deny that the Internet is only one possible world among many, and like the material one, is a world of exclusions unaccounted for by the romanticism of an important sector of cultural studies. A shadow must be cast over this enthusiasm. While claiming a solidarity with subalterity, some cultural theories glorify high-tech cultural productions, such as music videos, video games, and now the Internet, assuming both that technology is "ideologically free" and available for willful appropriation(s). This dynamic is quite complex; technology brings not only changes in lifestyles and systems of thinking, but also a cultural baggage that modifies the social space, and is often complicit in the production of myths where models of domination and exploitation are reproduced (as in García Márquez's Macondo). An example of this mystification is the characterization of the Internet as an entrance to a limitless

universe of information and entertainment (infotainment) available to all.

We must not discard the unanswered questions: How do different group's representations or self-representations function in the Internet? To what extent do these groups actively control and participate in the process of cultural production?

Although it is possible to think of a nation without a state in cyberspace, and although it "empowers" diverse social sectors with a relatively inexpensive and wide system of production, its most alarming limitation is the reproduction of exclusion and differentiation mechanisms due to a lack of access. Today *Sherezade* finds readers in almost all of Latin America (with the exception of Bolivia, Honduras, and Cuba), yet most of its readers are from the US, Spain, Mexico, and Argentina. This unequal distribution of consumer capacity is exacerbated by the internal social and economic inequalities of each country.

Pierre Bordieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's categories, "cultural capital" and "technical selection" (73-76, 164-167), prove fruitful in this discussion. It is not only a matter of literacy and the ability to decode cultural signs; what facilitates Internet use is the distribution of technological and cultural goods. Only when that capital grows can one begin to speak of that double-faced Trojan horse trotting into the border that so excited Néstor García Canclini (l998). Meanwhile, the hybridization (flexibility of borders) of metropolitan areas (centers possessing cultural capital) has as much transcendence as Taco Bell's Chihuahua dog (even if it is a Janus-like Chihuahua sitting on the Mexican border). On the other hand, without this capital and all its ideological implications, an enormous sector of the population loses the battle over cultural power; difference becomes subsumed and neutralized by the sophisticated market.

A generalized assumption conceives virtual space as rhizomatic and decentered,[12] encouraging the myth that the Internet's center is everywhere (nowhere). For his part, García Canclini (l995) insists that the permeability (acquisition of cultural capital) of popular culture has made possible the production of hybrid symbolic goods. In this context, a center-

periphery model:

> is insufficient for understanding current power relations. It does not explain the planetary functioning of an industrial, technological, financial and cultural system whose headquarters is [sic] not in a single nation but in a dense network of economic and ideological structures . . . new processes make the asymmetry more complex: . . . the planetary simultaneity of information, and the adaptation of certain international forms of knowledge and images to the knowledge and habits of each community. The delocalization of symbolic products by electronics and telematics, and the use of satellites and computers in cultural diffusion, also impede our continuing to see the confrontations of peripheral countries as frontal combat with geographically defined nations. (227)

Yet, even when acknowledging the hybridization of identities and the insufficiency of dependency models, a vision of calibanesque appropriations of "certain international forms of knowledge" is far too celebratory. Regardless of all the optimism found in "the planetary simultaneity of information" (as García Canclini says), globalization, as understood by economist Luis Jorge Garay Salamanca, is a contradictory process, less likely to generate order, harmony, and stability, than lead to risks, disorder, and conflicts.

The short story's success on the Internet should not lead to forgetting the multiplicity of problems about which an unbridled optimism fails to give account. Neither can we overlook that apocalyptic warnings can veil an elitist revulsion against the massification of cultural practices, or the fear, foreseen by Raymond Williams, of "many radicals [that] retire to defensive positions: to identify new technologies with the corporations that control them, and each other with the new and disastrous phase of 'supra-capitalism' " (152). A healthy distance from both celebration and lament is useful when thinking of narrative practices. Neither a utopian complete transparency, nor the utopia of democracy can omit ongoing questions about social struggles, some of which are actually being enacted in cyberspace. Martín-Barbero's words, then, become pertinent:

> Today, culture and communication constitute a primordial political battleground: the strategic scenery requiring politics to recuperate its symbolic dimension--its capacity of representing the link between citizens, a community's feeling of belonging--in order to confront the erosion of a collective order. This is what the market cannot do, no matter how efficient the simulacra. The market cannot solidify traditions since everything it produces "melts into air" due to its cultural tendency to an accelerated and generalized obsolescence . . . . The market cannot create social alliances, that is, between subjects, for these are constituted through sense-making communicative processes, and the market operates through value-logics that imply purely formal exchanges, and evanescent promises and associations. . . . The market cannot engender social innovations, for they necessitate non-functional differences and solidarities, resistance and dissidence, whereas the market only deals with profit. (xv-xvi)

Using the general category “market,” Barbero specifically alludes to the conditions of late capitalism and its inability to produce social bonds, a market that excludes other forms of exchange and communicative processes with a different logic of profits: social profits.

Imagined communities of readers have been developing on the Internet, whether in chatrooms, discussion groups, e-newspapers or as in the case described above, "literary" publications. Notwithstanding complex debates over the definition of “the literary” with its categorical limits and well-known crisis, *Sherezade*’s narrative practices actualize the “old literary field," paradoxically, via conservative mechanisms of authorization (as evidenced by its academic origin, the quotation of the traditional format of a printed publication, its regularity, and its application of an editorial policy). What is indeed innovative appears to be an acceleration that enables and multiplies encounters among storytellers, readers, and texts, and placement of readers’ critical production in the same textual space as the short story. The

narrative ensemble and assembly produces a rich social interaction, and displaces the purported academic monopoly over literary criticism.

This analysis yields questions about the relationship between the deterritorialization and deauthorization that the Internet supposes, and the processes of territorialization and authorization that certain communities of readers fashion when writing themselves on the Internet. In the same way that the electronic magazine quotes the printed world, these written communities evoke "bankrupt" concepts such as the nation and literature; but in both cases, the quoted and the evoked have been somehow actualized and abandoned. This undeniable cultural geography cannot be ignored by the postmodern insistence on deterritorialization, nor understood as a "rebirth" of the classical topology of identity politics. Still, it suggests the viability of these communities as non-essentialized social spaces, where alternative narrative practices capable of resisting the intense logic of late capitalism can be enacted.

Notes

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[1]Plato portrayed Socrates as outlining the potential danger of writing through the tale of Theuth, its inventor. Theuth brings his invention before the king, saying that "letters will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories," but the king replies, "O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art [technologist] is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them . . . ; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their

memories; they will trust the external written characters and not remember of themselves." ("Phaedrus). See also John Beverley. *Against literature*. Regarding the crisis of the literary institution and the mediating function of the critic, see also Beatriz Sarlo, "Los estudios culturales y la crítica literaria en la encrucijada valorativa."

[2]During the 1960's Herbert Marcuse warned about the qualitative consequences of a technological transformation of social life manifested in the sophistication of alienating forms as consequence of the transformation of social production relations. See his *One Dimensional Man.* The old Frankfurt School polemic regarding the emancipating or alienating aspects of art in the face of technology is being actualized. See Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

[3]For example, Carlos Fajardo comments, "the digital mass becomes only a spectator, without permanent historical and political commitment. . . . Spectacle, fascination, ecstasy, manipulation, these are the orders carried out to their fullest."

[4]See Beverly.

[5]For example, Susana Pajares Tosca, privileging experimentation, says, “Hyperfiction will only be something more than ‘choose your own adventure” if it renounces to linear characteristics such as the traditional idea of structure with its beginning, development and denouement, for all this is only excess baggage for new forms.” This vision follows the anonymous “Manifesto for Hyperauthors” with respect to favoring “the essential value of non-linearity as a new literary force” and the idea of achieving “true innovations in the arts of writing.. . through radical experimentation.” Maddox skeptically argues that “Some uses of hypertext . . . such as avant-garde literary texts, are likely to remain as isolated and rare as, well, avant-garde literary texts” (1992b).

[6]This distinction is operational and serves to differentiate what circulates online, which includes material originally printed on paper and later transferred/translated to databases such as the *Gutenberg Project* <http://promo.net/pg/>, from that which is produced specifically for the Internet, such as *Sherezade.*

[7]Joaquín María Aguirre's useful distinction characterizes *Sherezade* as a *writer's web page*; it can also be said to correspond to a *literary project* or *virtual press.* Note: *Sherezade* moved to the University of Manitoba’s server in Canada in January 2000.

[8]Statistical information was provided by Enrique Fernández in a

phone interview by Carlos Jáuregui, February 1999, and in private e-mail messages and statistics sent to Carlos Jáuregui, January 5 and 22, and February 1-3, 14 and 27, 1999.

[9]Significant in regards to literature is Spanish, in comparison with similar printed publications.

[10]For an extended discussion about the processes of deterritorizalization within an integrated world capitalism, see Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze.

[11]Still, even publications like *Sherezade* participate in censuring mechanisms. On one occasion the editorial board rejected a story that portrayed an ambivalent stance toward violence against homosexuals. Now and then it is discussed whether a story can endanger the institutional support provided by Princeton (now Manitoba) University, which serves as both landlord and generous patron.

[12]Jerome McGann alleges that "the Internet, which is an archive of archives, was originally designed precisely as a decentered, nonhierarchical structure."

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