

Review / Reseña

Gainza Cortés, Carolina. *Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina. Producción literaria en el capitalismo informacional*. México: Remediabes, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2018.

Verónica Gómez

Universidad Nacional del Litoral/CONICET

Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina. Producción literaria en el capitalismo informacional by Carolina Gainza Cortés proposes an urgent and necessary reflection about the relation between digital technologies and contemporary culture. The book begins with a prologue, then offers a detailed theoretical framework, three chapters, and an (in)conclusion, focusing on a variety of questions that are not completely answered, but are deeply explored from many angles: “Este trabajo no busca llegar a conclusiones ni generar respuestas. Más bien, está lleno de preguntas” (Gainza, 2018: 15). Actually, the challenge involves leaving the questions open to dialogue and to reflecting together about electronic literature. As she says in the prologue, these literary “digital experiences” allow us to better understand where we are positioned in the contemporary context of production of the new narratives of the future. The construction of these “technopoetics” could become a lot more than just the ludic artifact they seemed to be at first glance. Furthermore, the emergence of this “born digital” literary production entails the disruptive and expansive possibility of questioning what has been called informational capitalism.

The prologue is titled “Prólogo. Experiencias digitales.” a brief but important part of the book that traces out Gainza’s academic trajectory during more than ten years of research in the field: she brings us concerns that come not only from her

doctoral studies in Hispanic Languages and Literatures, but also from her grade studies in sociology. Regarding this academic background, and her own personal engagements with books and words, she expounds on how her “digital experiences” “re-set” her point of view to analyze the social impact that digital literature could have in relation to the construction of contemporary subjectivity. When she says “re-set”, she means that she had to re-order her perceptions about what electronic literature seeks to transmit. At the beginning, she perceived these “digital experiences” as a kind of chaos because they did not possess the linearity and comprehension of print books. But then she realized she had a great opportunity to develop new reading and writing strategies and interpretations: “Es necesario generar una caja de herramientas conceptuales que se adecúe a las necesidades de interpretación que emanan de una práctica literaria vinculada a una materialidad diferente, que genera un universo de percepciones y experiencias distintas a la experiencia estética de lo impreso” (Gainza, 2018: 15).

After this brief prologue, the book then turns to “Prácticas literarias en tiempos digitales”, where some definitions are carefully established. Due to the fact that this part of the book has many references to different theories from philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, political sciences, and others, we might consider it more of a theoretical framework rather than a descriptive introduction. Here, Gainza develops different concepts. First, she describes the seemingly unavoidable relationship between technology and informational capitalism. To understand this constitutive relation, says Gainza, gives us the key to recognize the disruptive, migratory, and interactive characteristics of digital literature. She asks: what is the link between new technologies and cultural goods? What are we thinking about when we say “electronic literature?” Following pioneers like Jay David Bolter, Katherine Hayles, and Espen Aarseth, Gainza arrives at the definition of e-literature, according to the Electronic Literature Organization’s website: “Electronic Literature, generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitalized, is by contrast ‘digitally born,’ a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read in a computer” (cited in Gainza, 2018: 20). But she goes further by posing the question in a different manner: are we talking about the same thing when we move from the American context to the Latin American one? And if not, how can they be distinguished from one another?

She observes that it is very important to focus on “the local of the global,” and that is why she took some political decisions when she decided to explicitly show us her Latin American position of writing. One of these decisions is to have written her book entirely in Spanish and published it not only in print support but also as an e-pub,

an innovative digital platform to freely share texts and knowledge. The third was to fulfil what she promises in part of the book title: “*Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina*”. Her corpus is made up entirely of Latin American works such as *Diario del niño burbuja*, *Wordtoys*, and *Góngora Wordtoys* by Belén Gache, *Golpe de Gracia* and *Gabriella Infinita* by Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, *Detective Bonaerense* by Marcelo Guerrieri, *Milagros Sueltos* (collective roman), *El primer vuelo de los hermanos Wright* by Juan B. Gutiérrez, *Tierra de extracción*, *La buella de Cosmos*, and *Hotel Minotauro* by Doménico Chiappe, *bacterias argentinas* by Santiago Ortiz. She examines these works meticulously and commits developing the field of Latin American electronic literature when quoting Latin American authors, such as Claudia Kozak, Ángel Rama, or Jesús Martín-Barbero, with the same “authority” as anyone else writing theory from the “global north.”

The first chapter focuses on how experimentation with new technologies affects the production, reception, and distribution circuits of literature and cultural representations. To answer this question, she employs various theoretical frameworks: Deleuze and Guattari’s figure of the rhizome, which is linked to the concept of network in cyberspace; De Landa, Hayles, Latour, and Galloway’s posthuman theory, which helps us to elucidate the way bodies, machines, and information become a singular complex organism. Actually, it is the organism, deterritorialized and rhizomatic, that produces and consumes electronic literature in cyberspace: “La literatura digital experimenta con las nuevas tecnologías en diversas formas, incorporando el imaginario tecnológico en sus narrativas, generando nuevos formatos de lectura y escritura, y estableciendo puentes entre lo impreso y lo digital” (Gainza, 2018: 34).

In the second section of this chapter, she insists on the political bias of technology. In fact, as information flows, networks are directly connected according to a hegemonic order, quoting Castells. This means that the different spheres of life are equally important to understand a phenomenon that many times is read only as technological, obscuring its political side. On the contrary, Gainza reminds us that informational capitalism needs communication to shape subjectivity and that this action affects life itself:

Esto no solo afecta lo económico, social, político y cultural, sino que también—como señalan Hardt y Negri (2000)—la producción y reproducción de la vida misma. De esta forma, las redes de comunicaciones se convierten en uno de los principales aliados del capital, ya que estas son transmisoras de símbolos y códigos que afectan la cultura, las identidades y la construcción de la subjetividad en nuestro tiempo. (Gainza, 2018: 40)

We can therefore understand the reason that it is so important to analyze the emergence of electronic literature. The “digital textualities” the author deals with allow her to recognize an aesthetic experience that, on the one hand, interrogates those perceptions shaped by informational capitalism, and, on the other hand, stimulates collective agency through other random, deviant, performative, playful, and experimental paths that make it possible to transgress the hegemony of capital over technology.

At this point, the book has already given us some theoretical tools with which we are able to experience the works discussed in the following pages. Chapter 2 reviews many of the Latin American works mentioned above, although the author insists that it is a selection that leaves out other, relevant works (memes, bots, code). This is also a political statement, as the author recognizes that literature could never disregard the context in which it is produced: “constituye un espacio donde las culturas se piensan a sí mismas, generan relaciones sociales, difunden conocimientos y crean imaginarios sociales que finalmente influyen en los procesos de construcción identitaria y en la producción de la subjetividad” (Gainza, 2018: 86). Through their use of different media, meanings, genres, and languages—hypertext, hypermedia, blog stories, net-art, e-poetry, cyborg narratives—the analysis offers readers / users of these electronic literary forms the distinctive aesthetic experience that Gainza refers to throughout the first part of the book. Thus, she observes a break with the acquired and institutionalized practices of print literature due to changes in contemporary culture and media: “La literatura digital, al incorporar(se) a las redes y experimentar en la relación con ellas, da cuenta del cambio de época que estamos experimentando” (Gainza, 2018: 107-108). And it is precisely this rupture that gives rise to a series of questions posed in the chapter about the function of literature, its conditions of production, and the possibility of consuming it, depending on the context in which it circulates.

In Chapter 3, Gainza goes on to cover topics that involved controversial discussions not only in academia but also in creative fields: authorship and reception. She poses a complex question, not fully answered in the chapter but thoroughly discussed: “¿De qué forma la introducción de las TIC modifica las prácticas de producción y circulación cultural?” (Gainza, 2018: 189). Focusing on the production and reception circuit, she explores technophobia (the fear of the death of the print book caused by the emergence of digital culture), as well as the technophilic view (referring to a certain “apolitical” action that concentrates on the benefits of the internet without a critical take on the technology itself). Instead of choosing one or another, the author explains the contradictions and conflicts that are present in this kind of production,

given the rupture with the author / reader paradigm present in modernity. Following Bourdieu, she says, to be recognized as an author means to gain symbolic capital, but how to keep that capital when the works circulate in the de-centered, de-territorialized, and fluid context of cyberspace?

As well as in the previous chapter, here we also find an analysis of electronic literature that seeks to explain how the artists, authors, the public, editors, programmers, and developers relate to the conceptualization of informational capitalism she discusses in the first part of the book: “Las consecuencias de este modo de producir y distribuir en la era digital tienen claras consecuencias políticas, especialmente en relación, como hemos analizado, con la manera en que concebimos las formas de propiedad” (Gainza, 2018: 213). She explores how authors construct the figure of the author, and how the economic factor applies when private property seems to follow a kind of fuzzy logic due to the appearance of hacker culture, copy&paste, free culture, (the omission of) quotes, copyrights and copyleft strategies, among other factors. Following the theoretical contributions of Hardt and Negri in their book *Multitude*, Gainza discusses the transformation of authorship from close and control to common and open access, rather than postulating its disappearance: “Las formas de relaciones sociales de redes y ensamblajes creativos son posibles gracias a la libertad que permite internet y al fracaso, hasta ahora, de los intentos de control de las redes por parte de los actores capitalistas” (Gainza, 2018: 219).

At the end of the book, Gainza offers a text titled “(In)conclusiones”, inscribing her research within a complex and large field under construction, one that is unfinished. There is a collective agenda that Gainza proposes with her book, since she recognizes that there is still much work to be done: what will we do with our subjectivity? What do we do when we say we “read” electronic literature? Where are we subjects when we interact with these electronic literary productions? With these and many other important and unresolved questions, Gainza leaves to us the task of reflecting on the surrounding world as the posthuman subjects we already are: “Esta manera de pensarse a sí mismo y de ver el mundo y las relaciones con el entorno, ciertamente dibuja otras formas de pensar la subjetividad” (Gainza, 2018: 238-239). Finally, Gainza manages to put into practice the art of the oxymoron: she exposes an urgent reflection, a convergence that questions, an unfinished closure.