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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Art of the Hack: Poets Carla Faesler and Mónica Nepote, and Booktuber Fátima Orozco

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While we might imagine a contestatory function for the intermedial artwork in Spanish available on YouTube, the following reading ends up largely denying such alterity. Videos by three Mexican artists, Mónica Nepote (b. 1970, Guadalajara, Jalisco), Carla Faesler (b. 1967, Mexico City), and Fátima Orozco (b. 1993, Monterrey, Nuevo León) exemplify the flexibility of the categories of the amateur and the professional in an age of distrust for expertise, without pushing the discussion in new directions—sadly for feminists. In a key YouTube video that I discuss, Nepote turns the notion of the voice into an interface, now that of an analog body, now that of a digital trick. Similar games with mediated presence appear in Faesler's YouTube videos, which include print pages and paper dolls. Orozco, a Mexican book reviewer on YouTube, or Booktuber for short, performs something of a fetish for print books in her videos. Non-poet Orozco at first seems a dissonant choice beside Nepote and Faesler, although I hope that by the end of the present analysis, my reader will understand the stakes of dismissing Orozco's efforts out of hand.

The Set Up: Intermediality, Expertise, and Print

Jan Baetens and Domingo Sánchez-Mesa define the term *intermediality* as an artwork of heterogenous materials in conflict (292).[1] This definition strikes a familiar deconstructive note, and in recognition of that familiarity, Baetens and Sánchez Mesa nod at the relevance of Kiene Brillenburg's "back to the book" conference, now transformed into an edited volume (298). The

relevance of the print book is also hinted at in Mexican critic Roberto Cruz Arzabal's work on materiality and the interface, the point where mediums meet. An enthusiast of Nepote's and Faesler's poetry, Cruz Arzabal launches his criticism from Alexander Galloway's broad definition of interface as a "space of transition between media and forms of language" ("Writing" 244). An interface is usually invisible and therefore when one appears, "it has stopped operating as such and has begun to function as a medium" ("Writing" 244).

Interest in materiality coincides with Edmundo Paz Soldán and Debra Castillo's observation regarding "literature's overall 'representational privilege'" (cited in Lavery 13). This question of print publication is hardly esoteric—or even a truly alternative topic, especially if distribution systems for eBook editions of print material are taken into account. Like the global platform of YouTube owned by the market dominant Google, increasingly large book publishers manage the international circulation of digital and print literatures in surprising concentrations of power.[2] In a book I will mention again, *The Amateur*, former professor Andy Merrifield critiques the monopolistic pressures on university intellectuals by citing a study from 2013 of 45 million articles in the Web of Science, which "revealed that just five publishing companies control 70 percent of global output" (51).

The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity juxtaposes an article on the long roots of the 1960s term *intermedia* (Augsburg 136) with meditations on the pros and cons of outsider collaboration and insider academic status by thinkers such as Robert Frodeman (4), Stephen Fuller (64), and Britt J. Holbrook (491). The subjects of amateurism and interdisciplinary research or intermedial art necessarily intertwine, thanks to the profound degree of specialization required to turn professional, which makes expert cross-disciplinary work quite difficult. Several books by legal scholar Lawrence Lessig also align these subjects. In *Free Culture*, Lessig refers in passing

to a definition of the amateur (44), amidst his thoughts on such topics as blogs and the rise of a kind of "copyright code" in place of "copyright law," created as platforms like YouTube built in restrictions (152). Some four years after Lessig's meditations on an increasingly weak public domain, he opened another book with an anecdote regarding a dispute between lawyers for the media company Universal and a user of YouTube who posted a twenty-nine second video of her toddler dancing to an imperfectly audible tune by Prince; because the user did not have the rights to the song, the legal team for Universal refused to "back down," despite the poor sound quality (Lessig, *Remix* ii). It bears emphasizing that a common thread connecting Lessig's explorations of law and the studies on academic tradition in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, is the proper place of professionals and amateurs. The debate implicitly acknowledges onlookers' resentment of elite expertise, a resentment driven by twinned perceptions of increasing social inequality and narrowing opportunities for professional security. However, as intermedial art shows, the professional and the amateur are not simple binary categories. The wavering line that divides these classifications can be straddled with a figure such as the *hacker* and the technique of the *hack*.

In Print and on YouTube: Mónica Nepote, Carla Faesler, and Fátima Orozco

For an introductory overview of the Mexican artists themselves, I begin with Mónica Nepote, the director of projects such as *E-Literatura*, a digital publishing entity under the governmentally funded Centro Digital de Cultura (Centre for Digital Culture) in Mexico City. Nepote dances to her own poem in a piece commissioned by Fernando Vigueras for the *Soledades* (*Solitudes*) exhibition, presented in the Centro Cultural de España in Mexico City in 2013. Henceforth, this video appears in my labelling under the title of Nepote's poem, "Mi voz es mi pastor" ("My voice is my shepherd"). In the best online video of the performance ("best" thanks

to superior staging and filming), Nepote's pre-recorded recitation plays while she dances and while sound engineer Cinthya García Leyva manipulates that poetic reading in real time for a live audience (*@Articulaciones del silencio*). Aside from the intriguing possibilities of intermediality triggered by dance and the technically mediated poem, I note two additional points of interest. First, the video does not include a print version of the poem.[3] Second, Nepote's dancing is distinctly non-professional, an amateur performance captured in clumsy filming. Her choreography avoids especially athletic movement: no leaps, no fancy footwork, no pirouettes, no balancing poses. Unlike many adult dance soloists who perform before a live audience, Nepote is not remarkably young, flexible, thin, or trained. *Dance need not be left to the professionals*, her confident movement implies.

Nepote begins the performance by loudly unspooling duct tape from the roll; she imperfectly tapes a border for herself and adds a center line from downstage to up. Possibly, the tape connotes the notion of transgression, or perhaps it refers to a border-crossing state between digital and analogue forms. Awkward camerawork complements the enigmatic nature of the taped lines, and the spectator is never sure what the camera operator leaves out of the frame. Nevertheless, at about 4:10, the filming reveals that Nepote, who has been dancing for spectators in a largely black theatrical space, moves in front of a screen that projects another video of her dancing against a white background. That second performance copies the style but does not synchronize with the steps of the live dance. How should we judge the discipline of Nepote's poetry against the undisciplined dancing? How much weight should we assign to her collaborators' skills or lack thereof? The tricky matter of professional poetry complicates matters. Low sales make it difficult to become a professional poet by virtue of topping the mass-market charts, and yet, ongoing interest in publishing print books may respond to the need for credentialing.

On that note I turn to Nepote's colleague in poetry, Carla Faesler, who incorporates images of print text in relevant videos, such as *Tiza persona* ("Chalk Person") and *Asuntos internos* ("Internal Matters"). The pages filmed are found in the source book of poetry, *Anábasis maqueta* (2003), which won the Gilberto Owen prize for 2002. That award and publication, along with the subsequent reviews in venues like *Letras Libres*, gird Faesler's claim to competency.[4] Her publicly recognized skill conflicts with the distinct signs of amateurism in the videos that illustrate her poetry. Like Nepote's low-budget dance performance and recording, the props in Faesler's videos are strictly in-house efforts centered on common household items like pencils and mirrors. Instead of dancing like Nepote, Faesler manipulates paper dolls of herself, which are noticeably "material". The dolls, made from miniature cut-out photographs of Faesler in various poses, always wear a red outfit.[5] In each video, Faesler arranges the dolls in tableaus that support the content of the parodic spiritual journeys explored in the poetry books, *Anábasis maqueta* and *Catábasis exvoto* (2010). These Latin names help obscure the otherwise easily recognizable topics of alienation and embodiment.

Cruz Arzabal emphasizes the traces of analogue materiality in Faesler's photographs, noting that the "material roughness" makes no effort to hide its origins in non-digital technology.[6] While the white edges around the cutout dolls of Faesler inspire Cruz Arzabal's respect, a less inventive critic might reject the arts-and-crafts approach as inept. Faesler does not fear that accusation and plays up the amateurish, two-dimensional nature of the dolls. For example, in the video *Espejo* ("Mirror"), Faesler mounted the photos of herself on wooden sticks, and as an unseen hand moves the dolls in front of a mirror, the video audience intermittently sees the blank side of the dolls where the stick is attached, whether by direct viewing or indirect reflection in the mirror.

In keeping with the fact that Nepote and Faesler are not the most celebrated writers in Mexico, I have elected to focus on Orozco and not Raiza Revelles, the Mexican Booktuber with the largest fan base, some 1,298,907 subscribers for her channel ("raizarevelles99") as of August 29, 2018; this number swelled to 1,550,000 subscribers by November 22, 2019.[7] Around the same dates in 2018, Orozco had less than half this following; "LasPalabrasDeFa" counted 355,953 subscribers by August 29, 2018—up from 349,596 subscribers on February 14, 2018, a number that had already risen by 3,946 subscribers since December 1, 2017. Over the course of drafting the present analysis, Orozco's channel plunged in membership. On September 24, 2019, Orozco posted a final goodbye on LasPalabrasDeFa, concluding seven years of constant video production. Her fans could follow her to another YouTube channel, Fa Orozco, although by November 22, 2019 only 44,700 subscribers had done so. Despite Orozco's minor status next to Revelles's early and ongoing success, I have chosen to study Orozco because even as a second-tier effort, the former Booktuber's numbers overwhelm in comparison to the two poets' virtual followers. On August 29, 2018, Carla Faesler's channel on YouTube ("carla faesler") counted only 52 subscribers; on November 22, 2019 that number had reached 63. On that same date, Mónica Nepote did not have a channel; her place of employment maintains one that counted 1,316 subscribers; by November 22, 2019 that number had risen slowly, to 1,740 ("Centro de Cultura Digital"). Thus, Orozco's YouTube channel represents an increase in audience over channels by Faesler or the official CCD of some 200%. To ask why Orozco draws such a large audience is to some degree to ask why Internet users might be interested in a digital format that praises the print book. Alessandro Ludovico supplies one answer when he states that the "digital is built for speed, while print ensures stability" (7).

In the summer of 2018, Orozco published a short story, "El abrigo rojo" ("The Red Coat"), in the intensively marketed anti-bullying anthology that she co-organized, *No te calles* ("Don't Be Silent") (2018). In addition to her advancing age that gradually distanced her from the younger YouTube crowd, the inexpert literary quality of this short story may partly explain her decline in popularity on YouTube. This inept "El abrigo rojo" counsels the reader in contradictory clichés, and rather than parse the many directions of its advice, I prefer to give my reader an idea of Orozco's style by citing the more relevant "About Me" section of the YouTube channel. There, Orozco explicitly and inexpertly declares her amateur aim, couched in identity shared with her fans: "On this channel we chat about books and how good they make us feel, how they move us; transform, heal and revolutionize that, many times, we don't see coming. Don't expect anything professional from me, I'm just a fangirl of books and reading" (Orozco, LasPalabrasdeFa).[8] Orozco's upbeat tone, matched by three misspellings, a misplaced semi-colon, and syntactic spontaneity, stakes a claim of amateur status that by January 29, 2018 had received 22,321,715 views. By August 29, 2018, that number had climbed to 23,357,721. The increase of 1,036,006 views suggests the power of print (and matching eBook) publication to tout a digital artist; despite the closure of the channel LasPalabrasDeFa, the views for the "About Me" page had risen to 24,507,819 by November 22, 2019.[9] The channel may evolve into a nostalgic collection of book fandom that attracts web traffic, even though no new content appears there.

Interestingly, Orozco's literary style in the short story does not mimic her digital style on YouTube. Only the videos abound in English-language catchphrases, humor, and skillful editing.[10] Still, it is inaccurate to label Orozco's anthology as a wholly amateur effort. Like Merrifield's *The Amateur*, the major publisher Penguin Random House backed the anti-bullying project. In further marketing, Orozco's anthology includes texts by three Spanish Booktubers born in Madrid: Javier

Ruescas (b. 1987), Andrea Compton (b. 1991), and Chris Pueyo (b. 1994). The closest Nepote or Faesler can come to the sort of international distribution made possible by Random House is the publication of *Formol* ("Formaldehyde") (2014), Faesler's novel distributed with the formidable reach of Tusquets, a label of high prestige under the massive Grupo Planeta.

Orozco's often body-conscious clothing and her colorful blue, pink, or lavender hair evoke for me the wavering line between analog bodies and digital stylizations that Nepote's doubles and Feasler's dolls also test. To name another parallel, Orozco occasionally draws herself, somewhat in the style of Faesler's video *Tiza persona*, in which we see the poet's hand as she sketches a paper doll of herself, which she holds in her other hand. Orozco's self-portrait emerges among the pages of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo (2016, translated as *Cuentos de buenas noches para niñas rebeldes*). In the germane video, Fátima Orozco's videographer sister, Karen Orozco, exclaims delightedly off-camera that she hadn't known that Orozco appears in the book. Fátima clarifies with a sly smile that she put herself there; she used the blank page to sketch a stylized version of herself, with blue hair and enormous green eyes (*Cuentos*). Orozco generously shares with viewers the technique of her doll-like look, and in one video she even combines book references with makeup tips (*30 min*).

An entertaining interface in her work celebrates the line between reading and playing with books as material objects. Orozco falls short of academic professional standards as a critic, given that she does not cite other academics' work or seem knowledgeable about the range of literary theories used to interpret text, but she excels as a book lover, as is apparent in one of her most popular videos, an explanation of the metaphors and symbols in the teen angst work *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012, translated as *Bajo la misma estrella*) by John Green (*Metáforas* ["Metaphors"]). Orozco's interpretations never venture beyond the basics of a close reading, and thus no single

point in Orozco's explanation of *The Fault in Our Stars* inspires me to cite her directly; rather, I want to call attention to the spread of this video. The 25-minute piece, *Metáforas*, uploaded in July 2014, had attracted journalism about its popularity by 2015 (see Sánchez Sánchez). By the end of August 2018, the video had accumulated a whopping 493,391 views. By November 22, 2019, after the closing of the channel, the views totaled 511,393.

A direct comparison with the internet presence for Nepote and Faesler proves enlightening. By late 2017, the three videos among the list of the most-watched of Faesler's oeuvre, *Espejo*, *Tiza persona*, and *Impulso* ("Impulse"), had earned a joint total of 3,469 views, since being uploaded to YouTube in 2008. Two years later, by November 22, 2019, that total for the three videos increased only 6%, to 3,678. The video for *Asuntos internos*, with its shots of the printed page with the poem, tripled Faesler's usual 500-or so hits per video and had drawn 1,513 views and four thumbs up by August 31, 2016; by February 2, 2018 that number had increased by 44 views, to 1,557 and seven thumbs up. On November 22, 2019, the views reached 1,599, with nine thumbs up. The same small audience and slow crawl of viewer hits describes Nepote's work. From December 12, 2014 until March 9, 2018, Nepote's *Mi voz es mi pastor* had attracted 970 views. On November 22, 2019, that total stood at 1,173 views and twelve thumbs up. Orozco is as deft with intermedial art as the poets are clumsy—and yet, both groups play the amateur. However, only Orozco makes money off this amateur performance. I cannot count the number of ads I have watched in order to play the videos or check the view totals on LasPalabrasDeFa.

Thanks to the demands of intermedial art, *none* of the three Mexican artists studied here fully dominates all the disciplines that feed into the digital artworks. Academics who disdain Orozco for her lack of literary skill or dismiss Nepote's efforts for her inexpert dancing or ignore Faesler for her homemade video props have perhaps misunderstood the opportunity here to rethink

the amateur and the professional, a binary that ought to concern academics not just for the debate over silo-ed disciplinary elitism, but also for the history of sexism. In point of that last subject, I note that Merrifield defines the hobbyist role as a savior, poised to "take back democracy from technocracy," just at the moment when women can become professionals with something like the privileges that men traditionally held (130). Merrifield drives home this historical coincidence with his nearly entirely male canon of thinkers and artists. Note the implicit masculine gender in Merrifield's nostalgic description of his most admired professors: "most drank too much, hardly published anything, and were veritable antitheses of today's professionalized academy" (11). The gender bias of late twentieth-century social rules for tolerated public drunkenness hint that these excessive drinkers were men. Thus, Merrifield may long for a certain kind of male privilege upended not just by the "neoliberal university" but also the newly "professionalized" and more inclusive faculty.

A Precedent in the Amateur/Professional Debate: Ana Clavel

Jane Lavery's foundational analysis of multimedia art recognizes the controversies that surround Ana Clavel (b. 1961, Mexico City), who sometimes strikes peers as an amateur. In Lavery's words, Clavel's multimedia work, "has had at times a lukewarm reception, perhaps because she has straddled, or rather smuggled herself, into other fields which are not perceived as her expertise" (251). Clavel's Mexico City installation staged in 2008 and connected to her novella *Las Violetas son flores del deseo* (2007), according to Lavery, had the novelist commission life-size dolls from thirteen papier-mâché artisans, called *cartoneros*. Clavel requested that each of the commissioned dolls be her height, 1.5 m (Lavery 192). Then, sculptors, painters, and Clavel herself worked on the dolls. Lavery reports that the resulting "artistic renditions were unanimously horrifying"' (179). The grotesque nature of the dolls helps to counterbalance Clavel's inexperience

with installation art by echoing serious themes of her novel, including pedophilia and doll-making, a thematic seriousness that, as Lavery understands, reinforces "Clavel's credibility as a writer of serious fiction" (Lavery 116).

Though Lavery emphasizes Clavel's expertise and looks past the infelicities of experimental collaboration, I suspect that *both directions*, the polished and the unpolished, can serve the ends of a canny artist if she means to play to a code of femininity. That is, if such habits as "tolerated excessive drinker" tend to code masculine, the domestic arts-and-crafts, DIY doll play, and corresponding implied transportation of home activities into the public space, tend to code feminine. Nepote, Faesler, Orozco, Clavel, and like-minded artists work as "amateurs" when it comes to one or another of the skills required to complete their intermedial projects, against the notion of the lone (male) genius, in ways that likely appeal to an audience receptive to the invitation to be inspired by imagining themselves as capable of copying these arts as a kind of craft. The irony of Merrifield's male amateur, as per his examples such as Marx writing a masterpiece in the public library, is that the feminine model of this activity connotes a hobbyist effort that at once seems inviting *and* makes the other amateur activities that code as male seem more like a gig, that is, a professional contribution. A woman writing in the library is just that, and not a poorly paid genius.

Another Precedent: Motín Poeta

To better define the amateur or DIY nature of Faesler's and Nepote's videos, Clavel's installation art, and Orozco's video projects, I turn to another term, *techné*, or an art with practical purpose. I take *techné* from Mexican science fiction writer Fran Ilich (b. 1975, Tijuana, Mexico), who compares the Greek term with the Mexican notion of *artesanía*, "as a professional role and not as a flash of inspiration" (103). Ilich thinks of the method of *techné* as admirable by conceiving

of it as a kind of craftwork in which certain steps are followed; practitioners can choose either to break with those steps or to develop proficiency within them, which allows for play within the form. Ilich thus defines electronic art, media-art, and Internet projects as restrained less by the medium than by this technical approach (103). The skilled following of steps within the boundaries of certain crafts—and at times in collaboration—can be seen to repurpose such practices as dance, poetry, or even dollmaking. In Ilich's sense of the uses of *techné*, the term *hacker* applies; after all, the *techné* can lead to self-aware, politically critical art, or a multivalent hack job. What Ilich calls *techné* then, I find more usefully labeled the *hack*. Thus, the false binary of amateur and professional can give way here to the word that combines both those angles into one: the hack.

Because none of these Mexican artists knows how to code, they can all be seen to operate as *hacks* (amateurs) in need of a *hack* (short-cut), such as collaborating with a *hacker* (a piratically inclined coder). Nepote's collaborative and knowing play with presence and representation, set against the crudeness of the "homemade" video, picks up on the art of the hack, which makes the audience think that perhaps they too could dance in seemingly unchoreographed inspiration, just as Faesler's games with paper dolls seem invitingly homemade and the nitty-gritty details of Orozco's book preferences and makeup brands seem to hand spectators the keys to her success. Just as the meaning of the *hack* changes according to context, I find my views on these tactics wavering. On one level, there is something fundamentally cheering about watching a Mexican woman embody her own thoughts and art, and on another level, the games with self-presentation across multiple bodies—whether Clavel's and Faesler's dolls or Nepote's digital recordings or Orozco's endlessly exacting hair and makeup—only ambivalently defy entrenched reasons for dismissing women as lesser intellectual and artistic talents. Precisely on this point of imitability—

of *accessibility*, which in sexist tradition is suspiciously labeled "commericalism"—I confront the at least partially imaginary nature of the binary that divides the professional and amateur.

To show that what might be called "high art" as distinguished from "commercial art" is sometimes more of a gendered slur than a cogent matter of professionalism, I examine a project by Motín Poeta ("Poet Uprising"), the collaborative effort that Faesler coordinated. Motín Poeta disbanded in 2010, the same year that the collaborators gave up the space dedicated to that group's project of poetry by commission called *Agencia de Poemas para toda Ocasión* ("All-Occasion Poems Agency"). According to flyers that Faesler shared with me, the Agency boasted that a commissioned poem is "truly personalized", thanks to the questionnaire that potential clients must fill out. Once a poet accepts a commission, the minimum time to write a poem is 10 days. The advertising copy highlights the material result: " "A poem is more than a perfume, a jewel, a tie. / A poem is forever"). One flyer even offers talent swaps: although the price for a poem is $550 pesos, barter among numerous professions, such as butchers, hair stylists, accountants, designers, electricians, plumbers, and attorneys, is also accepted through September 30, 2006. While it lasted, the Poet Agency played with hack ideas by stretching the notion of poetry to include poems as ambiguously hand-crafted (an expert hack) or handicraft (an amateur hack). The *techné* implicit in writing a commissioned poem for money, as if it were just another commercially traded object, imagines all guild members as equals. Such equality is not actually the case, of course.

To wit, I cite the participating poets, in order of appearance in the advertisement, born in Mexico City unless otherwise noted: Ernesto Lumbreras (b. 1966, Jalisco, Mexico), Hernán Bravo Varela (b. 1979), Luis Jorge Boone (b. 1977, Monclova, Mexico), Julián Herbert (b. 1971, Acapulco, Mexico), Faesler herself, Pedro Serrano (b. 1957, Montréal, Canada), Mónica Nepote, León Plascencia Ñol (b. 1968, Jalisco, Mexico), Ricardo Pohlenz, Myriam Moscona (b. 1955),

and Rocío Cerón (1972). On the extremes of the scale, Pohlenz is the most obscure figure, while Herbert is the best known and most award-winning, who in his own confessional writing is also known for excessive drinking and cocaine use.

I bring up details of Herbert's masculine performance because when I asked Nepote why Motín Poeta disbanded, she pointed out that some rising careers weakened the collective (Personal interview). To put the point another way, the *hack* of guild membership that posits poetry as an equivalent of a skilled trade stagnates in the face of squarely professional literary success, which prefers the aura of celebrity attached to individual trajectories and still favors men. I turn now from the matter of amateurism or hack "commercialism" that plagues women artists to the most unfortunate implication of being seen as accessible: vulnerability.

Nepote and Faesler: Genre, Gender, and Vulnerability

Cruz Arzabal published observations on just one section of Nepote's chapbook *Hechos diversos* (2011).[11] Regarding Nepote's subject matter of the bodies of murdered women, Cruz Arzabal proposes that the poet wrestles with the dilemma of presenting these violated beings in a way that is not exploitative. This visibility in Nepote's interface between poetry and murders reported in the news leads Cruz Arzabal to his concern for "the materiality of the system," the same theme that he had earlier explored for Faesler's work ("Writing" 246). In assessing these artworks—that is, in judging the interface as a failure or a skill—the eye of the beholder determines all. These topics of violence and vulnerability bring new nuance to my reflections on the use of dolls and doubles that manages to transform the artist's body: erasing the author even while training attention on her. To add another example, take Faesler's video *Impulso*. There, Faesler herself appears, in absence of the paper dolls, though her face is obscured by what seems to be

white-light overexposure. Through this blurry face, the video shows the author's body and explores the limits of presence. As I mentioned, in *Mi voz es mi pastor*, Nepote's voice is distorted with digital effects, even though her body dances normatively during her live performance. I return to the key question: Who decides when the amateur performance is actually avant-garde and thus expert? In the traditional answer, *men do*. At least until yesterday, men's opinions often seemed to carry the most weight when it came to evaluating projects as authoritatively skilled. Hacking this system risks being left outside it; after all, until yesterday at least, women writers were mainly understood as amateurs who didn't drink their way to likeability, much less genius status.

For example, the highly subjective critiques at work here surface with a novelist, Tryno Maldonado (b. 1977, Zacatecas, Mexico), who disapproves of Nepote's contribution to the Faesler-coordinated record *Urbe probeta* ("Test Tube City") (2003). That digitized recording exists on the internet today and by early 2018 had tallied some 13,429 hits (*Urbe probeta*). In her role as leader of Motín Poeta, Faesler invited Nepote to the collaboration among fourteen poets and twelve music producers, all of whom lived and worked in Mexico City ("Poesía y arte" 12). In Maldonado's view, Nepote's track, titled "Ciudad Puente" ("Bridge City"), fails to understand the group project. Maldonado dislikes the vocals sung by Gabriela Vega, and laments Nepote's decision not to recite her text. For Maldonado, the resulting collaboration fails due to its *lack* of intermediality: "Ciudad Puente" is simply a tune with "the typical structure of a pop song" (Maldonado). By contrast, Maldonado approves of Faesler's poetry-typical reading of "Fauna Ciudad de México" ("Mexico City Fauna") over a beat by the artist "Nasty". Maldonado's opinions hint that the interface, the collision of one medium with another—here between conventions of poetry and those of music recordings—must remain appropriately visible for the work of art to pass muster as avant-garde and not facile. My readers should keep in mind that their

evaluations of these works as either sophisticated or inexpert risk undue influence from gender bias.

To explore this hack technique further I asked Nepote during a personal interview what it is like to work as a non-coder at the Centro Digital de Cultura. She explained her professional responsibility there in terms of coordinating others by way of a search for literary language, specifically a search for metaphors (Nepote, Personal interview). That is, Nepote aligns coders' and artists' plans for a project by using poetic skills, but she no longer *writes* in the traditional sense as she shepherds the joint endeavor. During our interview, Nepote spoke repeatedly of her pursuit of the effects of interruptions in the way a user expects to interact with technology, which is reminiscent of the way artists Mariela Yeregui and Gabriela Golder speak in this volume (xxx) about using technology to disrupt people's experience of their urban environment. She distinguished her "break it" style from Faesler's "build it" aesthetic, a contrast which I interpret as Nepote's urge to adopt new technology that risks hiding the interface by fully breaking with one genre and entering another, by subtle differentiation from Feasler's drive to show the construction seams among her various invoked genres (Nepote, Personal interview). The printed text that Faesler sometimes reveals in the videos logically disappears in Nepote's experiments with multimedia interference with—rather than support for—the "architecture" of the "formal" poem. In sum, Nepote sometimes gambles on abandoning the sort of poetry that critics know how to read as such; by disappearing the interface, she risks her work being described as, for instance, an easy-listening pop song.

Certainly, watching *Mi voz es mi pastor* is an exercise in a battle against instability and distraction, as the live performer struggles to command attention over the sound of the poem and against the screen with her own dancing image, and the spectator wonders which element deserves

interpretative attention. Just as Maldonado came to question Nepote's multimedia poem on *Urbe probeta*, the audience for *Mi voz es mi pastor* may wonder what happens to the poem in the midst of the dance and the digitally altered word. Though Nepote's live dancing remains in the analog world, her voice—that shepherd or minister of the poem's title—is dragged about electronically until at certain moments it becomes electronic music. The battle between analog and digital in the technique forms a parallel with the content of Nepote's verses that encourage confusion between machine and body. From the outset, *Mi voz es mi pastor* proposes the awakening body as a computer-like machine: "You start in the body. Extended. You gesture as usual in the mornings, the moment when the device activates. The power button. The daily click" (*@Articulaciones*).

The dance complicates the notion of an analog body by insinuating that an awakening can be imagined as a digital booting up process. Because—during the relevant lines, at least—Nepote fails to mime the expected gestures of the poetic subject in a non-digital body coming back to memory after sleep, it becomes even harder for the audience to capture the meaning of early lines such as: "You are still lying down. You just woke up. For a fraction of a second you forget everything: your gender, your weight, your name, your pains, your love, your ideals, your things to do" (*@Articulaciones*). Not only is Nepote not lying down nor immobile during these lines, she is hardly a blank slate. The poet's dancing body suggests her gender, age, and health, among other elements in the list of supposedly forgotten personal identity markers. For that reason of analog embodiment, the last line of the poem surprises. "La voz es mi pastor, nada me falta" ("My voice is my shepherd, I lack nothing") manages a Biblical allusion to the comforting shepherd that the machine-as-body theme fails to cultivate as an expectation. The "wiped disk" of the identity-free awakening unexpectedly delivers the audience to the possibility of transcendence. If Philip K. Dick cleverly asks whether androids dream of electric sheep, Nepote seems to reassure us that a liminal

analog/digital state still requires shepherds, though what this guiding "voice" is, whether digital or analog, remains unclear. Since Nepote never imitates a robot in her dance, it is not clear that she means to present a kind of post-analog embodiment.

If Nepote suppresses printed matter in the video *Mi voz es mi pastor*, Faesler takes the inverse stance. Moving from the videos already mentioned, I can ponder print books among the pages of *Formol*, because Faesler locates a fictional family heirloom—the preserved heart of the last human sacrifice of the Aztecs—in the library of two successive Mexico City homes. The novel teasingly suggests that, despite its supposed location amid print culture, the heart exists within a digital literary reality. In the 33rd chapter, Larca and her father Celso arrive at a laboratory in Mexico City with the heart of the last Aztec sacrifice in a jar, and the narrative hints that we are actually reading about characters on a screen. When the characters' reality pixilates, Faesler suggests that the heart is made not of the expected DNA, but a different sort of code. In this key scene, as Larca and Celso climb stairs mechanically,

> they look like animated characters from a videogame. They don't notice where they are going, and they don't realize how the wall of mosaics moves and throbs as they walk. They feel they are carrying their history, and what happened recently, they have halos of poorly tuned waves over their heads (182)

The characters do not notice that their reality may be coded, or that they exist in an interface that causes their otherwise stable reality to show its glitches. Although Faesler does not know how to code, she is writing her characters and their architectural environment as digital: a hacker move. By scripting a glitch of ersatz coding, Faesler draws attention to an *imaginary* interface, which seems to trump the digital with the force of imagination. This literary technique that claims the

qualities of the virtual—without actually taking on the instability of code but only mimicking it—aims to produce maximal confusion between the digital and the analogue levels. That confusion makes the novel impossible to interpret reliably as one genre or another (Is it a historical family drama? A fantastic novel? A new genre of "digital realistic" fiction?).

The tricky chemistry of Faesler's novel appears to invoke what Rebecca Walkowitz, by way of citation of Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, calls "an aesthetic of bookishness," which has "bookish" literary texts reflect a "post-digital" turn. Under this bookish aesthetic, literary fictions "call attention to the properties of bound paper and ask readers to do more, in fact, than read" (231). The extra task for readers, according to Walkowitz, requires them "to become handlers and viewers, and […] to establish the text rather than to assume it" (231). Indeed, *Formol* demands that the reader think about the properties of a text on a screen or in a book and question its nature as "written" rather than "coded." Precisely this question interacts with bookishness. Why does Faesler's narrative insist on placing the preserved heart in not one but two versions of the family library? Perhaps because as Ludovico notes, the print book remains "the very best 'interface' ever designed" (7). The print library, in itself, is a kind of formaldehyde.

Youth, Literacy, and Fátima Orozco

Another way to compare the Booktuber Orozco and the poets Nepote and Faesler is to mark the distinction between the "real time" that print literature and poetry take, and the "virtual time" that sharply edited video words can withstand. Orozco's playful editing refuses the "real time" summoned in Faesler's and Nepote's videos. The Booktuber rarely allows spoken words to "take the time that they take", by contrast to Faesler's measured rhythms of poetry reading and Nepote's similar style before the sound engineering adds the distortions. Orozco understands the value of speed in the digital format, and she employs jump cuts that remove the pauses from unrehearsed

speech. To emphasize certain emotional peaks in a quick-fire monologue, Orozco's edits switch from color to black-and-white images and freeze-fames, with music that cues the proper interpretative mood. Moreover, Orozco draws attention to the interface of one temporality and the other by communicating in a two-way circuit of influence with the video audience. Fans express preferences to Orozco, who in turn acknowledges these fans' opinions in her videos, and the discourse creates a sense of shared present time, bolstered by a doubled sphere of both public and intimate space thanks to Orozco's usual backdrop of her bookshelves in her parents' home, where she lives.

The library helps Orozco to establish a kind of readerly aesthetic, a *being* of bookishness. Notions of reliability matter to a young generation. Attention to a generational divide comes to me from Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda's chapter on Mexican Booktubers, or "Vloggers" as they prefer to refer to Orozco and her peers. The scholars distill the lure of the Booktuber into youthful sincerity; in fans' positive impressions, the Vloggers seem to be who they are (Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda 92). The Mexican video makers tend to range from 15 to 25 years old—though Orozco now exceeds that upper limit (Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda 92). To trace the lines of this feeling of sincerity, note Orozco's Twitter name, "La Pequeño Pony @FaOrozco," a reference to My Little Pony dolls. That unpretentious reference invokes youthful naïveté; by early 2018, this Twitter feed counted 90,800 followers. By November 22, 2019, La Pequeño Pony had slipped to 89,600 which hints that youthful Twitter handles are most appealing when the owner is still herself relatively young. At the peak of her popularity on Twitter, Orozco as "Pequeño Pony" may have successfully performed generational nostalgia that connected with the digital generation's admiration for the print book. The wielding of material goods, whether toys or books, as identity markers and community-building tools, turns the often individual practice of reading or

imaginative doll play into a collective practice, a point that Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda also make (97).

Ludovico reinforces the point that books can seem reliable when compared to the digital because, "printed materials are one of the few consumer objects that generally do not expire or become obsolete, meaning they can't be quickly 'consumed' and discarded, but just sit there taking up space, for years or even decades" (83). The print book supports users' long-term constructions of identity—*not* necessarily as readers, but as book owners—a point that Orozco implicitly stresses. The ephemeral nature of the YouTube videos—the vulnerability of the art itself—leads me to the conclusion that if the present paper argues anything, it is that one of the aspects of "representational privilege" wielded by literature, to borrow once more Paz Soldán and Debra Castillo's phrase, still hinges on the material (cited in Lavery 13). Other academics have speculated that young people form an altered view of themselves once they begin building a personal library, an identity that—thanks to the stability of the medium—can endure for a lifetime. Michael Austin reviewed studies conducted over the last twenty years for programs that give permanent gifts of books to students; taken together, these statistics "suggest that book ownership can enhance literacy in ways that cannot be attributed to any other factor, including book readership" (19).[12]

The Booktuber, precisely the most amateur (hack) of the three talents probably does more to spread a profitable—and therefore *professional*—habit of literature than any of the would-be "professional" but utterly nonprofitable writers searching for hacks in the interface, such as Faesler and Nepote. Orozco's hack language comes nowhere near the poets' trained skill. The resulting impression of a "sincere" appeal of the Booktuber videos allows Orozco to emphasize speech at the edges of reading, speech that enjoys the limits of writing because the talk is in itself a break from reading—a playful area of rest—which allows Orozco to admit freely that she has not yet

read one book or another in her collection and to emphasize her relationship with a material book rather than its more technical literary qualities. This labor of promoting book owning and book-as-object play stresses the pleasures of the material and inhabits an interface. This dilemma of the amateur that pits accessibility against expertise, and tries to solve problems with the hack, is surely familiar to the woman academic critic. Just as women are finally making it to the rank of full professor in larger numbers, the administrators change the game and begin to call for more public-facing humanities, which begs the question of whether books of previously disdained genres of criticism (especially if they are by women), such as epistolary conversations, interviews, personal essays, blogs, podcasts, fiction, and other sorts of non-monograph projects count as *expert*. Should the humanities professor be paid well, or offered stable employment, if rather than specialized knowledge, a wide audience is required? What happens to expert art when expert critics are no longer needed? Only certain kinds of hacks in art interest the expert: see my earlier reflections on gender bias operant among men critics. Perhaps criticism benefits from opening up to the amateur, and yet it seems that something is lost when professionalism in art comes to be defined only by financial reward and not by peer respect—even if the latter is traditionally awarded by a boys' club.

To show how Orozco plays with her books intermedially—*not just by reading them*—I showcase a crowning hack: Orozco's refusal to alphabetize her library, which serves as the backdrop for most of her videos. Instead of alphabetization, she arranges her books by the color of the spines. Two of the games that Orozco has played with her library suffice as examples of the resulting color-inspired confusion. *Coordenadas en mis estanterías* ("Coordinates on My Shelves") is played with Orozco's friend on camera and facilitated by her sister, who films the proceedings and speaks from behind the camera. After locating the proper book on her shelves

according to the random coordinates sent by fans and friends, Orozco tells the story on camera of how the book came to form part of her collection. By early 2018, the video had been seen 91,085 times. By August 29, 2018 that number had risen to 97,802. By November 22, 2019 that number reached 107,373 views.

In an even more successful book game video, by early 2018 with 143,615 hits, by August 29, 2018, 154,241 views, and by November 18, 2019, 173,490 views, Orozco searched for 15 titles picked in advance by her sister, such as the anodyne *Literatura mexicana* ("Mexican Literature"). (With a black cover? With a white cover? Orozco battles to call to mind the brownish-red book, to Karen Orozco's amusement.) Other titles that Orozco must hunt down include *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) in Spanish translation, *Anna Karenina* (1877), *Como agua para chocolate* (1993), and eleven more titles, none of which are discussed in the video in terms of their technique or historical context. Instead, the books mostly matter for their covers and consequent shelf placement (*Conozco*). The point of *Conozco mi librero? ¿O soy puro cuento?* ("Do I Know My Bookshelf? Or Am I Just Fibbing?") is to find all the books in less than five minutes. As the bookshelf activities illustrate, the amateur move of arranging a library by color ends up creating considerable work for Orozco. This hack (amateur) move is also a hacker (expert repurposing) technique that proves entertaining enough to operate on a professional level.

This amateur angle manages to circumvent many of the gatekeepers in the literary world. Consider, in that sense, Orozco's interest in *Peter Pan*, a more than century-old play (1904) and novel (1911) by J.M. Barrie (1860-1937, Scotland). In a video that shows her collection of various editions of the text, Orozco acknowledges Barrie's name, but little more (*Mis ediciones*). The video in question is not about *Peter Pan* per se, but rather Orozco's material interaction with *Peter Pan*, as proven by her collection. Orozco gains authority over her library not from formal studies so

much as a performed lack of pretentiousness, a type of virtuous informality. Because her persuasive rhetoric depends on her embodiment as a fashionable consumer, Orozco's reign may not outlast her audience's perception of her youth, and indeed her decision to stop posting new content on LasPalabrasDeFa indicates the time-sensitive appeal of this performance of amateur enthusiasm. I will leave it to the academic to contemplate her own predicament in an economy that demands profitability through audience numbers. To extrapolate from the three Mexican cases, the largest audience rewards certain amateurish performances with gig status only as long as that act seems entertaining as gauged along an aesthetic of the youthful.

Conclusion

As indicated by these artists' videos and the forms of doll play and doubles contained therein, the point of interface from print literature to the digital has only made the embodied female author *more* visible, not less. The binary associating women and embodiment is nothing new, as Katherine Hayles presciently teaches, working off a critique that comes to her from Elizabeth Grosz, who in turn works off Simone de Beauvoir. These scholars note that in the tradition of western philosophy, women bear the burden of corporeality, which frees men to be imagined as disembodied thinkers—one reason why men writers can be understood as serious intellectuals even if they are alcohol dependent (Hayles 155). Another traditional aspect seems unchanged as well: the aspirations of the reader against the monopolic pressures of capitalism. In the worries of so many contemporary thinkers cited in the present analysis, the paths to power seem to narrow, even for the would-be elite academic. Galloway observes that today, for the first time, scholarly researchers operate "in a deficit of resources" before the "far superior data reserves" at the disposal of the corporate sector (110). This scholarly imbalance has Galloway rephrase Audre Lorde's

famous maxim: “The question is no longer ‘can we use the master’s tools to take down the master’s house?’ Today the question is ‘can we still use or own tools now that the master has taken them up?’” (110).

Galloway’s repurposing of Lorde’s famous quotation warns us that platforms such as YouTube are not a democratic space. Here I return to my introductory mention of Lessig’s lamentations, which make abundantly clear that YouTube is not *our* platform because *we* do not own the site. While the hack that Faesler, Nepote, and Orozco employ of using their own bodies, to which they have the rights, largely circumvents the immediate legal problem for YouTube videos, the solution ends up returning us to the long-lasting sexist binary of embodiment. The three Mexicans play into the centuries-long difficulty of public appearances interpreted as accessibility, also coded as vulnerability, which triggers doubled-edged consequences for “dolling up”. The relative control that the women retain over their image in the videos is an insufficient consolation prize. It seems commonsensical to affirm that longevity in one’s career is probably better protected by expertise recognized as such; after all, expertise defends the existence of a *career* in the first place. The threat faced by humanities professors in a time of dwindling university support can encourage experts to seek a larger audience through less expert genres, and because of the risks involved, it seems worthwhile to articulate the problem of the amateur, which affects women in particularly forceful and even ageist ways. The hobbyist-turned-gig worker act that aims to hack its way into paid, e.g. *professional*, work is not, in the end, a career if that gig depends on youthful performance. Still, the freedom of the hack holds appeal.

On one level, the hack is a relatively safe place from which to operate, because it does not threaten the professional (corporate) players, but rather invokes an amateur stance that seems, so to speak, “rough around the edges”. On that level, the artist is at the mercy of the critic, who can

choose to authorize (e.g. Cruz Arzabal) or reject (e.g. Maldonado) the experiment with the interface. As per Cruz Arzabal's admiration of Faesler's white edges around her paper dolls, *of course* these unpolished aspects appeal to him; they are the sign of the expert hack. As per Maldonado's rejection of Nepote's "Ciudad puente," *of course* he rejects the transition of a poem into a pop song; he objects to the sign of a hack. My vocabulary tries to make clear that both critics react to what is by and large the same approach. All the women studied here speak from the inevitably limited authority of their own bodies, whether as a Booktuber, a poet-dancer, or a poet-doll, and thus they risk functioning in the context of YouTube as the "tools […] that the master has taken […] up". If the artist with the largest audience wins, Orozco triumphs. If the artist with the largest number of academic fans wins, Nepote and Faesler triumph. If the artist with the greatest autonomy from monopolistic systems wins, I cannot say that any of us knows which is the safest bet.

NOTES

[1] Rosalía Winocur is correct when she asserts that the dominant themes of discussion on digital culture in Latin America share the Anglophone model (134). For an excellent review of the literature on the matter of technology and Latin American literature and culture, see Tania Gentic and Matthew Bush's article.
[2] David Sax has registered the recent retail bounce in analogue media, including "old-fashioned print books." Though statistics for the Mexican book market are not available, it seems likely that the same trends exist there.
[3] Nepote tells me that she circulated 30 homemade copies of the poem (Nepote, "Personal email").
[4] For sample reviews, see Ramírez and Cruz Arzabal in *Letras Libres*.
[5] Faesler told me that for her the color red represents good energy (Faesler, "Personal conversation").
[6] All translations are mine.
[7] See Batalla for more.
[8] All translations from Spanish sources are by the chapter author unless otherwise stated.

[9] This following also benefits from a Mexican podcast called *Hijos de la Web* (www.hijosdelaweb.com), begun in May 2018, on which Orozco is the only woman. On November 22, 2019, the Twitter handle @HijosDeLaWeb counted 6,167 followers.

[10] Orozco claimed in an email to me that she never studied English formally: "I learned it with music and TV series. I like to say that I owe my English to Friends and Hilary Duff, haha." In the same email in which I queried her about formal education experiences, she answered that she had never studied at private schools (Orozco, "Personal email").

[11] This work is also examined by Sarah Bowskill in this volume (xxx).

[12] In results published in 2014, M.D.R. Evans and co-researchers found a statistically significant effect in 42 countries, among 200,000 students at age 15. Of the various family background influences, "Home library size is clearly the most important," when it comes to predicting a student's reading achievement; this factor proved to be more important than parents' occupational status, parents' education, and parents' wealth (1590).

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