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Digital CultureS: A View from French Studies and Literature

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In response to a call inviting submissions of *Caribbean* digital literary works, Leonardo Flores (2017) questions the relevance of talking about electronic literature[1] in terms of national or regional distinctions as we usually do in the case of non-digital cultures. He highlights that the former depends more on (global) technological developments and international influences than on national or regional traditions. Digital technologies represent such a radical change of paradigm, he argues, in line with an often cited argument, that we should consider electronic literature as an international or even postnational phenomenon.

Meanwhile, histories and surveys of individual digital literature*s* are being drafted according to language, region, and/or country. Two full issues of the journal *Dichtung Digital* (2012) devoted to creative communities in digital literature highlight the importance of regional, linguistic, and national or regional communities alongside that of genre- or platform-focused ones and international organizations such as the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), the largest community in the field. Books by Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman (2007, 2012) and Claire Taylor (2014) have examined the role of local culture and history in Latin-American cyberculture and cyberliterature, Michel Hockx has published a monograph on *Internet Literature in China* (2015), Reham Hosny just completed a thesis (Hosny 2017) and created a network on Arabic electronic literature,[2] Emanuela Patti's forthcoming monograph on *Italian Digital Culture: Key Concepts, Genres, and Artists* includes literature, and articles in English have provided overviews of Russian (Kouper 1999), German (Simanowski 2000; Suter 2012), Polish (Pajak 2008), Croatian (Peović Vuković 2012), Slovene (Železnikar 2012), and other electronic literatures. Regional and language-specific databases such as the German *Archiv der deutschsprachigen elektronischen Literatur* (ADEL),[3] the Latin-American *netart_latino database*,[4] or the *Anthology of European Electronic Literature*[5] are also well established.

Serge Bouchardon (2012) outlines 'the filiations of digital literature in France' – adding in a footnote that they 'may of course not be specific to France'. Indeed, the analogue experimentations of the Oulipo with combinatorics and constraints, the German Romantics' fragmentary writing, the Nouveau Roman's destabilizing proto-hypertextual narratives, Mallarmé's and Apollinaire's toying with the visual aspect of words and their place on the page, and later concrete, lettrist, and sound poetry are also often mentioned in histories of electronic literature elsewhere or globally. Nevertheless, from the often shared

[1] Flores shifts from '*digital* literature' in the text he cites to 'literatura *electrónica*' in his interpretation and response presented in Spanish. Both adjectives can be used in both languages, and they can in theory be used interchangeably in both. The choice between the two is far from being neutral, however. I will come back to this terminological question below.

[2] Arabic E-Lit, https://arabicelit.wordpress.com

[3] https://adel.uni-siegen.de

[4] http://netart.org.uy/latino/index.html

[5] https://anthology.elmcip.net/

origins and inspirations, different lines of development emerged. Bouchardon quotes Alain Vuillemin affirming that 'the poetry generated exclusively by computer remains a European phenomenon, and more specifically French', and Philippe Bootz, French poet and critic having pioneered digital poetry in both practice and theory, declaring that 'la poésie numérique animée est née en France en 1985. […] (Animated poetry was born in France in 1985.)' Bouchardon contrasts this with other traditions showing different emphases, such as the US leading in hypertext fiction and Brazil interested mainly in the intersemiotic relations between text, image, and sound in digital poetry, as opposed to the French focus on text generation. As far as contemporary developments are concerned, Bouchardon identifies two core trends in France: 'performances of programmed and generated literature' on the one hand, and 'online animated hypermedia pieces, conceived for a "private reading"' on the other, such as Bouchardon's own *Déprise / Loss of Grasp* (2010).

Of course, presenting the creative output of a given country or language does not necessarily mean that the works included have tighter links with each other than with the international field in general. Yet it confirms two things. First, that we now have substantial enough digital literary outputs in languages other than English and also beyond the Western cultural space to make more focused overviews, directories, and anthologies not only worthwhile, but also necessary. And second, that as soon as we have substantial enough digital literary outputs in a specific language, country, or culturally coherent region, we can legitimately *ask the question* as to whether or in what respect the shared language and cultural background might lead to other shared characteristics that will distinguish these works from others produced elsewhere. This does not mean denying the importance of specific technologies in shaping practices and creating communities and commonalities across borders, but simply acknowledging the axis of linguistic and cultural background as *potentially* no less significant in shaping works than the technology. It means opening a space for cultural difference within digital culture.

Bouchardon (2012) himself rejects the idea of 'a French School of digital literature, considering the great variety of creations', but maintains that 'digital literature is based on each country's own conception of literariness'. This conception of literariness is in turn shaped by cultural heritage and institutions, more or less tangibly specific to individual countries or regions that are internally connected through a shared language, history, and cultural references. They can of course integrate influences from elsewhere, but such influences will become part of a constellation that remains specific to the given culture. Bauer (2016: 32–37) retraces the cultural and political context of the emergence of digital literature in France and, contrasting it with the case of Germany, concludes that the combination of literature and the computer as a medium will differ from one country to another. While the distinctions will not necessarily follow political borders – just as linguistic and cultural differences are often badly aligned with these – and linguistic and cultural migration and nomadism are part of the dynamics that shape them, they do undeniably carry the traces of cultural difference.

Beyond shaping the concept of the literary, institutions are also important markers of the process of legitimation and perceived identity of digital literature in any given culture. Publicly funded research centres and communities, conferences, journals and other publications, teaching programmes and curricula, festivals and exhibitions, presence in the national media are representative of a field taking shape while also actively shaping the field. The current scene of French-language digital literature and the emerging infrastructures around it are a case in point showing not only a growing – if still, and

perhaps necessarily, niche – interest in creative digital outputs in French, but also how digital literature might reinforce the sense of community and cultural belonging among speakers of the same language across countries, thereby contributing to the development of an identity proper to 'their' digital literature. While the Département Hypermédia and the Laboratoire Paragraphe at the University of Paris 8 were among the first internationally to have an institutional focus on hypermedia works – not the least thanks to the leadership and participation of pioneer digital poets, experimenters, and theorists Jean-Pierre Balpe and Philippe Bootz, and other seminal theorists such as Jean Clément and Pierre Lévy – and Paris 8 still remains an important hub in the field, two substantially funded Canada Research Chairs in Montreal focus on digital literature and arts, at the University of Québec in Montréal (UQAM) with the Laboratoire NT2[6] and at the University of Montreal (UdeM)[7] respectively. Both have strong institutional links with France and Belgium, running projects and co-supervising doctoral theses in collaboration, and attracting PhD students and postdocs, while the current UdeM Chair, Marcello Vitali-Rosati earned his doctorate in Paris.

Moreover, the NT2's 'Répertoire'[8] is the most exhaustive directory of hypermedia works – including individual authors' and collective websites and relevant events – across no less than 50 languages, with 1124 works in French, for 3131 in English (as of April 2018). As such, it is also the largest catalogue of digital artworks and literature in French. While these numbers include translations, they clearly show a greater emphasis on linguistic identity and variety than any other existing anthology or database. The fact that the directory is searchable by language but not by country of origin also suggests the closing of a gap between Quebec and metropolitan French literatures in the digital space.[9] This may be read as a shift away from the traditional boundaries between French and Francophone literatures, and it could serve as an argument for the postnational nature of digital culture. But the linguistic identity, the partially shared cultural heritage, and the institutions whose collaboration is facilitated by historical links still define a subset of global digital literature that can legitimately be hypothesized to have a degree of internal coherence and studied as a significant facet of contemporary French-*and*-Francophone culture. What it draws attention to is rather that the distinction between metropolitan and Canadian French is becoming less relevant when it comes to digital literature, inviting a rethinking of existing divisions within the discipline.[10] At the same time, local projects, especially when the location is important – such as the Montreal-based *Hochelaga Imaginaire*[11] or Pierre Ménard's metropolitan French *Liminaire*[12] – can further establish local communities and identities. The ways in which borders are shifting, the new permeabilities but also the new barriers within and between digital literatures – such as the virtually complete lack of translations and therefore of interlinguistic circulation especially of blog- and website-based literatures – is something we still only have a very blurred image of. Modern Languages and area studies have a key role in gaining a better

[6] http://nt2.uqam.ca

[7] https://ecrituresnumeriques.ca/fr/

[8] http://nt2.uqam.ca/fr/search/site/?f%5B0%5D=type%3Arepertoire&retain-filters=1

[9] On the problem of mostly one-way transfer between metropolitan French and Quebec literature, see François Bon's 'Service de Presse 11: Spécial Québec': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwGhQFpcJGk.

[10] The case of Francophone Africa will be different again, as Guilet (2013: 92) also notes, due to the backlog in the availability of technology and other historical and cultural factors.

[11] http://hochelagaimaginaire.ca/

[12] https://www.liminaire.fr

understanding of these dynamics, and this can only be done by working together across disciplines and languages.

Hochelaga Imaginaire and *Liminaire* would also be considered as a different kettle of fish than what is usually discussed under the label of 'electronic literature'. Bouchardon (2012) would set them aside as part of what he terms 'blog literature', excluded from his account. The born digital literary writing published in authors' or collectives' blogs or websites indeed falls outside the area usually studied under the (English) title of 'electronic literature'. The ELO – admitting the difficulty of circumscribing the phenomenon – defines the latter as 'works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer'.[13] 'Digital literature', 'cyberliterature', or 'internet literature', which we find in the titles of the above mentioned publications focusing on specific countries or regions, on the other hand, are more free-floating terms with even more malleable borders as there is no one central organization or theory whose definition would dominate their uses. They are also more naturally associated with 'digital culture' or 'cyberculture', which encompasses digital or cyberliterature, but within which the limits of literature are again blurred.[14] As a result, the second set of terms rather highlights the continuity of the content with the broader (digital and connected) cultural context that surrounds it, while 'electronic literature' emphasizes the specificity of the phenomenon within literature as a type or category that includes a series of more specific literary genres produced and presented electronically and actively experimenting with the technology, such as hypertext fiction or kinetic poetry.

Nevertheless, the ELO's definition does technically cover blogs and websites, insofar as their interconnectedness and temporality relies on the networked computer. It is true that the writing that happens there is often not particularly experimental in terms of form and technology – hence the lack of interest from e-lit scholarship. The terminological distinction is not present in French, where the most commonly used term today is 'littérature numérique', both marking its continuity with 'culture numérique' and identifying a subcategory of literature. French scholarship still tends to focus on one or the other kind of work, however, following the division explicit in the English terminology. Alongside the substantial French theorizations of hyperfiction, hypermedia, and generative texts from the late 80s, extensive work has addressed the literary blogosphere, especially in the first decade of the explosion of the web and blogging around 2000 – but rarely have the two sides been combined, even though literary works also occupy the transitional zones between the two.[15] Gilles Bonnet describes his study devoted to the poetics of web literature in French as a 'pas de côté' (2017: 17), a sidestep away from the 'other' focus on 'electronic literature', the other face of 'littérature numérique'.

The writing produced and published online is important, however, because it constitutes 'les zones de friction entre culture du livre et culture de l'écran' [friction zones between book culture and screen culture] (Bonnet 2017: 16) where 'la littérature vivante', the living literature is happening, as Bonnet says quoting François Bon (15). While 'contemporary' or even 'extreme contemporary literature' is still generally understood as the most recently *published books* – preferably by those well-established publishers whose

[13] https://directory.eliterature.org/basic-page/4579

[14] The term 'hypermedia' used by both by the older Paris 8 academic department and UQAM's research centre and directory avoids the distinction between electronic or digital *literature* and other arts, considering the most often multimedia and animated nature of all creative digital works that blurs the boundaries between textual and visual materials.

[15] See for instance Philippe de Jonckheere's website-oeuvre www.desordre.net.

names serve as a guarantee of quality, if not high-brow literature – the online literary scene is largely where the ongoing (re)invention of literature and culture is now happening. This space, free from the pressure and constraints imposed by the traditional gatekeepers and their markets which like to follow well-trodden paths and dominant modes of thinking and writing, is where alternative and critical voices can best emerge and proliferate – even if in certain countries they still need to do so in a veiled fashion. It is not a utopian space; it does carry its own pressures and issues, but it represents a key area of emergent cultural processes which it would be a mistake for scholars studying and teaching foreign cultures to ignore.

Both aspects of digital literature are what Deleuze and Guattari call minor literature in that they carve out a space of resistance and alterity at the intersection of two dominant fields of culture: digital culture, understood broadly as a mass phenomenon shaped by multinational companies and platforms on the one hand, and literature as a cultural institution dominated by print culture and its well established forms and modes of expression on the other hand. As such, they are both inevitably – if not always explicitly – political, and they both inevitably involve raising questions about both the 'other' they resist and the 'other' that they are. If Modern Languages as discipline[s] have, beyond their pragmatic function of language education, an important role in drawing attention to 'other' cultures – of which digital cultures, however narrowly or broadly we define them, are now part – they also have the responsibility to acknowledge and be curious about the 'other' within those cultures, which are no less constitutive of their complex identities.

Moreover, in the UK – and probably in other English speaking countries as well – digital culture is more 'owned' by media and communication studies and related, typically monolingual disciplines and degree courses. The materials they focus on will accordingly be sourced overwhelmingly from the Anglo-Saxon world, contributing to the perpetuation of the reductive idea of a homogeneous and largely monolingual digital space. I have focused on the case of digital *literature* here, but this serves also as a case in point for highlighting the cultural specificities of areas in the digital space to which one is easily blinded when using the web only in one language. The case of non-mainstream web authors and communities showing 'live' literatures in the process of (re)invention also invites an extrapolation: the digital allows us to observe, from our admittedly limited perspectives in the constantly expanding cyberspace, the transformation of cultures and societies through their ongoing quests and struggles across identity, community, and hybridity.

To sum up, then, what Modern Languages research and teaching can do for digital culture, both as a concept and as a phenomenon is, in this light:

(1) recognize it as an essential aspect of any specific culture today;
(2) recognize the possibility of cultural specificity in the digital space;
(3) highlight the richness of this space through studying and presenting individual (non-Anglo-American) digital culture*s* and literature*s*; thereby
(4) counter the stereotype of a homogenous global culture in the Digital Age;
(5) facilitate the development of a comparative perspective on digital cultural studies and on digital arts and literature specifically;
(6) acknowledge and help circulate the various modes of digital creativity and their aesthetic and political potential through scholarship, teaching, and translation.

And what acknowledging digital cultures can do for Modern Languages:

(1) offer insight into the ways in which the digital media impacts the societies and cultures we study both through the culture-specific modes of presence of dominant multinational platforms and through national or language-specific services;
(2) allow access to niche practices, communities, and outputs that question those mass influences and sharpen the critical perspective on the given society or culture;
(3) refine the concept and approaches to cultural identity in the Digital Age;
(4) help Modern Languages to be not only modern, but truly contemporary.

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