

BOOK REVIEW

TINA ESCAJA AND A POLITICS OF PO(E)TENTIAL LITERATURE

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Re: Thinking “The Digital”

Electronic poetry, as a kind of “thinking through making” (Glazier), is an ideal vehicle through which to conceptualize the multifarious nature of digitality in our contemporary age of information. From the Latin “digitalis,” in both English and Spanish we hear the resonance of code or computation—as *techné*—as well as the tactile—in this case, the cursor as a prosthetic of the human digits themselves. Whereas e-poetry as “digital artifact” might not constitute “mainstream” literary production—Leo Flores recently argued that perhaps memes are the most mainstream form of digital literature today—interactive, kinetic poetry certainly offers us some extremely suggestive avenues and potentialities for literature and/as political statements.

“EMBLEM/AS” as a Po(e)tential Politics

In *Electronic Literature*—an encyclopedic approach to the dynamic field of electronic literature—Scott Rettberg writes that “[i]nteractive digital poetry further considers the relationship between reader and text as a recursive feedback loop, the relation of physical gesture to poetic trope, and the position of reader as embodied actor” (119). In Spanish media artist Tina Escaja’s “EMBLEM/AS,” the reader or interactor indeed becomes enmeshed with the interface, insofar as their navigation with the mouse/cursor “writes” the poem on the screen and composes the re-cited soundtrack. This haptic interface relies on Flash animation—once a highly popular platform for creating e-lit but in decline over the past decade or so (despite its persistence in Latin American digital literature)—to build a concrete poetic space that is in constant flux per the interactor’s hand movements (via scrolling). At the same time, the Lettristic underpinnings of Escaja’s “EMBLEM/AS” reveal letters via visual and auditory performativity, obviating (or perhaps seeking to obviate) some degree of semantics in their flickering dance across the screen.

In the rhythmic appearance and disappearance of these letter-objects—and the simultaneous auditory accompaniment of words, which is controlled by the algorithms that construct Escaja’s three “EMBLEM/AS,” which are titled “MORA AMOR,” “ARENA AL COR,” and “UNITED ESTADOS”—the poet reveals how language is a complex system of (polysemic) information akin to the constructed nature of political symbols and discourse. For example, in “ARENA AL COR” (2018), the sights and sounds revealed when scrolling over areas on the Catalan city’s emblem are designed to evoke memories of the Mediterranean port (“ROCA, OLA, ANCLA, CARACOL”) as well as aspects of the cityscape and local culture (“ROBAR, ACERA, ALA, BALA”). This project is interactive in Spanish and in Catalan insofar as the user can choose amongst numerous potential combinations of letters (as objects and as sounds) in the emblem’s 12x9 grid. At the same time, in this kinetic work, there are, of course, limitations to the number of combinations the reader or user may “play” in their “co-authorship” of the piece, for (at least) two reasons: first, the letters appearing on the grid are limited to those that are present in the title of the individual work (and all possible signifiers are thus anagrams of the titles);

second, all elements are pre-scripted by the author, as Espen Aarseth argued in his groundbreaking study of cybertext as ludology. Nevertheless, in the case of “EMBLEM/AS”, this limitation might *in itself* be a political statement, since Escaja’s clever remixes and recombinations, arranged in pre-scripted formulae, allude to the limits of po(e)tentiaally vacuous political discourse, especially given the ostensibly political nature of the flag as emblem. Moreover, we might consider the temporality of the “text-as-process” here as akin to the foundational gestures of a nation, which are largely patriarchal in nature (as *patria*)—along with its potential destabilization as kinetic poetic object.

Towards Digital Identities

The question of politics and the subject is very much at play in the virtual spaces Escaja creates to explore the issue of a nomadic identity. In “MORA AMOR” (2017), the emblem is that of Zamora, the artist’s birthplace. Potential signifiers displayed on the screen and recited letter-by-letter include those highlighting Escaja’s simultaneous nostalgia for the past (“AMOR, AMAR, MOZA”) and a conflicted web of signification hinging on religious/medieval vocabulary (“ORA, MAZMORRA, MAZO, ROMA”). These mutable anagrams look backwards in history and in the artist’s biography; in “UNITED ESTADOS”, on the other hand, she explores a series of complex personal and social semantic networks that engage with the contemporary world in their evocation of “DIOS, DESTINO, ODIO, DATA, SENSE”, among others—including “TINA” herself. The subversive strategy of code-switching in “UNITED ESTADOS” destabilizes normative linguistic practices seeking to preserve the hegemony of the English language in Trump’s America, an explicit “SOS” seeking solidarity in the face of the power of the patriarchal emblem. In all, Escaja’s thoughtful triptych of interactive, kinetic poetry shows how the personal is also political, in a way that will appeal to contemporary audiences as well to scholars of electronic literature.

WORKS CITED

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Received April 23, 2019

Accepted April 23, 2019