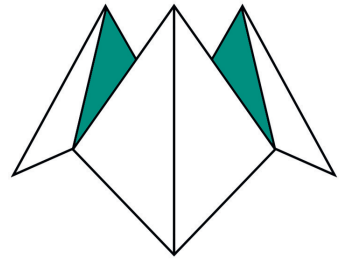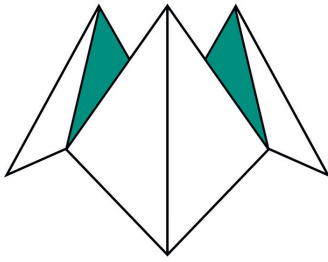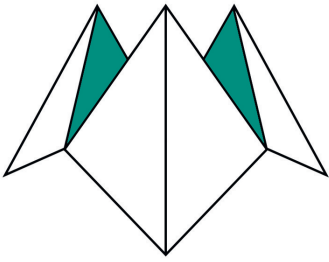DANIELA CÔRTES MADURO (ED.)

Digital Media and Textuality

From Creation to Archiving

From:

Daniela Côrtes Maduro (ed.)
Digital Media and Textuality
From Creation to Archiving

Due to computers' ability to combine different semiotic modes, texts are no longer exclusively comprised of static images and mute words. How have digital media changed the way we write and read? What methods of textual and data analysis have emerged? How do we rescue digital artifacts from obsolescence? And how can digital media be used or taught inside classrooms?
These and other questions are addressed in this volume that assembles contributions by artists, writers, scholars and editors such as Dene Grigar, Sandy Baldwin, Carlos Reis, and Frieder Nake. They offer a multiperspectival view on the way digital media have changed our notion of textuality.

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Contents

Part Four: Teaching the Digital

Part Five: Trans-Multi-Inter-Meta (The Medium)

Part Six: Tracking and Preserving Texts

Preface

Despite the fact that the concept of "text" is unstable and in constant shift, texts have not been able to surpass their root meaning. As we know, the term "text" is linked with the word "to weave" (Ong 13). Whether inscribed on paper or displayed in computer screens, texts have remained as fabrics comprised of a set of symbols or formulas, as well as intricate combinations of elements. Even though they are believed to be mostly comprised of words, images and graphic elements are often used as the interweaving thread holding texts together. Digital media seem to reinforce this idea, and to demonstrate that texts are not anchored in verbal language.

Since the introduction of computers, we have watched texts being turned into superimposed windows; into chunks of verbal and graphic material; footnotes interconnected by links (Landow 3); audio and video files; strings of letters that become images, or messages popping up on the screen of our mobile devices. We knew already that texts could be read, performed or listened to. However, digital media have provided alternative forms of contact between text and user, as well as further ways to combine semiotic modes. The act of reading is no longer exclusively related to the process of decoding letters or interpreting static images, but it is also linked with an invitation (or challenge) to assemble, play, activate, download or install. Besides scrolling up and down and zooming in or out, a reader can experience a text by moving across a room, touching a screen or speaking into a microphone. Sounds and gestures initiated by the reader can morph into words, letters or pictures displayed on a wall or a computer screen. In fact, digital texts need the cooperation of several languages (such as machine or assembly languages) in order to be understood by a human. The underlying code allows a text to generate itself and to shapeshift right before our very eyes. Thus, digital texts do not merely remain at the surface: they exist elsewhere, in our devices, or spread across the web. Locating the text—or bringing it to the surface—has become an intrinsic part of the reading act.

Digital media also allow readers to share their texts instantaneously. From self-generated poetry to beguiling bots, digital media have allowed the creation of additional ways to defy the role of the author. In so doing, they pose new challenges concerning publication, copyright, archive and access to information.

The implications of all these changes are analyzed in the essays included in this collection. Thus, the reader of this anthology may find unexpected connections between apparently disparate topics. Comprised of six parts, this book aims to offer the reader a broad perspective over the relationship between text and digital media, from creation to archiving of digital texts. The

first part, "Nothing Comes of Nothing" presents an essay written by Dene Grigar, where a link between electronic literature and oral tradition is emphasized. In the same part, we can read Jörgen Schäfer's text whose title, as the reader may notice, is based on Italo Calvino's stimulating essay and Alan Turing's influential test. While reading this first part, we are reminded that electronic literature is not born *ex nihilo* (Hayles 60). In fact, electronic literature continues a dialog established long before digital computer was created.

The second part, "Introspective Texts," is focused on the way texts can be self-reflexive and mirror the process of their own creation or reading (Portela 25). The essay shared by Otso Huopaniemi explores a link between machine translation and self-translation. In the same part, Sandy Baldwin and Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette underline a connection between poetry and video games by analyzing a performance which turns a game into an introspection about literature.

In the third part ("Where is Narrative?"), the reader will find essays about the way digital media can be used to tell a story or build a narrative. The essay written by Carlos Reis is focused on the survival of characters in (digital and print) fictional worlds. María Goicoechea De Jorge describes Shelley Jackson's work, *my body—a Wunderkammer*, as an exploration of the grotesque. In an essay about choice and disbelief in digital fiction, the reader is invited to revisit the debate around the concepts of immersion and interactivity, as suggested by Marie-Laure Ryan.

The reader will also find a part focused on digital literacy and the teaching of electronic literature. In "Teaching the Digital," María Mencía argues for the benefits of adopting a practice-based research inside the classroom. In the same part, Mia Zamora offers us the opportunity to know *Networked Narratives*, both a course and a project designed to promote digital literacy.

The third part, "Trans-Multi-Inter-Meta (The Medium)," aims to describe the role of the medium in the production, transmission and comprehension of texts, as well as to evaluate the conditions of media interaction, convergence, and divergence. Anna Nacher analyses materiality by focusing on the intermedial component of Shelley Jackson's work, *Snow* (2014–). In this part, María Teresa Vilariño Picos shares her reading of several transmedia stories.

The final part, "Tracking and Preserving Texts," presents essays concerned with the process of gathering and archiving texts. In this part, the reader will have the opportunity to know Devon Schiller's research about vocabulary for describing facial expressions. An account of my experience as the curator of the exhibition "Shapeshifting Texts" is also shared with the reader.

This collection culminates with an enticing and thought-provoking postscript written by the pioneering artist and professor, Frieder Nake.

Bremen, August 2017
Daniela Côrtes Maduro

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Dene Grigar

Rhapsodic Textualities

> ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
> πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν:
> πολλῶν δ᾽ ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
> πολλὰ δ᾽ ὅ γ᾽ ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,
> ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἑταίρων.[1]
>
> <div align="right">Homer, Odyssey</div>

> I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only
> piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have
> to sew me together yourself. Here Lies a Head, Trunk,
> Arms (Right and Left), and Legs (Right and left) as
> well as divers Organs appropriately Disposed. May
> they Rest in Piece.
>
> <div align="right">Shelley Jackson, Patchwork Girl</div>

In *Writing Machines* (2002), N. Katherine Hayles argues for electronic textuality, a condition of text that includes "signifying components" such as "sound, animation, motion, video, kinesthetic involvements, and software functionality" (20). Calling her approach to analyzing non-print texts "media-specific analysis" (29–31), she broadens the scope of literary criticism to attend to interaction common in hypertextual works where the user-audience experiences a text by kinesthetically combining and recombining lexias of text made possible through computer programming language and code. Such recombinatory structuring, according to Bill Seamen, allows a type of poetics where each "media-element . . . convey[s] its own field of meaning" and the user-audience "becomes dynamically involved in the construction of meaning" (Seamen, "Recombinant" 157–158). I refer to this recombinatory quality of text as *rhapsodic textuality*.

While Hayles and Seamen theorize specifically about digital texts, we see this mechanism at work in ancient, epic literature where units of texts and whole episodes are believed to have been stitched together in performance by singers, known in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, as rhapsodes. Derived from the Greek word *rhapsodein* (ῥαψῳδεῖν), meaning "to sew songs together," rhapsody today implies a musical improvisation, one relayed episodically yet maintaining narrative integrity for the audience.

I argue in this essay that Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) is, like Homeric epic poetry, rhapsodic and that this quality of textuality constitutes the work's poetics. Scholars and critics have long identified *Patchwork Girl* as

one of the major works of electronic literature. In "Electronic Literature: What Is It?" (2016) Hayles herself hailed it as "important and impressive" and called it "a culminating work for the classical period [of hypertext literature]" (200). Along with Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1987), it has long ranked high in the pantheon of electronic literature, which, to date, constitute the only works of the forty-three published by Eastgate Systems, Inc. on diskette or CD-ROM that have been migrated to a format accessible by contemporary computers. It is precisely because *Patchwork Girl* stitches together bits of texts, assembled and re-assembled during a reading or performance, with potentially many possible tellings—each resulting in, while not a "textual whole" (Eskelinen 70), certainly a coherent experience for the user-audience—that the work has achieved its recognition as an important literary work. That it uses the metaphor of stitching the body of the Frankenstein monster for the sewing together of its many lexias of the hypertext only adds to the playful orchestration of the work.

My notion of rhapsodic textuality aligns with Daniela Côrtes Maduro's notion of "shapeshifting"—that is, the ability for literature to "self-renew" by "chang[ing] its form"—and to her argument that shapeshifting can be found in oral, print and electronic literature.[2] I suggest that the potential to shapeshift is a feature of rhapsodic textuality.

In regards to Homer's rhapsodies, the work we know as the *Odyssey*, for example, was sewn together, according to Milman Parry, "by many [people] over many generations" (li) from several sources over time. References to the Trojan War can be loosely dated to 1250 BCE, while episodes focusing on Odysseus's journey, books 9–12, where he encounters the monsters Cyclops, Sirens, and Charybdos and Scylla are believed to be derived from very ancient folk tales that pre-date the war by hundreds of years. John Finley argues that such compositions arise from legends of heroes that "passed from generation to generation but [were] freshly used and slightly changed by each age and singer [enabling] singers to compose complete verses as they went along" (5).

It is believed that the work was performed in its totality from memory, beginning 566 BCE at the Panathenae festival held in celebration of Athena's birthday during last ½ of July and first ½ of August, which was the first month of the Athenian year. The length of the epic—12,110 lines—however, required several performers in succession to present it at the event. Because of the amount of time it took to perform the work, it is believed that it was more often presented at other events by performers who recited their favorite episodes or targeted specific parts of the story to a particular audience (Doherty). Odysseus and Penelope's reunion where she tricks him into revealing himself as her husband is believed to have played well to an audience containing women. His defeat of the dangerous suitors at the end of the story may have been recited when the theme called for an example of heroism and male virility. And the

loss of his men on the sea following their devouring the Sun God Helios' sacred cattle may have taught the ethical lesson about human folly and hubris against the gods. Performers of the *Odyssey* were believed to be adept enough to shift through the narrative from episode to episode, by word or phrase, based on the audience's reaction, stitching a performance together on the fly. Performed in this way, the *Odyssey* contains the potential for multilinear storytelling, though it was indeed assembled in the form that we have to today as one continuous written story with a beginning, middle, and end, long after it had been an oral experience. But as an oral epic, more often than not, it was recited in bits and pieces in a way that defies the notion of this very unilinear structure. Key to rhapsodic textuality is this very quality to relay a coherent and satisfying user-audience experience whether the story is relayed in parts or assembled as a whole, over time.

Patchwork Girl was published in 1995 by Eastgate Systems, Inc. on diskette and re-released on CD-ROM in 2000 and most recently, in 2014, on a USB stick. It was produced with the company's own proprietary software, Storyspace, a hypertext authoring system used by artists in the early 1990s to early 2000s. For authors wanting to experiment with writing for the electronic medium, Storyspace provides affordances like hyperlinking between textual units and opening up the text to multimedia reading paths. As a Storyspace hypertext, *Patchwork Girl* utilizes the structure of nodes and links to tell the story of the female monster created by Mary Shelley whose body is stitched together from body parts of other women. In total, *Patchwork Girl* contains 323 lexias, 462 links, and 45,000 words.
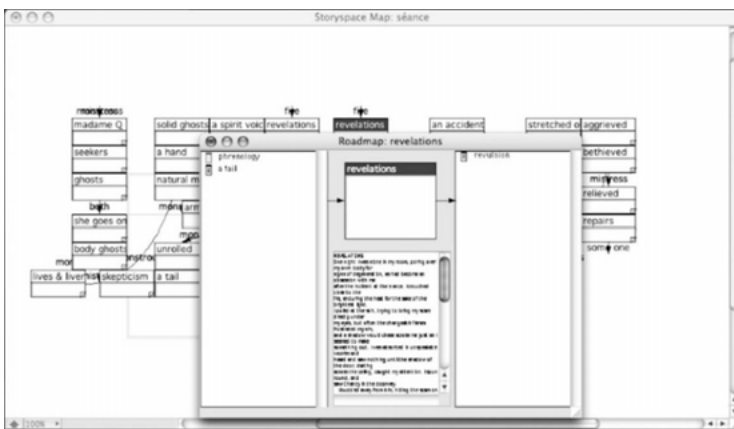

Fig. 1. Nodes and links found in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*.

Drawn from both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818, and L. Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1913), the story has been read as a commentary on feminist issues relating to authorial voice, women's body, society role and expectations, and image of self as other (Odin 58).

The narrative is organized into five threads: a graveyard, a journal, a quilt, a story, and broken accents. No particular order is required for moving through the hypertext. We can click on any of the threads to experience the work. Clicking on "graveyard" in the list takes us to the graveyard node where we can see more nodes nested inside. Clicking on the body of the node, we encounter the line: "I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself." Clicking on the text gives us:

> Here Lies a Head,
> Trunk, Arms (Right
> and Left), and Legs
> (Right and Left)
> as well as divers
> Organs appropriately
> Disposed.
>
> May they Rest in Piece.

The work continues through this pattern of clicking on words and following links. As mentioned previously, no set path is laid out for the user-audience. We experience the work as bits and pieces not unlike the Patchwork Girl herself.

In the fall 2014, Stuart Mouthrop and I videotaped Shelley Jackson performing a Traversal of *Patchwork Girl* as part of the Pathfinders project, funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities. A Traversal is "audio and video recording of demonstrations performed on historically appropriate platforms" (Moulthrop and Grigar 5). In this regard, Jackson performed the work using the 2000 CD-ROM version of the work on a "graphite" Power Mac G4 Tower that had been released by the Apple Corporation in 2001, certainly the computer her audience may have used upon the release of this particular version. Traversal videos were edited into four clips ("Unweaving the Poetic Narrative," "Confronting the Monster," "Stitched Remix," and "Parallel Patches") and, along with other media, such as images and sound files, were made available in an open-source, multimedia environment built on the Scalar platform. The advantage of producing videotaped Traversals is obvious: they provide documentation of the work, particularly the interactive and hypertextual ele-

ments that cannot be captured in a still image. Unlike Homeric epics where we have to rely on textual scholars from the 18th century onward to figure out how the work was constructed and performed, video documentation of Shelley Jackson's Traversal means generations after ours can hear directly from Jackson how she conceptualized her work.

Fig. 2. Shelley Jackson at her Traversal.

For example, in the Traversal entitled "Confronting the Monster," Jackson talks us through her process of navigating through the text. She tells us that she decides to jump from the word "journal" to Mary Shelley's "account"—which is actually authored by Jackson—where Mary confronts her own monster. Once Jackson reads this piece of the story, or lexia, she is faced with a decision. She can hit the return key and move to a lexia that follows or she can choose among two phrases, "one written" and "one sewn," that are linked with other words in other lexias. These, she tells us, represent the "parallel paths" that she developed throughout the work. The parallel paths in this case relates to the body in the sense of "a body of text" and a literal body that must be sewn together. "Writing becomes," Jackson says, "like stitches, and stiches become like writing," and it is up to the reader to decide which direction to go. Like a rhapsode reciting a favorite episode for an audience, Jackson does the same for us by taking us through segments of the story she wished to highlight.

But the stitching to which she refers reflects not just the *techne* of sewing but also design of the fabric itself. Like the *Odyssey* that was stitched from tales well known by his audience, Jackson, as mentioned previously, stitches her own text from two with which we are familiar: Mary Shelley's 19th century novel *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus* and Frank L. Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*. The genesis of Mary Shelley's story most of us are acquainted with:

during the summer of 1816 Mary Shelley, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and others vacationed together at Lake Geneva. In the evenings, the group recounted "Old German ghost stories" to one another. On a dare, they all tried their hand at creating their own frightening tale. Mary Shelley's idea came to her one evening in a dream about a "hideous phantasm" (Shelley 9). So well conceived was hers that she was encouraged to finish it as a novel, which she did. However, it is important to note that the ghost tales from which her story was woven were themselves sewn together out of German folklore tradition that developed over centuries and reflected many cultural influences that were remixed and emerged influential to German nationalism. They were themselves already stitched together over time and then re-stitched by Mary Shelley into *Frankenstein.* A century later, Baum stitched his own tale out of Mary Shelley's, giving us his patchwork girl, which Shelley Jackson then borrows for in her novel.

Midway through this clip, Jackson tells us that she is clicking through a section that is "quite linear" so that she can get to the place in the story where Mary Shelley makes love to her monster. Jackson then tell us that she plans to "jump back" to the original overview where she can access the lexia relating to the "Graveyard." Storyspace hypertexts often made it possible to hit the return key and move along a predetermined path, riding, as Michael Joyce calls in his preface to *afternoon: a story*, "a wave of returns." Just as likely, one would spend time selecting a direction to go when encountering choices, as Jackson does when she encounters multiple paths to follow. Thus, within these hypertexts was the potential for many ways of reading and performing the work. The proverbial Borgesian forking path that Jackson confronts has the potential of revealing the composition of both the Monster's body and the body of the hypertext. Likewise, we find a similar forking path construction throughout the *Odyssey*. Homer's frequent use of the Greek conjunction, μεν δε [on the one hand and on the other] signifies the mindful deliberations Odysseus often made when faced with a choice. A simple word search of the epic turns up well over 500 uses of this conjunction. George E. Dimrock argues that Homer used this construction as a way to maintain unity while at the same time to include "probability in his plot" (22). It's worth noting that Jay David Bolter, who along with Michael Joyce created Storyspace, was trained in the Classics and so may have very well have been familiar with the use of this Greek conjunction to denote choice.

The video clip continues approximately for a minute after the previous one with Jackson explaining the way she had constructed the lexias pertaining to the various body parts that comprise the Monster. She brings up the head of the Monster and shows us that she can "move" the lexia containing the head around and so reconstruct the body visually. Audiences listening to rhapsodes

singing the *Odyssey* or *Iliad* would have been able to compose and recompose text by interiorizing it in the mind (Ong 9), much as Jackson reconfigured it kinesthetically on the screen.

Homer's epics were composed in a very consistent dactylic hexameter and with formulaic expressions. It is believed that this compositional approach is common to oral, epic poetry (Ong 21) and is built out of the affordances and constraints of the oral medium. Extrapolating from contemporary Hungarian heroic epic poetry, the great Homeric scholar Parry was able to verify this practice. In the same token, the distinctive feature of Jackson's work is due to the economy enforced on it by electronic methods of composition. This includes both the affordances of the medium and the software: the instantiation of ideas through visual, kinetic, and kinesthetic modalities as well as into Storyspace hypertextual nodes and paths.

Rhapsodic textuality—the quality of being stitched together from prescribed bits of texts, assembled (and re-assembled) during a performance, into a coherent experience, from potentially many possible tellings—is a quality associated with but not limited to hypertext literature like Jackson's and has at its core a long tradition of fluid and audience-centered poetics distinct from print texts. While Walter Ong maintained that "the epic in effect is dead" and "Kazantzakis' continuation of the *Odyssey* is an alien literary form" (Ong 159), I suggest that Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* is, like Homeric ancient narrative, rhapsodic, and offers us a new way to describe epic reading experiences in the 21st century. Like the Patchwork Girl herself, it is alive in rhapsodic textuality.

Notes

1   Translation by Robert Fagles, 1996. "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns/ driven time and again off course, once he had plundered/ the hallowed heights of Troy./ Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,/ Many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,/ Fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home."

2   More information available at <https://shapeshiftingtexts.wordpress.com/>.

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