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Electronic Poetry and the Importance of Digital Repository

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Abstract: In his article "Electronic Poetry and the Importance of Digital Repository" Manuel Brito ana-lyzes selected early digital repositories of electronic poetry. In addition to issues concerning efficiency and discursive practice, Brito's discusses the objectives, contents, and the funding of digital reposito-ries. Brito argues that digital repositories promote poetry, enable networking and quick publishing of innovative poetry, they intensify the reading experience, and make a readership possible that is larger than that of print poetry. Networking, interaction, and web-based communication intensify the writing and reading experience while new modes of discourse are emerging continually. Not just passive con-sumerism promoted by an attractive presentation, digital repositories engage in developing aesthetics of poetry as a continual process of innovation. Their objectives, contents, and the funding of these e-repositories are not based on market-driven concepts or by academic purposes, but on the wish to al-low for a true encounter with language. Importantly, in the case of new media publishing the figure of the editor has become responsible for reconciling novelty, lived cultural experience, and technical know-how.

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Manuel BRITO

Electronic Poetry and the Importance of Digital Repository

Today's digital repositories replace the traditional production, presentation, and storage of literary texts. In the last two decades, electronic poetry has become a prominent form of literary production and in the U.S., Brazil, France, etc., it is electronic literature where innovation and experimental art occur (on this, see also Brito, "From Paperspace to Hyperspace"; see also Pressman <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/electronic-literature-comparative-literature-0>). This has complicated the relationship between writing and media, the process of reading, and the medium of publication. To illustrate this, I discuss Carolyn Guertin's *Assemblage: The Women's New Media Gallery* <http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/traced/guertin/assemblage.htm>, the *Electronic Literature Directory* <http://directory.eliterature.org/>, and *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubuweb.com>, three early digital repositories of electronic literature including poetry. The rise of electronic repositories has affected the form of publishing, reading, and writing. Of course, the contents of these repositories differ, although most repositories share parts of their works to archive poetry of various literary modes. In this field editors are not solitary shepherds who permit authors to publish or readers to read. Editors are also the users and managers of programs in a computer system. Moreover, they are supposed to ensure digital preservation, while providing reliable interlinking. As editors become increasingly aware of these complexities, their intellectual mediation must be the most persistent task leading to the success of their digital resources.

Digital repository (also e-repository) refers to a location of storage for presentation and preservation of born-digital material by institutional or government—in some instances individual—undertaking (i.e., editing, publishing, presentation and preservation and matters of finance). The digital repositories I discuss in the present study share some advantages and protocols with digital libraries: digital repositories allow access to texts and images easier and cheaper because of lower maintenance costs, support innovation in technology and new forms of communication, they are not limited to geographical boundaries, allow users to search entire collections, and preserve born-digital material. I argue that e-repositories of electronic poetry are "open" rather than enforce particular poetic modes since they present varied work and they do not imply any endorsement: "if, through hypertext or any other delivery technology, literary objects are constructed as 'open,' then this permeability of writer/programmer is extended to reader/programmer, as readers configure or radically change the literary objects of their attention" (Cayley 318).

Friedrich Block traces the climate for the emergence of digital poetry back to the 1950s when writers experimented with the "experience of a total abuse of language, media, and art" (231). New and diverse experimental programs appeared in the following decades, in which visual poetry played a leading role (231-42; for pre-web scholarship about computer literature see, e.g., Balpe; Vuillemin and Lenoble). For Bill Seaman, the digitization of texts is more radical, highlighting the intentional participant role of authorship including aesthetic strategies which are aligned with "the history of art, literature, philosophy, technology, the computer, as well as the history of the construction of meaning. These foci are all drawn upon in the authorship of this techno-poetic mechanism and are explored through the use of media-elements that exhibit a specific ambiguity" (170). The relationship between author and reader described by Seaman is also accompanied by a sudden rush of inconclusive meaning. This surge "passes through a series of different states—from the clear—to the highly polysemic—to states approaching the dissolution of meaning, as deeply chaotic structures are generated" (Seaman 170). Seaman's idea of digital media suggests that the reader's fascination with the construction of meaning is central. Indeed, digital readers read texts, but they often also "express" themselves by means of programming and source codes, animation and processuality, interactivity, or hypermedia.

Loss Pequeño Glazier argues that the final acceptance of digital poetry has come through the existence of the so-called "subject village," which is a "site for the access, collection, and dissemination of poetry and related writing" (*Digital* 3). Glazier's concept of the "subject village" does not entail collecting or controlling everything. In order to understand the archival implications of these new repositories we must breakdown the concept of "archive" (on digital archiving see also, e.g., Edmond <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/archive-now>; Zimmermann

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<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/3>). The examples Glazier provides—the *Electronic Poetry Center* <http://epc.buffalo.edu/> and *UbuWeb* <http://www.ubuweb.com>—are different from other digital archives insofar as the collected material is edited which also helps to disseminate print publications, and editors also introduce other documentary materials such as hypertheory or a "topography of digital studies" (*Digital* 9). The editors pay attention to potential misinformation on the world wide web which involves writing and the consideration of the publication and dissemination of texts as their most significant mission (Glazier, *Digital* 3). Glazier's considerations are useful for my analysis of repositories since they clarify "the relation of the medium to art-making" (*Digital* 161). Glazier uses the term "electronic poetry" or "e-poetry" to replace the classification of new media poetry by Eduardo Kac in six categories: "Digital Poetry," "Poets' Sites," "Oulipo," "Poetry Resources," "Hypertext Resources," and "Hypertext Authors" ("Selected" <http://www.ekac.org/webliolinks.html>). Glazier's terms embrace all electronically produced poetry and appears over-inclusive when he observes that e-poetry "consists of innovative poetic practices in various digital media, that is, writing/programming that engages the procedures of poetry to investigate the materiality of language" (emphasis in the original) (*Digital* 163). Bearing this in mind, the digital medium becomes both a form of writing and a virtual space for the circulation of innovative poetry and poetics.

The significance of these kinds of repositories becomes clear when we consider the thousands of results which Google shows when searching with the key words "repository" and "American poetry" (2014). Although we would need to examine these results more closely, the sheer number is relevant. E-repositories such as the *Electronic Poetry Center* <http://epc.buffalo.edu>, *PENNsound: Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing* <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>, *Poem Present: Program in Poetry and Poetics* <http://poetics.uchicago.edu/poem-present>, *Academy of American Poets* <http://www.poets.org>, *Sally Gaster's African American Phat Library* <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/Snally_Gaster.html>, the *Poetry Society of America* <http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/>, and *Modern American Poetry* <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/>, to name a few, store poetry through digital technology and contain literary texts "along a continuum of variability, ranging through from fixed pieces to 'poem-program(s)' … which generate new material without continued intervention from the author" (Smith 491). Further, while many of these repositories disseminate literary works, they avoid questions of value or canon formation. Marjorie Perloff highlights economics as a central issue in the rapid acceptance of these kinds of archives and remarks "that electronic texts are likely to be truer to the original than are the usual reprints and anthology versions" (378) and thus an alternative to traditional publishing and reading. This strategy is about how the performance of literary works may be read back into both the "silent" text and text-based performances and thereby problematizes "the role of the author, who may also be an interactive reader or programmer … the meaning-creation of the work is provided by the performance of the literary object itself" (Cayley 322). Further, repositories follow the combination Block recommends for experimental poetry with regard to its combination of form, content, and technology: "only when we proceed semantically according to art-specific conditions do we move forward. This can be tried via single work analysis, or with contextualization in reference to existing, more specific programs. If, in addition to technological criteria others such as 'reflection', 'production', 'presentation', or 'exemplification' of, or 'experimentation' with the technological and media possibilities are considered—then we have already reached the program of experimental poetry" (231).

My first example, *UbuWeb*, fosters a relational mode of thinking about art, music, and literature interaction: "we simply became a repository for the 'avant-garde' (whatever that means—our idea of what is 'avant-garde' seems to be changing all the time). UbuWeb adheres to no one historical narrative, rather we're more interested in putting several disciplines into the same space and seeing how they interact: poetry, music, film, and literature from all periods encounter and bounce off of each other in unexpected ways" <http://www.ubu.com/resources/index.html>). *UbuWeb* operates as a vast e-repository of visual, concrete, and sound poetry, all forms of avant-garde, outsider arts, and significant artists ranging from Jean Dubuffet, Julian Schnabel, and Martin Kippenberger to John Lennon, Karen Finley, and Joseph Beuys. In response to one question in the section "Frequently Asked Questions," *UbuWeb* states that "we post many things without permission; we also post many things with permission. We therefore give you permission to take what you like even though in many cases,

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we have not received permission to post it. We went ahead and did it anyway. You should too … Let's face it, if we had to get permission from everyone on UbuWeb, there would be no UbuWeb" (<http://www.ubu.com/resources/faq.html>). However, *UbuWeb* acknowledges that the copyright of the printed work stays with the author and makes clear that the rights presented on *UbuWeb* belong to the authors and artists thus highlighting the non-profit nature of the website. More recently, *UbuWeb* expanded its activities to Twitter, radio, iPhone apps, and opened up new sections for dance, conceptual writing, electronic music, ethnopoetics, film, video, editions, and visual poetry. Focusing on recuperating neglected art and without having to yield to market obligations, *UbuWeb* recovered film material by artists such as Richard Serra or Salvador Dalí, readings by Alain Robbe-Grillet, radio plays by Samuel Beckett, or Meredith Monk's music. This interaction converted *UbuWeb* into a space of experimentalism with varied artistic and literary forms. To observe several collections from diverse historical periods sensitizes readers, viewers, and listeners to the complex temporality of cultural artifacts. *UbuWeb* continually adds poetry, film, and art to its site, as well as acquires collections including "The 365 Days Project," Jerome Rothenberg's Ethnopoetics, Vito Acconci's videos, interviews with notable authors like Jorge L. Borges or Allen Ginsberg, performance documentation like the *Cinema of Transgression* series, and biographies or composer portraits featuring artists like Philip Glass or Pailine Oliveros. Another section of *UbuWeb* includes the section editions centered on the publication of contemporary literature including the work of Jean Day, Monica de la Torre, and Tan Lin. Further, there is a section featuring the so-called *UbuWeb* "Top Tens List": the top ten lists do not result from competition, but reflect the editors' preferences for individual artists, poets, or scholars.

UbuWeb has gone beyond the limits of visual, concrete and later sound poetry embracing instead all forms of avant-garde art: both the publisher and the board of directors of *UbuWeb* opened up this literary archive posting what they called "found street poems" and now include other types of texts: "MP3s that can be best described as celebrity gaffs, recordings of children screeching, how-to records, song-poems, propagandistic religious ditties, spoken word pieces, even ventriloquist acts" (<http://www.ubu.com/resources/index.html>). The power of presenting several thousand artists and their works is what *UbuWeb* is about:

The future is eminently scalable: as long as we have the bandwidth and server space, there is no limit as to how big the site can grow. For the moment, we have no competition, a fact we're not happy about. We're distressed that there is only one UbuWeb: why aren't there dozens like it? Looking at the art world, the problem appears to be a combination of an adherence to an old economy (one that is working very well with a booming market) and sense of trepidation, particularly in academic circles, where work on the internet is often not considered valid for academic credit. As long as the art world continues to prize economies of scarcity over those based on plentitude, the change will be a long time coming. But UbuWeb seeks to offer an alternative by invoking a gift economy of plentitude with a strong emphasis on global education. We're on numerous syllabi, ranging from kindergarteners studying pattern poetry to post graduates listening to hours of Jacques Lacan's Séminaires. (<http://www.ubu.com/resources/index.html>)

UbuWeb's position toward capitalist market economy and the university system clarifies the new orientation which the site has taken beyond commercial motives: it not only preserves born-digital avant-garde aesthetic modes, but more importantly, facilitates access to those works which official institutions would not otherwise have taken seriously. Most e-repositories of electronic poetry host works and occasionally include critical texts such as essays and other resources. Compared, for example, with traditional anthologies, they do not seek institutional recognition and appear as independent sites. They have thus generated new criteria of taste and value in poetry and the other arts. Hence e-repositories garner a wider readership and use than traditional print literature. For example, the *Electronic Poetry Center* with its rise in transactions from 20,000 transactions in the later months of 1995 to 10,000,000 in 2000, and with users in over 80 countries (Glazier, "Introduction" <http://home.jps.net/~nada/glazier.htm>). Both experimentalism and diversity are welcome in these repositories, as can be seen by the presence of women's voices, transmedia, performance, sound poetry, and algorithmic or animated text. John Cayley makes the case that the popularization of these resources for both authors and readers is related to contemporary intellectual and social challenges: "For in networked computing … plurality, multiple/parallel processing, and decentralization are signs of robustness and efficiency in our attempts to represent, manipulate and create meaning from complex inputs and interactions" (318). Visits to these sites have continually grown since the mid-1990s and

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their use follows James English's concept of super- or extrasocial networks of cultural production in new media studies, a "thriving area of research that knits together book history, cultural studies, communications theory, and the history and sociology of science" (ix).

A good example of what English understands as cultural production—with the added perspective of primary texts—is my second example, Guertin's 1995-2005 *Assemblage: The Women's New Media Gallery*. Guertin focused on women's voices in new media art and associated the e-repository with a long-standing interest in experimentation insisting that exploration is central to the site: "you will find a variety of tones, schools, genres and generations in these pages: prose, poetry, theory, autobiography, strident cyberfeminist polemic, quiet self-affirmation, innocence and experience, and visual/textual arts not yet classifiable. You will find works that use traditional narrative forms or language (not necessarily English) in innovative ways, and texts that create new forms by interweaving word and image in patterns that transform both. The common ground here is the non-sequential—the hypertextual—use of words and images to birth possible worlds in this new art form, and to create present tense textual spaces for readers to explore" (<http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/traced/guertin/assemblage.htm>). Guertin bases her work on Jacques Derrida, "(a literary theorist not female, feminist or a practitioner of the new media arts but who has much to say of interest to literature, technology and contemporary thought) sees in text an unending combination of contexts that may be endlessly reshuffled to produce meaning. He calls this an 'assemblage.' His is a 'schemata' for a general system and a 'bringing-together' that 'has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again as well as being ready to bind others together" (<http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/traced/guertin/assemblage.htm>). Guertin's emphasis on a wide range of material is characteristic and she compiled 326 authors and collectives. Although US-American authors predominate, authors from other countries are numerous and the texts compiled come in English, Korean, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Dutch. Guertin's e-repository went beyond specific literary schools and resonates with Glazier's defense of the "re-invention of the possibilities of the Web as medium" (*Digital* 163). Glazier did not only underline the experience of e-poetry writing and the accompanying technological changes, but understands the web "as a bearer of multiple practices and diverse cultural engagements" (*Digital* 164). In this context, virtual space has become itself a source for inspiration and a field for continual exploration. Creating an e-anthology, Guertin embraced international poetry and presented an interdisciplinary network geared not to the academic world, but to those interested in literary practices with new impact.

My third example is the *Electronic Literature Directory*, an e-repository that was started in 1999 with the objective to engage "transmedia possibilities of the digital" (Gould <http://directory.eliterature.org/node/3706>) with the co-operation of writers, artists, scholars, and software developers "designed to bring authors and readers together from a wide range of imaginative, critical, technological, and linguistic practices" (<http://directory.eliterature.org/about>). This attitude toward archiving texts which explore the capabilities of electronic literature is accompanied by an engagement with collecting literary works, descriptions, and keywords, since "the work of literature co-evolves in ways that need to be named, tagged, and recognized in a Web 2.0 environment" (<http://directory.eliterature.org/about>). As one might expect, the site is marked by the intention of presenting new electronic literary production and its classification system implies a practical sorting of authors, titles, and resources rather than prioritizing any practice. Along with the preservation of born-digital material, the strength of the *Electronic Literature Directory* is that it not only archives literary works, but that it is a site which encourages its users to seek further relationships among authors and their diverse aesthetic concerns. Indeed, we need to open up the very substance of literary culture, within which "the hypertext research community must now understand hypertext as an artist's medium as well as an information delivery system" (Kendall <http://www.wordcircuits.com/comment/htlit_intro.htm>). Robert Kendall founded *Word Circuits* <http://www.wordcircuits.com/about.htm> in 1997, another e-repository similar to the *Electronic Literature Directory* to present and preserve "the best in electronic poetry and fiction … text-generating algorithms or animated text that moves and mutates on the screen" (<http://www.wordcircuits.com/about.htm>). Further, with the creation and use of electronic poetry, a higher degree of democratization emerges as English points out, "scholars … have recently carried

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the project of democratization further, into the world of things, exploring the cultural agency not only of 'minor' individuals and collectivities but of the technical apparatuses and material objects of literary practice, which serve, in Bruno Latour's terms, as 'actants' in a vast network of productive interrelation with other objects as well as with humans" (ix).

The *Electronic Literature Directory* adds continually experimental digital texts and the site is conceived both as an e-repository of primary work and of scholarship on electronic literature. Established authors such as Thelonius Monk, Julio Cortázar, and Djuna Barnes, as well as less-known authors of electronic texts and other resources are featured. Since support comes from multiple universities, a community of scholars reports on the credentials of the submitted work. The process of submission begins with the opening of an account and to meet the criteria implies the contributions are "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (<http://directory.eliterature.org/process>). The intervention of experts and the revision of the submitted work does not put restrictions on experimentation, but is part of the need to construct the framework for a permanent archive. The final product shows how imaginative and aesthetically original the compiled texts are. For example, the tags section illustrates the complex variety of topics and approaches which can be found in the selected works.

Clear benefits of e-repositories are their accessibility and low cost because of much voluntary work. However, it is difficult not to hear complaints about their maintenance and funding. To begin with, the acquisition of hardware and software applications, file conversion, search engines, digital image preparation, and other quality-control measures involved in presenting the final product require financial resources. Eileen Gifford Fenton and Hoyt N. Duggand warn that costs soon become higher than expected: "machines may not perform at the speed advertised or as tested; drives may fail; software upgrades may be needed. As the scale of production increases, additional purchases may be needed to reach the desired production level and to maintain server response time in an acceptable range. Similarly, as project scale increases, more staff time is required to tend to systems administration to develop a technical infrastructure suited to the operation" (252)

The distinction between the three repositories I analyze here is whether or not they are attached mainly to non-profit organizations. Universities and other institutional support provide assistance to the editing team and this aspects includes the importance of "branding" and "legitimization" (note that this aspect is similar to all open-access online publications including the publication of scholarship: see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Jia <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2426>). The exception is *UbuWeb* that hosts several thousand artists and authors with no ads or donations and the site has always been free and in open access. Attempting to dodge the market economy and academic competition, *UbuWeb* relies on a team of volunteers who believe in grass-roots participation and innovation: "UbuWeb is vociferously anti-institutional, eminently fluid, refusing to bow to demands other than what we happen to be moved by at a specific moment, allowing us flexibility and the ability to continually surprise our audience … and even ourselves" (<http://www.ubu.com/resources/index.html>). However, while *UbuWeb* emphasizes its independence, it is supported, especially at the technical level, by universities and partners which have provided server space and the *Electronic Literature Directory* was financed by a grant from the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities from 2009 to 2011.

In conclusion, the three e-repositories I discuss represent rich resources with the primary objective to host innovative work. Networking, interaction, and web-based communication intensify the writing and reading experience while new modes of discourse are emerging continually. Not just passive consumerism promoted by an attractive presentation, these e-repositories engage in developing aesthetics of poetry as a continual process of innovation. Their objectives, contents, and the funding of these e-repositories are not based on market-driven concepts or by academic purposes, but on the wish to allow for a true encounter with language. Cayley mentions phenomena of interactivity which characterizes electronic literature: text generation, animation, as well as authorship-sharing "user" functions associated with cybertext (320-21). Thus it is the everyday spectacle of "choosing" that makes the internet the ideal site for individual agency. No one can tell the exact future of this field, although we must not forget that human agency is key to the postmodern emporium full of such varied texts. Hazel Smith recalls the continual transgressing of genre boundaries in the history of poetry: "generative poetries point to a posthuman future where text-generation via the computer is likely to become commonplace, and where author and machine become more closely identified. So far there

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are not many examples of fully generative poetry: most rely on some re-combinatory strategies im-portant, to varying degrees, in most of the pieces we explored so far. However, poetic creation has always relied to a degree on such recombinatory strategies, hence the significance of the concept of intertextuality to all poetic endeavor" (508). From this perspective, the three e-repositories I explore provide "galleries" of texts which depend on computer technology. They also signal the challenge to discuss, absorb, and become sensitive to new media literature in order to practice poetry "at his or her moment … in evaluating 'electronic poetries,' we should not subordinate the second term to the first … the artist or poet uses a particular medium, not because it is 'better' than others but because it seems most relevant at his or her moment—currently, of course, the electronic screen, with its particular en-ticing challenge to the printed book. Does this make the poet in question a digital poet? Or, converse-ly, is the purveyor of the electronic word ipso facto an artist? 'Chopsticks,' Viola quipped, 'can either be a simple eating utensil or a deadly weapon, depending on who uses them'" (Perloff 390-91). Clear-ly, the significance of new media technology and its uses cannot be underestimated (on new media and pedagogy see, e.g., Boruszko <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2355>; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Boruszko <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/paradigm-shift-comparative-humanities-digital-humanities-pedagogy-new-media-technology-and>). In the case of new media publishing the figure of the editor has become responsible for reconciling novelty, lived cultural experience, and technical know-how. Block's ideas have become an emblem of the new digital editorial task where lit-erature and the scholarship of literature "must be a multi-dimensional system to which belong the works themselves, the technical procedures and their corresponding media, and the protagonists with respective cognitive areas, action roles, groupings, communications, and symbolic orders (such as genre knowledge or program of poetics). Each dimension is subject to certain coordinated dynamics and historical development" (230).

Note: "Electronic Poetry and the Importance of Digital Repository" is an updated and substantially revised version of Brito, Manuel. "From Paperspace to Hyperspace: An Evaluation of E-Anthologies in Innovative American Poetry." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 52 (2006): 105-27. Copyright release to the author.

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