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Digital Humanities in Praxis: Contextualizing the Brazilian Electronic Literature Collection
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In the following essay, Luciana Gattass discusses the formation of a Brazilian Electronic Literature Collection via analysis of works identified in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. Positioned between the existence of geographical data and the question of a national literature, Gattass considers the role of the human critic in the age of big data.

A Preface and a Disclaimer

If the first "wave" of Digital Humanities was said to have prompted a quantitative turn, e.g. the compilation and implementation of databases as well as the organization of information in elaborate arrays, then the much anticipated "second wave" is to be "qualitative, interpretive, experimental, emotive, generative in character" (Schnapp & Presner, 2009). As curator of the Brazilian Electronic Literature Collection for the ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice) Knowledge Base, I have been asked to partake in this second wave and offer a few conclusions about Brazilian electronic literary production, identifying dominant genres of creative and critical practice. Untrained in informatics and statistics, I write instead as a scholar of literary theory who happened to find herself compulsively imputing data in her country's electronic literary production and in the process taking a peek into the inner workings of a collaborative database in the Digital Humanities. Though the examples to follow are derived specifically from the Brazilian Collection, my conviction is that the underlying questions will pertain to a larger realm, one which transcends or rather precedes nationality and speaks directly to the issue of archiving electronic literature in networked environments. By addressing the particularities of a "geo-tagged" collection, the paper will seek to discuss and problematize quantifying trends in humanistic scholarship.

Two Waves: Brief Remarks on the Digital Humanities

It would be plausible to argue that ELMCIP Knowledge Base embodies such medium-specific hybridity as advocated by DH 2.0 enthusiasts who claim that digital technologies have permanently altered the paradigm in which the humanities operate: the full absorption and digitization of printed records constituting the basic step towards a significant change in analytic practices.

Franco Moretti, a champion of the first wave of the Digital Humanities, bids farewell to interpretation and proposes "distant readings," where distance rather than closeness becomes the precondition of knowledge. (Moretti, 2000, p. 2). By oscillating between micro-textual units and their extreme opposite, "the great unread," which is to say the extra-canonical, Moretti claims to subvert the typical hermeneutic approach. The result? Correlations, visualizations, maps, graphs, trees, and a general feeling of let-the-data-speak-for-itself. "And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more" (Ibid.). Regardless of the critical wrath such radicalisms are sure to summon, one fact remains indisputable: once literary data is digitized and parsed into a thematic database—i.e. the ELMCIP Knowledge Base—all manner of narratives can be concatenated. And these can be as varied in scope, depth and nature as the queries prompting them.

A tamer example of digital humanist is Stephen Ramsey. Arguably a representative of the second wave in the digital humanities, Ramsey elaborates on the notion of algorithmic criticism. Algorithmic criticism seeks to articulate computer-assisted analysis and literary criticism so as to arrive at a model wherein computer-based tools are deployed not to confirm or verify meaning, but rather to open interpretive horizons. In its essence, algorithmic criticism is one that uses the findings of algorithmic text analysis—i.e. visualizations, word frequency counts, patterns, correlations, etc.—as points of departure to further hermeneutic practices. Fearlessly aligning himself with Gematrists and soothsayers, the author absolves the technical medium of its traditional role as nemesis to "pure" literary arts, recasting the computer as initiator of polysemy: "not to constrain meaning, but to guarantee its multiplicity" (Ramsay 170).

Against this backdrop of controversy and change, the time has come to ask what would constitute helpful "computational" interpretation? I believe this is where the ELMCIP has something to contribute. Because users are able to generate, tag, and cross-reference immensely rich entries on creative works, authors, publishers, organizations, events, and pedagogic resources, the Knowledge Base caters to both sides of the discussion: Moretti's all-inclusiveness (enhanced by the aggregation of paratextual information and source-codes) is supplemented by Ramsey's computer-assisted hermeneutics, guaranteed by both human tagging and user generated outputs.

Collecting Concrete in the Age of Digital

Renouncing the struggle for "absolute," Concrete Poetry remains in the magnetic field of perennial relativeness. Chronomicro-metering of hazard. Control. Cybernetics. The poem as a mechanism regulating itself: feed-back. Faster communication (problems of functionality and structure implied) endows the poem with a positive value and guides its own making. Concrete Poetry: total responsibility before language. Thorough realism. Against a poetry of expression, subjective and hedonistic. To create precise problems and to solve them in terms of sensible language. A general art of the word. The poem-product: useful object (Campos, H. & A. Pignattari, D. "Plano Piloto Para Poesia Concreta," 1958).

At the front end of the Knowledge Base, the Brazilian Electronic

Literature Collection is one of the possible outputs, one of the pre-determined "narratives" contained in the database. One of the pivotal points in such a narrative is Concrete Poetry. Concrete poems operate as self-referential blocks of text which mirror their semantic meaning through the manipulation of form. Quite schematically, Concrete poetry's emphasis on design and spatial grammar triggers two distinct (albeit inextricably conjoined) reception strategies, namely, those of "reading" and those of "viewing." This trope of optical fluctuation is relevant in the Brazilian context because it is precisely that which Augusto de Campos and other co-members of the highly prominent Noigandres group of São Paulo (Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos) have attempted to subsume under the heading of the "verbivocovisual" function—semantic and formal poetic constituents being synchronically deployed. While an analog poetics of space necessitates the analysis of strictly Concrete discursive strategies, a digital spatial poetics encompasses the direct effects of programmable language on what Katherine Hayles terms "material performances of the text" (Hayles 186).

Now, that no existing computer could possibly produce a critical paper on the influence of Concretism in contemporary Brazilian electronic poetry does not mean that no insight is to be gained from the compilation of a database that facilitates queries and provides cross-referencing of relevant data. But once the data is assembled, one should tread carefully. The commonplace contention is that it would be only natural for Brazilian electronic poetry to be framed against critical and theoretical biases of the Concrete movement. As theorist Giselle Beiguelman observes in her "The Reader, The Player and the Executable Poetics: Towards a Literature Beyond the Book," the influence exerted by the Noigandres group on "first-generation multimedia artists," such as Beiguelman herself, Lenora de Barros, Lucia Leão, Arnaldo Antunes, Andre Vallias, and many others, is not to be underestimated (Beiguelman 404).

However, to affirm that Brazilian electronic poetry recaptures some of the fundamental tropes and debates of Concretism is not to blindly subscribe to a simplistic model of literary historiography—one in which the "logic of affiliation," to borrow Beiguelman's term, is applied indiscriminately and causality tends to be ascribed to places where only chronology would make sense. Simply put, though it can be framed as an antecedent—particularly so in an academic exercise of a certain agenda in Brazilian literary historiography—one should be cautious not to rush into facile conclusions, such as that Concrete poetry "caused" Brazilian electronic poetry. Though a quantitative study might reveal a strong correlation between kinetic poetry production in São Paulo and, say, the Campos brothers, I believe such inferences ought to be derived analytically, by which I mean, through qualitative scholarly exercise, and never through the execution of a search command. Here the dangers of "distant readings"—where, per Moretti, "explanations of general structures" tend to precede, possibly even preempt, interpretation—become self-evident. The simple fact that the tag "antecedents" is attached to a number of entries obviously displays a teleological bias on the part of the ELMCIP Knowledge Base contributors, for only in a diachronic scheme of literary historiography would the logic of antecedents be valid.

Perhaps the larger question to be posed is this: do literary databases inform us of otherwise undetectable patterns in literary history? Certainly, the quantitative approach to literature allows for quite stunning renditions of data. But, to paraphrase Moretti in the opening lines of his chapter "Maps,"

what do these visualizations do that cannot be done with words, and what do they add to our knowledge of literature (Cf. Moretti)? Granted, in "Maps" Moretti deals primarily in smaller units—i.e. elements abstracted from individual narratives and subsequently plotted as maps, such as the country walks contained in Mary Mitford's *Our Village* published in five volumes between 1824 and 1832 in England. The bet is both simple and ambitious: that the results will amount to "more than the sum of their parts [and] possess emerging qualities, which were not visible at a lower level" (Moretti 53).

How could we transpose this logic to the ELMCIP and its current potentialities? One example is Scott Rettberg's use of the modularity algorithm to identify network communities (Cf. Rettberg). Rettberg's visualizations display several clusters of data, each revealing closer relationships between certain networked records. As they pertain primarily to creative works, these clusters can be reflective of a variety of commonalities: genre, production year, language of the work, etc. The result? The ability to detect not only those categories we already intuited but to identify generic or thematic associations we would not have seen otherwise (21). Though hard-core hermeneutists might frown at this close encounter with raw data, it would be possible to imagine a critical essay on the reception history of electronic literature benefitting immensely from a chronological visualization of citations contained in the Knowledge Base, to give one example.

Narrating my Nation: Notes on Process and Selection

If the future of a relational database, such as the ELMCIP, is to cease to be relational as it becomes all encompassing, right now the paradigm is still very much authorial. At its current stage, The Brazilian Electronic Literature Collection is the result of my own academic biases and as such, any current "findings" need to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt since they are the results of the tautological exercise of data compilation and digitization. They are, so to speak, narratives-turned-into-database.   Preliminary research led me to a few prominent names, notably, Eduardo Kac, Andre Vallias, Wilton Azevedo, Jorge Luis Antônio, Giselle Beiguelman, and Lenora de Barros, whose records contain links to creative works, critical writings, and events in which they were involved.

The bulk of the critical writings currently contained in the Brazilian Collection were extracted from three principal sources, two of which are anthologies of essays and one a monograph comprising a panorama of digital poetry from its origins to the present. They are Jorge Luis Antonio's Poesia Digital: Negociações com os Processos Digitais: Teoria, História, Antologias ("Digital Poetry: Theory, History, Anthologies"), Jorge Luis Antonio and Artur Matuk's (Eds.) Artemídia e Cultura Digital: Palestras e Textos Apresentados e Desenvolvidos no Evento Acta Media III – Simpósio Internacional de Artemídia e Cultura Digital, and Paula Perissonoto and Ricardo Barreto's Teoria Digital: Dez Anos do FILE - Festival Internacional de Linguagem Eletrônica, the latter comprising rare translations into Portuguese of such familiar names as Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Markku Eskelinen, and Lev Manovich.

Despite Brazil's continental dimensions, Brazilian electronic literary production is concentrated on a few metropolitan areas,

Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo being the most prolific. Though one can certainly detect interconnections amongst the producers and critics of electronic literature, it would be somewhat premature to speak of a national (in the sense of all-encompassing) community of electronic literature in Brazil. There are, however, burgeoning sub-communities well worth mentioning, particularly if one is willing to aggregate electronic art as an "edge" to a Brazilian network of Electronic Literature. Institutionally, São Paulo houses both the internationally acclaimed FILE (Festival Internacional de Linguagem Eletrônica), a success story from its inception, and Itaú Cultural, the cultural branch of the homonymous bank, which hosts and maintains the most complete online encyclopedia of Brazilian interchanges between art and technology. On the scholarly side of the São Paulo sub-community one will inevitably encounter the Programa de Pós-graduação em Comunicação e Semiótica at Pontifícia Universidade Católica São Paulo. The program at PUC-SP has produced a variety of dissertations on electronic language over the years. Notably, Professor Lucia Santaella, the director of CIMID, Center of Research in Digital Media at PUCSP, has advised a plethora of scholars of electronic language and could be regarded as one of the key nodes of a "paulista" network community. A similar "network logic" applies to artist, curator, and scholar of electronic literature Giselle Beiguelman, whose works are featured in electronic literature syllabi all over the planet. Still in the São Paulo sphere, Wilton Azevedo is a rare example of a full-fledged electronic artist cum scholar: co-author of Interpoetry (alongside Philadelpho Menezes), Azevedo is a poet, musician, graphic designer, and academic. Azevedo's promptness to contribute to the Knowledge Base has generated immensely thorough records, including the full text of his postdoctoral dissertation "Interpoesia: O Início da Escritura Expandida," written in 2009 under Professor Philippe Bootz's advisement at the University of Paris VIII.

Rio de Janeiro has Andre Vallias as perhaps its most renowned representative in electronic literature. Working in electronic poetry since 1988, Vallias is coeditor (alongside poet and critic Eucanaã Ferraz) of the online literary magazine Errática, a prolific critical resource on poetry and new media. Ample documentation on Vallias' paradigmatic poems as well as the author's participation during the several stages of development of the Brazilian Collection have amounted to rich entries in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. Notable examples are IO and Nous N'avons pas Compris Descartes.

Rio de Janeiro is the headquarters of Oi Futuro, an institute which has consistently invested in and curated exhibits of electronic poetry, visual poetry, and new media installations. A highlight from the Oi Futuro output is the exhibit POIESIS <POEMA>ENTRE PIXEL E PROGRAMA</>, co-curated by Vallias, Friedrich Block, and Adolfo Montejo Navas in 2007. The full catalog and individual creative works (including images and videos) featured in the Poiesis exhibit are currently contained in the Brazilian Collection.

A cosmopolitan carioca, Eduardo Kac, is another central figure of a Brazilian electronic literature network community. Responsible for revolutionary works such as the "Genesis" installation and the fluorescent GFP bunny "Alba" —a piece of transgenic art consisting of an albino bunny injected with a green fluorescent protein—Eduardo Kac has been an active voice in the theorization of new media art as well as a remarkable practitioner of digital language as it relates to and dialogues with biology, sociology, and culture. Because Kac embodies the

kind of post or trans-nationality which is characteristic of the electronic medium, it is difficult to sell him as a typical "Brazilian" author. Yet, in the end, passports do make a difference and databases are built on rather trite binary distinctions. As such, Kac is included in the Brazilian collection as a central node. Additionally and rather parenthetically, I should mention that apart from the examples extracted from Kac's Holopoetry, a great number of Kac's works would technically fall under the heading of electronic or bio-art rather than electronic literature. Decisions were made on an individual basis. The *Genesis* installation, for instance, has warranted its individual ELMCIP Knowledge Base entry, whereas the GFP bunny was omitted.

A notable geographical outlier is NUPILL—Núcleo de Pesquisas em Informática, Literatura e Linguística—linked to the Department of Vernacular Language and Literatures, in the Center of Communication and Expression at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Headed by new media poet and academic Alckmar Luiz dos Santos, NUPILL organized the first international Symposium of Electronic Literature (I Simpósio Internacional e V Simpósio Nacional de Literatura e Informática) in 2012.

Conclusion

The ambitious future of the Brazilian Collection, where the qualifier would allude to both the incommensurable notion of a "national literature" and to a mere geo-tag, is not to be the curatorial by-product of a single Brazilian. The future should be an anonymous result of collective data-mining. But we are not there yet and, in some ways, this is a good thing.

With Rettberg, I would submit that it is both a strength and flaw of the ELMCIP Knowledge Base that the content is provided and tagged by humans as opposed to being automatically harvested by algorithms. With Collections, the human factor assumes an even greater significance for collections are de facto personal narratives adorned with statistics, and if in their current iterations they present themselves as such (rather than as objective portraits of literary communities, which they simply cannot be yet), then we have done our jobs as scholars of literature.

That said, one should not neglect the message of the medium. The future of a database is already contained in and dictated by its name: data. After all relevant data has been compiled and digitized, after we have internalized algorithmic criticism to the extent that, as Ramsay puts it, "[the term] will seem as odd as library based criticism" (Ramsay, 2003), and after we have distanced ourselves enough from distinct literary objects so as to be able to see the "big picture," then what? If we renounce reading, as Moretti seems to suggest, are we not essentially forfeiting the central task of literary criticism? And if so, isn't algorithmic reading nonetheless reading and should it not be underscored as such? These are questions to occupy scholars to come. For my part, I encourage you to take a look at the Brazilian Collection and contribute where possible. Mechanized or not, the hermeneutics of the future will certainly profit from a plurality of voices.

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