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Toys and Toons: From Hispanic Literary Traditions to a Global E-Lit Landscape

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Is it possible to talk about Hispanic electronic literature? If so, what elements render a particular work *Hispanic*? In the current media landscape, cultural specificities and differences are reconfigured in the many spaces where they come into contact. The web, commonly articulated as borderless and global, sits at the center of this landscape, becoming the workspace where e-lit has thrived in the last years. Consequently, Hispanic electronic literary works cannot be thought of simply in terms of national literature, not even in terms of Hispanism around the world. Hispanic e-lit works published on the web offer the possibility to observe the tension between a global digital culture, world e-lit, and specific literary traditions through their complex relationship to various forms of language. A solid grounding on the linguistically defined literary tradition is made explicit through the intricate referential networks found in Hispanic e-lit works. Yet, many works often fracture said linguistic tradition by means of rhetoric and meaning-making systems coming from digital media. At the same time, these media extend, parody, and put into question the seamless continuation of the past into the present, and the solidity of referential language. Thus, Hispanic e-lit invites a reflection on the mechanisms employed by authors to appeal to both a linguistic-literary tradition and the global landscape of digital cultural production.

This chapter explores the deliberate and problematic construction of e-lit works which, though cemented in the Hispanic literary canon, reach out to a landscape of global e-lit. Further, the dialog established between earlier works (chiefly print products) and current digital works allows us to comment on a type of intertextuality/intermediality that cuts through time, individual authors, and media. The resulting phenomenon is a “relocation” of the *literary* from its niche as a *product of language* into *non-linguistically bound word-objects*. We take two examples to explore this, Belén Gache’s *Góngora Wordtoys (Soledades)* (2011) and Benjamín Moreno’s *Concretoons* (2010). In these works, both writers have established a manifest connection between their e-lit production and two of the most celebrated periods of the Hispanic tradition: seventeenth-century baroque, and twentieth-century avant-garde. Over this basis, we analyze first how Gache’s poems reimagine the rhythms and imagery of Luis de Góngora’s *Soledades (The Solitudes)*, stressing the potentialities for movement and the distinct materiality that kinesic gives to the baroque writer’s verses. Second, we look at how Benjamín Moreno’s *Concretoons* explore material qualities of language, and how features like the iconicity of graphemes exploited by concrete poets in the twentieth century are enacted through game dynamics.

Looked at from an e-lit viewpoint, baroque and concrete poetry might seem abysmally different between them. However, both literary movements share a rejection of figurative realism, and draw on marked intermedial resources (visual, aural, and kinetic) as compositional principles. Góngora’s rhythm and sound throughout *Soledades*, for example, signal poetry’s structural and expressive potential beyond the word level and carry their own aesthetic meaning. Similarly, in concrete poetry, texts usually draw on two or more semiotic systems or media “in such a way that the visual and/or musical, verbal, kinetic or performance aspect of its signs are inseparable” (Clüver 2000: 34). It is thanks to these intermedial features that we trace in and out of Gache’s and Moreno’s pieces that the poetic strategies borrowed from their predecessors become word-objects.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the historical baroque and avant-garde periods and e-lit is not a linear or seamless one, and certainly not one of incorporation or allusion alone. As Jessica Pressman would have it in *Digital Modernisms*, drawing from established creators and their work to construct new digital texts is “a strategy of renovation that purchases cultural capital from the literary canon in order to validate their newness” (2014: 2). Partly a matter of influence and legitimization, of “making it new” in Pressman’s terms, we further sustain that the connections between Gache’s and Moreno’s works and baroque and concrete poetry are characterized by the tension of how poetic aspects are enacted individually in each particular case. Connections may come in the form of analogous instantiations or materializations in both the earlier creations and contemporary ones—a process akin to Joseph Tabbi’s “relocation of the literary.”

In “Electronic Literature as World Literature,” Tabbi explains how e-lit has revealed that literary qualities such as narrativity are not “universal”—i.e., not equally fitted to all expressive media—but best realized in particular ones and thus, “new media bode ... a revaluation and relocation of the literary in multiple media” (2010: 28). Similarly, Pedro Reis proposes that some features of electronic literature such as “[t]he combinatory strategy, the use of space, the destruction of syntax, the depersonalization of the work, the expedient of chance and the relative absence of orientation in the poetic structure” have already taken place in print literature (2015). Nevertheless, they have been developed and relocated in the electronic environment “so that [they] may be (re)discovered and (re)invented every time” (Reis 2015). Seen under this light, digital literary innovations may seem relative, except when they go beyond renovating or adapting the affordances of print intermediality. Thus, features of e-lit are not merely means to overcome the saturation of literary media or forms, but strategies to put into practice—to enact—poetic elements that might have been problematic in print as well. In that sense, we see enactment as a process of putting the literary into practice in a given work and to create new mechanisms of meaning not restricted to electronic media or linguistic referentiality. This idea is further useful to examine the trans-linguistic relations and the influence of globalization that shape Gache’s and Moreno’s work.

Relocating the Spanish Baroque: Word-Objects, Movement, and Rhythm

Baroque poetry explicitly drew on the potentialities of language to create complex structures that superseded the utilitarian qualities of expression. In the case of the Spanish baroque, this responded to a dramatic cultural and political decline after the glory of the Renaissance. The powerful reign of the Catholic monarchs was being eroded by religious changes and political challenges that threatened the continuity of an almost global empire. Thus, baroque literature combined a pessimistic look on the present with escapism and satire, which arguably fostered imaginative forms of writing. It is in this context where Luis de Góngora, one of the most influential Golden Age poets, wrote his widely studied, yet unfinished poem, *Soledades* (*The Solitudes*). Composed in 1613, *Soledades* is a long *silva* poem praising the natural world in which an anonymous castaway—depicted as a pilgrim—finds himself on an island. *Soledades* is paradigmatic for its difficult grammatical structures and the over-abundance of erudite and mythological allusions and references. Although it is a poem about nature, the natural world is evoked in figurative and rarified language because “language itself, not its emotive referent or expressive content, is the intrinsic aesthetic

component” of *Soledades* (Grossman 2011: ix). Key to understanding *Soledades* is its rhythm embedded in a set of mostly metarhetoric images pointing to the composition process itself. To appreciate *Soledades*’ rise and fall cadence one should consider the classical figures of Icarus, Sisyphus, and the Phoenix, which are alluded to explicitly in the text (Halevi 1995: 463). Moreover, Góngora’s employment of nets, labyrinths, and rivers, as well as “other rhythmical images such as the movement of the birds ... require interpretation to be viewed in a metarhetorical light” (Halevi 1995: 463).

Góngora’s emphasis on the form of the lyrical composition is taken on by Belén Gache in her *Góngora WordToys (Soledades)*—an online collection of five digital poems that explicitly engage with the Spanish poet’s work. In the opening poem, “Dedicatoria espiral,” Gache relocates the rhythm and rhetorical intricacy in *Soledades*’ dedication to the Duque de Béjar by transforming the verses into a moving spiral that turns clockwise or counterclockwise depending on where the reader places the cursor. Where Gache exploits the affordances of the animated object to instantiate the sense of movement in Góngora’s poem, Góngora’s general departure of writing conventions rejected the order and stability of classic or imperial writings of the time. Due to the extensive use of a variety of erudite references, the multiplicity of readings in Góngora’s poem has been a recurrent topic of investigation. Analogously, the near impossibility to pin down a reading of *Soledades* also lies at the bottom of “Dedicatoria espiral” as the spiral moves too quickly to read the words that constitute it. The spiral presents an intriguing paradox where the reader is able to read the poem only as long as she does not activate it, while it is still words. Conversely, the activation of the poem renders the composition asemic appealing only to its objectual and kinetic qualities

The recurrent representations of movement and rhythm in language common in baroque poetry are highlighted in Góngora’s *Soledades* to sidestep referentiality, which may also suggest an asemic intent. As a matter of fact, Góngora’s baroque convolution has been interpreted as non-sense—i.e., not conforming to referential interpretations of language in the baroque era. For Roland Barthes, and Paul Julian Smith, Góngora’s textual obscurities are open to free play of sense and meaning (Smith 1986: 83).¹ Góngora’s favor to rhythm and form as facilitators of multiple understandings is enacted

¹As Edith Grossman notes on her preface to the bilingual edition of *The Solitudes*, the conventional view of Góngora’s complex, allusive, hyperbolic, and highly metaphorical poetry had been seen for many years in literary histories as the result of mental disturbance. The insanity of Góngora’s poetic style, so contrary to the values of the Counter-Reformation has also been equated with non-sense. In this way, and following Lacan’s comments on the Spanish poet, Góngora’s nonsensical writing should be read in opposition to what our doxa (or “common opinion”) would deny in the name of truth. “As we shall see, it is precisely a lack of meaning that Góngora himself is accused of and is forced to deny” (Smith 1986: 83).

FIGURE 1 Belén Gache. “El llanto del peregrino.” Screenshot by the authors. <http://belengache.net/gongorawordtoys/llanto/laberinto.htm>.

in Gache’s work in the act of reading itself. In “Dedicatoria espiral,” the position of the cursor changes the direction and speed of the text on the screen and invites distinct reading acts—some of which can be semantic while others are kinetic. In that sense, Góngora’s non-sense becomes actual meaning-as-play when readers activate “Dedicatoria espiral.”

Through his newfound surroundings, the protagonist’s pilgrimage is rendered an adventure—a motif that makes *Soledades* move forward. In “El llanto del peregrino” (Figure 1) Gache’s castaway arrives not at an island but at a platform game, a puzzle made of verse fragments. Along with the avatar, the reader moves around the new environment and walks in between words using the keyboard arrow keys. The verses, cut up and disordered, become a maze with no beginning or end and no clear referential meaning. Gache’s poem becomes an entrapment of meaning in itself. “Emulating labyrinth poems so dear to baroque aesthetics, and taking the baroque (and Borgesian) idea of the ‘poem as labyrinth,’ this *wordtoy* recreates the text as a metaphor” (Gache 2015, our translation). Referential linguistic meaning is lost as it becomes a puzzle in the platform game, translating semantic meaning to the kinetic qualities of the word-object. Gache’s poem demands from her reader a separation from baroque wordplay and rhythm so as to engage with reading as video game.

Concrete Relocations: Word-Objects in E-Lit

Since the mid-twentieth century, the term “concrete poetry” has been used to refer to a variety of innovations and experiments that revolutionized writing around the world. Although the name received international support, and it should be considered in relation to a mainstream defined in terms of continents and not individual cultures (Clüver 1987: 113), concrete poetry was not a homogenous practice across the globe. In fact, the movement was originated in Switzerland by Eugen Gomringer who was born in Bolivia and published his first “word constellations” (1952) in Spanish, his native tongue. Furthermore, concretism almost simultaneously took root in Portuguese in the American continent thanks to the Noigandres group from Brazil—Haroldo and Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari (Solt 1970: 8). This brief backstory should caution us against understanding concretism as a primarily European phenomenon.

Among the different types of concrete poetry at least three have been distinguished: visual, phonetic, and kinetic poetry (static on the page, but activated by the passing of pages in a visual succession). Mostly seen in a performative combination, the fundamental aspect of concrete poetry is the concentration upon the physical material from which the poem or text is made (Solt 1970: 7). The implication of this is the subjugation of semantic referentiality to the poem’s structure—a structure that should be defined as intermedial as well. In concrete poetry, language, in a semantic sense, becomes secondary to how signs can convey meaningful information and, thus, the concrete poem communicates its structure. Concrete poets, however, were disunited on the importance that the poem should give to semantic meaning (Solt 1970: 9). On one side of the debate we place the Brazilian Noigandres whose work, although sometimes abandoning words, remains within the communication area of semantics: in their poems we can *read* words and sentences although these are distributed playfully and meaningfully throughout the page. On the other side we situate the Spanish visual poet Joan Brossa, whose one-letter poems and sculptures, such as those representing only the letter A, rely on the capacity of the character to transmit purely aesthetic information.

Taking this debate as a starting point, Benjamín Moreno’s *Concreteoons* explicitly reflect on the affordances of digital media, specifically the arcade video game, to transmit poetic information. His poems “Noigandres vs. Brossa” and “Brossa vs. Noigandres” take on the issue enacting it through video game dynamics. By transforming the debate into a literal fight following the *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Asteroids* (1979) game models, Moreno’s poems not only communicate their own structure; their very structure is (put into) play. In “Noigandres vs. Brossa” (Figure 2) the player takes on the pro-semantics Noigandres side put against Brossa’s army.

FIGURE 2 Benjamín Moreno, “Noigandres vs. Brossa.” Screenshot by the authors. <http://concretoons.net84.net/noigandres.html>.

The names of the actual Noigandres poets (Haroldo, Augusto, Décio) and their “verbivocovisual” composition principle are the only words in the poem. These “words” fight against a battalion of capitalized As—like those found in Joan Brossa’s reductionist one-letter poems. In this way, the joint “verbal,” “vocal,” and “visual” capabilities of poetry defended by the Noigandres group are in tension with the affordances of kinetic poetry and

video game mechanisms of meaning production. In the twin work “Brossa vs. Noigandres,” Moreno uses the *Asteroids* game to invert the fighting scenario. Instead of asteroids, the game shows originary concrete poems like Gomringer’s “Silencio” or Augusto de Campos’s “Sem um numero” flying across the screen. Likewise, the player’s spaceship is Brossa’s capital A, trying to blow up the approaching asteroids-now-poems. Moreno’s use of concrete poems in this work underscores their non-semantic qualities as these become objects standing in as asteroids. Thus, poems that already conceived the word as object are turned into second-order word-objects by Moreno. Since they are still made of words, the potential to “read” the object remains in tension within the object. Yet, the famous concrete poem’s iconic shapes are prone to be recognized by the reader because of their objectual characteristics.

Moreno’s poems act out the two-sidedness of the debate around semantics. By exploiting language as objects, Moreno brings about the asemic and kinetic understanding of poetry as play. Interestingly, with the addition of movement and the reader’s input as interplay, Moreno’s poetic enactment still falls within the basic concrete poetry standards by which the poem would communicate first and foremost its structure, beyond its linguistic meaning. Put slightly differently, the intermedial features of these poems, together with the reader’s necessary interplay, reveal how the poem is to be handled rather than read. Moreno’s poems radically manifest that in e-lit works language is most often pushed beyond semantic referentiality and turned into (digital) objects. However, Moreno fails to solve the debate as the explicit intertextual relationship points to a larger context that resituates the poems beyond the objects they depict, which should not be forgotten.

Concrete poetry often adopted procedures and objects coming from mass media, resituating literature within broader communication networks while exploiting their visual, aural, and kinetic dimension. Where concrete poets engaged the billboard and the page to suggest movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Moreno’s poems put into practice their readers’ poetic interplay through the global mass media object of the video game. The kind of non-linguistically bound video game dynamics utilized by Moreno borrow and simultaneously appeal to a global audience. The interplay required in these poems relocates the intersemiotic nature of concretism. These poems push for play, rather than reading. Further, Moreno’s approach to language as object signals an asemic intent and is thus not limited by any given language. Incidentally, this could explain the quick and vast adoption of concrete poetry across the world and the potential for e-lit to follow suit.²

²In her field-defining work on concrete poetry (1968), Mary Ellen Solt brought together examples appearing almost simultaneously in Switzerland, Brazil, Germany, Austria, Iceland, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Japan, France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Mexico, Spain, Scotland, England, Canada, and the United States.

Emerging Paths for a Global E-Lit Landscape

As we have argued, Gache's and Moreno's relocations of poetic aspects from their predecessors fracture the link between a literary tradition and strategies of meaning-making in digital media, while they open two reading paths and potential audiences. First, a semantic reading that entices readers to try to read the words in movement in order to understand the poems and, further, to identify the intertextual references to canonical works. It would follow that Gache's and Moreno's poems appeal most clearly to Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking readers for whom words and literary references are recognizable. Seen in this light, these works might indeed be making Góngora's, the Noigandres', and Brossa's poems new in the sense proposed by Pressman.

Nonetheless, a second reading path pushes for a "structural reading" that bypasses linguistic content and figurative languages in favor of visual and kinetic forms of engagement. This happens when poems taken from the literary canon are literally put into parodic play by being relocated *as objects* in the rhetoric of *toys*, *toons*, and video games. In this sense, Gache's and Moreno's poems appeal to a linguistically broader audience, perhaps even more so to e-lit readers familiar with various interplay dynamics, codes, and practices. Aside from the material conditions that foster this twofold reading, on the writers' part we might also find a "desire to speak as widely as possible, over time and space, and the desire to reach a carefully targeted and constructed audience" (2015: 298) as Alexander Beecroft would have it, when talking about the emergent global landscape of world literature.

Moreover, and aside from the aseptic information these poems exploit, Gache's and Moreno's work also reach out to a global audience through bilingual, "spanglish," expressions. Most evidently seen in their titles—*Wordtoys* and *Concretoons*—the initial bilingual intent in these works signals an awareness of the potentially global literary space of the web in English that exists in tension with some of the boldest uses of the Spanish and Portuguese languages during the historic baroque and avant-garde. Furthermore, as Joseph Tabbi proposes "[t]he concept of a world literature ... is tied to the creation of newly internationalized reading publics and to the loss of such publics (and their renewed creation) with the rise of new communications infrastructures" (2010: 20). By appealing to Spanish-speaking readers and others alike, Moreno and Gache carefully appeal to a reading public that is in no way exclusive to a single language, but perhaps suggest the emergence of e-lit grammars.

English and Spanish are two of the most spoken languages in the world. Along the American continent, English, Spanish, and Portuguese coexist within complex socioeconomic and cultural relationships shaped crucially by mass media. That Gache and Moreno hint in their titles at the

intricacies of cultural exchange shaped by market and political forces is further amplified by the video game dynamics alluded to in their poems. The engagement with these games—products of a globalized digital culture—situate the work of Gache and Moreno in a media ecology that challenges their canonic literary grounding, and stretches their reach toward the global. This is even more relevant because just as the concrete elements alluded to above, the grammar of video games and our familiarity with their dynamics do not demand linguistic understanding. In that way, and in Rita Raley's words, the hegemony of English as "the literal and metaphoric operating system for what Manuel Castells terms the 'network society'" (2012: 105) is contested by creating supralinguistic *toys* and *toons*.

Similarly, as Hayles notes in the work of Loss Pequeño Glazier, "[t]he combination of English and Spanish ... further suggest compelling connections between the spread of networked and programmable media and the transnational politics in which other languages contest and cooperate with English's hegemonic position in programming languages and, arguably, in digital art as well" (2008: 18). Doubtless, the influence of English as hegemonic language in the digital media landscape has shaped Gache's and Moreno's poetry collections. However, given that both artists share a history of working in the United States aside from Mexico, Argentina, and Spain, their creations may well be suggestive of a transnational workspace where figurative, kinetic, and visual languages operate in parallel to verbal ones. Gache's and Moreno's work must be understood as creations emerging of literatures in contact, Hispanophone, Lusophone, and Anglophone, as well as print and electronic. This repositions the cultural and media differences in tension that shape and inform them as part of an emerging global literary landscape.

Gache's and Moreno's emphasis on earlier literary traditions signals the frictional relationship between e-lit and previous experimentalism. Their deliberate call on baroque and avant-garde poetry establishes intertextual relationships that cut through—rather than just follow—literary traditions and uses of media. Further, the game and kinetic dynamics in Gache's and Moreno's work de-formalize our engagement with the weighty historical precedents and suggests a reconsideration of their relevance in our global network society as fixed *ouevres* in the canon. In this way, these works reveal previously unexplored compositional principles found in earlier works through the potentialities of electronic devices and uses. Gache's and Moreno's poetic strategies uncover the reconfiguration of the global literary panorama and the idea of national literatures by exploiting the expressive affordances of digital media objects. For Beecroft, the emerging global ecology of literature depends on how languages and literary strategies or devices are in contact and, thus, reconfigure cultural differences (2015: 295). Gache's and Moreno's enactment of poetry beyond language-specificity

locates them at this stage of cultural production and suggests a possible avenue for further e-lit production and study.

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