Chapter 14

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In late October 1997, a colleague sent me an e-mail to tell me about her recent trip to the U.S.-Mexico border, and mentioned, among other things, that she had picked up a copy of a Tijuana newpaper only in which Rosina Conde (a Mexican author who has interested me for a number of years) was publishing a novel called *La Genara* in installments. I was delighted to hear about Conde's new work and charmed by the idea of a revitalization of the old nineteenth-century cliff-hanger format familiar to us from writers such as Dickens, Balzac, and Pérez Galdós. After checking the web and verifying that this particular paper did not seem to exist online, I immediately wrote an e-note to a friend in Tijuana, who also happened to be a librarian at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, to ask if he could check his archives and save me copies of the installments. Instead, he wrote back with Conde's e-mail address. I wrote her, expressing my interest in her book, and she responded with an e-mail in which she asked whether I would be interested in reading a copy, which she would be happy to send me as an e-mail attachment. And so it came about that less than twenty four hours after I learned of this novel's existence, and several e-mail exchanges later, it was downloading on my computer and printing out in the comfort of my home. That afternoon, when I began reading the first pages, still warm from my printer, and realized that the novel was a modern epistolary romance,

conducted by e-mail and fax, I began laughing in delight at the strange quirkiness that brought this fiction to me in precisely this way.

Compuserve, AOL, and the web have moved into Latin America faster and more effectively than I ever dreamed possible back in the Stone Age of the 1980s, when electronic communication was still largely limited to computer jocks in research institutes. A decade later the scenario has completely changed, with the greatest acceleration in this transformation occurring as of the mid-1990s. Now, indigenous people are e-mailing messages from the mountains of Chiapas, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have set up their website and instant action network, and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) began serving as conduits for international networks of everything from grassroots agrarian movements to rock groups. Thus it is entirely unsurprising that Latin American writers have also moved quickly into the communication age. Given the much lamented difficulties of text distribution for all except the most prominent writers, the Internet's instant and international distribution possibilities of the net offer obvious attractions. Writers can get their works out to an ever-larger international community of casual readers, fellow writers, and literary scholars, and do it extremely rapidly and efficiently. This growth of online distribution networks is reshaping the publishing industry, as writers are increasingly turning to online self- or established e-publishing outlets for obvious reasons: publication is immediate, readers get cheaper books ($3.50 downloads are becoming standard, and few cost more than $10), and writers get larger royalities (40 percent to 70 percent of sales rather than much lower standard royalities for print) (Kuchinskas B7). Writers and critics can engage in dialogues heretofore impossible or exceptionally complicated—exchanging drafts of works-in-progress and completed but still-unpublished fictions and critical appreciations, responding to queries, providing access to out-of-print works as well as the newest fiction through downloadable files. Through the increasingly pervasive computer network, underrecognized writers from Spain, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and the United States can meet and share their works. Some of these fictions are more traditional in form and style, while others respond directly to the inspirations of the technology that underwrites their conditions of possibility: creating web-based poetry journals, collaborative fictions, and online mixed genre creative works that include text, sound, and moving images. Many of them enjoy the condition of evanescent fictions of varied, and frequently dubious, aesthetic merit, but with enormous creative panache. I am thinking here particularly of the interactive fictions like MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and RPGs (role-playing games) that require at least some input from the Internet user, who is increasingly referred to in some circles as a "wreader" and was presciently foreshadowed in paper-based texts like Cortázar's *Rayuela.*

Despite the enchantments of the Net and the web, in my incarnation as a scholarly reader of texts, I have an old-timers' preference for the solidity of print. Even refereed online texts seem to me a mixed bag—though often startlingly creative—and web-based fictions are often frustratingly ephemeral: here today, archanely archived in the unplumbed depths of hypertext, or totally gone, the next time one tries the bookmark. More than once I have tried to refer friends to a particularly intriguing site, only to register its absence or its retooling into some other, disappointing format. This is one of the reasons I am not recommending any specific sites in this chapter. Instead, here I will look at two print works that engage these technological transformations on a narrative level: Conde's novel *La Genara*, which came to me by such an interesting route, and Argentine Cristina Civale's short story "Perra virtual" ("Virtual Bitch"), from her collection of the same title (Edmundo Paz-Soldán told me about this story and gave me the bibliographical data—by e-mail, of course). The former takes a traditional tale and recasts it through the use of a late 1990s epistolary style; the latter uses chatline encounters as a thematic structure for her story.

Internationally, Internet and web-conscious narratives have begun to consolidate into a increasingly large and recognizable print subgenre, and one that is buttressed and given greater visibility by the on-screen success of movies like the late 1998 Meg Ryan-Tom Hanks vehicle, *You've Got Mail.* While many hip contemporary fictions, like Civale's, make use of the newer information technologies alongside other markers of contemporary urban culture (VCRs, cable television, cellular phones) to establish a cultural matrix or frame for their narratives, other writers, like Conde, are emulating the formal qualities of these newer communication protocols to explore concerns that are stylistic as much as they are thematic. In this world of accelerated communications, perhaps one of the more influential models for both types of fiction is the crossover success of Nan McCarthy's trilogy of e-novels, *Chat*, *Connect*, and *Crash,* from their self-published format and online distribution through McCarthy's Rainwater Press website, (<http://www.rainwater.com>) in 1995 to their mainstream publication by Simon and Schuster Pocketbook in 1998 after they were praised by humorist Dave Barry and written up in the the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Glamour*, *People*, and others. in 1996-1997. McCarthy's success has been followed by that of M. J. Rose's online erotic thriller, *Lip Service*, sold first on the Internet, and then at Amazon.com, and picked up in early 1999 directly from online sources as the first electronic text chosen by Doubleday as a Literary Guild selection. Texts like those by McCarthy, Rose, Civale, and Conde look at the intersections among the categories of the simulation, the virtual, and the fictional and respond, in their very different ways, to the aesthetic challenges posed by these new technologies.

Informally, we have all heard anecdotes about how the Internet has changed the shape of interpersonal dynamics through role playing in chatrooms, cyber-romance exchanges, and cyberporn sites. One of the attractions of web technology for a contemporary writer like Cristina Civale, I would suggest, is precisely this democratization of fiction effects whereby adults are able to continue playing a grown-up version of make-believe. Already in the mid-1980s, Arthur Kroker and David Cook were presciently signaling what they called the last and most purely artistic phase of capitalism: the site of power as the process of estheticized recommodification in the computer age. For Kroker and Cook, one of the key phases in this recommodification of capital involves a shift into virtuality, "where we experience pure imagining-systems as real, and where perspective itself is always only fictional because it is perfectly simulational. Estheticized commodification is the region of *virtual* cameras, of *virtual* technology, and of *virtual* perspective—the region, in fact, where the aesthetic symmetries of particle physics become the structural logic of the Real" (20). For Kroker and Cook, these changes loomed on the literary and cultural horizon as the "dark side" of the aesthetic transformation they correctly predicted, a commentary that meshes perfectly with a good deal of the anti-Net hype so familiar to us. Worried commentarists fear that electronic dialogue is coming to replace human interaction, that technically savvy children are all too ably maneuvering their ways into unsavory locations, that electronic input (the booming electronic market in, say, quicktime movies and interactive video striptease) can have all-too-evident real effects on the (implicitly male) bodies sitting at the keyboard, and that assumed virtual identities pose threats to users' perceptions of reality by inappropriately merging categories of fact and fiction. To this dark side of technological aesthetics, Celeste Olalquiaga would add that with the fusing of performance and spectator in virtual space, the "boundaries between what is being watched and who is watching barely exist" (6).

Civale's short story, "Perra virtual" inserts itself defiantly into this dark side of the e-revolution. The narrator, a high-class call girl, has discovered in the Net a new and extremely effective way of doing business. Taking her cue from the omnipresent spam that litters electronic bulletin boards, but with a much more directed approach, this technologically informed young woman has subscribed to a high-power Net typically used by well-to-do men. Her modus operandi is to lurk in the background of discussions, then invite a prospective client to a private chatroom. There, she seduces him with a virtual proposition before getting down to business with the offer of a real-world encounter: to be paid for with a credit card, no haggling, all

charges to be handled over the Net, naturally. The young woman–who calls herself, aptly enough, "Luz" ("Light") in her online / professional identity—thus fulfills the wet dream of misogynist e-porn. Unlike most such fantasies, which limit themselves to assumed personalities and an exchange of hot electrons, Luz represents a fantasy that is readily available, for a reasonable fee, both online and in person, at home, in one's own bed as well as on one's computer screen. Luz's comeuppance occurs, logically enough, through the operations of an even more able manipulator of the electronic network. An overwhelmingly attractive businessman with whom she falls hopelessly in love turns out to be another lurker, or more accurately, "lurkers," a cabal of fifteen-year-old boys who have invented the net identity of Aquiles García de Andina for their online role-playing.

"Luz," la perra virtual, manipulates the possibilities of the Net in order to create a business advantage, and like the flow of electricity for which she names herself, she imagines her service as providing connections with a specific subset of men: "young rugby players, laptop businessmen, architects and graphic designers, brokers short on time, liberals come down in the world, inexperienced nerds" ("jóvenes rugbiers, empresarios de *laptop*, arquitectos y diseñadores gráficos, *brokers* con poco tiempo, liberales venidos a menos, *nerds* sin experiencia," or, in more general terms, the clients who "habitaban espacios invisibles, agazapados en sus casas-terminales, en busca de sexo-alivio") (13). The democracy of the keyboard provides Luz with her first leveling device; in the second and final stage of her online sex service, the intromission of her ostentatiously hyperconstructed bohemian body into their private space keeps them off guard and her in cash.

The virtual chat room blurs into the physical house-terminal so that Luz can literally emerge from the computer screen into the client's private space. In this story, we never lose sight of the underlying theatrics that play out in the sexual excitement Luz discovers in her vitual/physical overlap of cyber and physical sex. Electronically initiated "sexo-alivio" ("sex-comfort") is her business, but Luz readily admits that she finds the double manipulation of men and medium deeply pleasurable. In this respect, Olalquiaga's observation about the interplay of cyberspace and the material body is apposite: "Technology is gradually displacing the organic in favor of the cybernetic and the symbolic with the imaginary, producing a fragmentation of the self that is compensated in the intensification of pornographic and painful pleasures" (1). I would add that it is precisely the gradual and playful slippage between the cybernetic and the organic that in Luz's case allows for this intensification, and it is the mannerism of her self display that creates an underlying painful

tension, just as her body is drawn out to tightly strung tendons and an anorexic-appearing skeletal structure.

Luz preserves a certain off-putting artificiality in self-presentation that distinguishes her from the voluptuous female images most favored in cyberpornland: "She was so skinny that at some times she seemed transparent and at others ethereal. She always dressed in black and she had gotten a mole tattooed on her breast. Her only colored accessory was a fake ruby mounted on a gold ring that she wore on her left little finger" ("Era tan flaca que algunas veces parecía transparente y otras, etérea. Siempre iba vestida de negro y se había tatuado un lunar en el nacimiento del pecho. Su único detalle de color era un anillo de rubí falso engarzado en oro que llevaba en su meñique izquierdo") (23). Here Civale's narrative participates in a self-conscious performance of what Elspeth Probyn in another context describes as "a kind of 'bored yet hyper' cynicism in a climate marked by a certain *m'en foutisme*, a couldn't-care-less-ism" (501). Luz's physical description matches her lack of emotional color or depth; Civale has drawn her as a profoundly unsympathetic character who deploys bad attitude into a niche market business success.

In "Perra virtual" the narrative ostentibly plays with the potentialities of electornic anonymity and with boundaries of permissible approaches to physical pleasure. Yet, despite its suggestive title, the story operates from a highly constrained and reductive notion of agency, and Luz acts only within an extremely restricted field. The main character's hip/hyper bored pose is a superficial screen for the thinness and inadequacies of her world. Although the e-prostitute's business uses real-world sexual service as its cornerstone, it nevertheless involves what Kroker and Cook might call an originary "immaculate deception" (24). Ultimately, Luz is self-deceived by her role-playing, and the narrative hints that some crucial, if ineffable, human element is missing from her e-generated life. Luz's business begins with electronic rather than street corner encounters and she insists payment for services only by credit card and sex only with condoms, thus eliminating both the tangible exchange of cold hard cash and the intimate exchanges of human sexuality. In these transactions, the obscurely virtual overtakes the cynical bitch, leaving the woman little room for maneuvering.

This restricted agency is nowhere so clear as in Luz's climactic encounter with the five fifteen-year-old boys who meet her at the door of the apartment in her final appointment of the story. She had, of course, expected that instead of servicing a gaggle of virgin nerds she would be enjoying a fabulous evening with her dream lover. Despite her disappointment, Luz does not pass up the business opportunity. She has sex with each of the boys, in silence, as she tries to prevent them from seeing "how a single tear ran down her cheek"

("cómo una única lágrima le rodaba por la mejilla"); they pay, in silence, and break into "hyena laughs" ("carcajadas de hiena") (24) as soon as she is out the door. Thus, the highly laquered and artificial manner she presents in both her virtual and her staged corporeal identities breaks down in the conjunction of her single tear and their communal laughter, the combination of which serves to point up her vulnerability.

The power dynamics of technified encounters are also responsible for the panicked obsession which plays out in the story's closing lines. Despite the boys' admission that "We are Aquiles García de Andina" ("Nosotros somos Aquiles García de Andina") (and regardless of the sexual service she provides them, which acts as a tactic acknowledgment of the eletronical contract between the two cyber identities), the story ends with Luz's frantic, illogical search through her desmantled computer for physical evidence of her desired, and entirely virtual, lover: "Luz was already in her house taking apart the computer monitor, naked and worn out, searching inside there for the lost man. Aquiles García de Andina had to be somewhere. He had not been a dream. He had been" ("Luz ya estaba en su casa desarmando el monitor de su computadora, desnuda y abatida, buscando allí dentro a su hombre perdido. En alguna parte tendría que estar Aquiles García de Andina. No había sido un sueño. Había sido") (25). In the slippage between the two final sentences of the story—"no había sido . . . había sido"—Civale puts pressure (if this hypermodern story can be said to indulge in any such retrograde meditations) on the question of existence itself. Luz's conviction that somewhere, somehow she will be able to materialize the embodied form of her AI (artificial intelligence) dream reflects as well on the nearly disembodied quality of her own pseudoexistence both as Net-prostitute and character in a printed fiction. This severe restriction of the possibilities of personal action and realization—despite Luz's apparently liberated, apparently hypermodern, apparently technologicaly connected condition—suggests that while electronic marvels may put a gloss over certain human problems, they provide no panacea for them, and in fact may intensify the dangers implicit in the late-capitalist, recommodified aesthetic that serves as a cultural base.

Civale's story also implicitly takes a critical stab at the unspoken pretensions of certain online culture producers, reminding us that the Net requires literacy without any concomitant approximation of creativity or profundity, and that real-time chatroom logs tend to be no more aesthetically rewarding than audio recordings of cocktail party chit chat. They are ethnographic signs, and not developed literature. Luz saves her chatlogs—initially, she says, as a kind of job insurance—and after the García de Andina fiasco she pores over them endlessly. These printed documents encapusulate Luz's hope for and/

or suspicion of hidden depths in the man she loves: "the log of the only two conversations turned into her most valued fetish, along with the photograph of her dead mother. . . . When García de Andina became a dusty memory, she printed them out and dedicated long hours to reading them with devotion, each time searching for a new signification and, above all, for a hidden declaration of love" ("El registro de las dos únicas conversaciones se convirtió en su fetiche más preciado junto a la foto de su madre muerta . . . . Cuando García de Andina pasó a ser un recuerdo polvoriento, los imprimió y dedicó muchas horas de sus días a leerlos con devoción, buscando cada vez un nuevo significado y sobre todo, alguna velada declaración de amor") (18). One of these two conversations is reproduced in the text in its entirety: the crucial dialogue in which Luz falls headlong in love with her newfound chatroom partner. It is a dialogue that she describes as fabulous, intriguing, mysterious, compelling. The reader of the story, however, would be hard-pressed to call the log anything other than a completely banal exchange of basic personal data about the presumed individuals' supposed identities, rapidly giving way to an agreement to meet at a specific place for an agreed-upon fee. Here's an excerpt from the beginning:

> Luz: ¡Qué honor!
> García de Andina: El mío.
> Luz: Quiero saber quién es.
> García de Andina: ¿Quién?
> Luz: Estoy exagerando . . .
> Luz: Usted.
> García de Andina: Aquiles, 33, abogado . . . (19)
>
> Luz: What an honor!
> García de Andina: The honor is mine.
> Luz: I want to know who you are.
> García de Andina: Who?
> Luz: I am exaggerating . . .
> Luz: You.
> García de Andina: Aquiles, 33, lawyer . . .

That is about as good as it gets. In some sense, Civale's story carries to an extreme its recognition of a phenomenon that other Net denizens have noted and commented upon as well: the different quality of Net-constructed versus fully embodied relationships and the incommensurability of the two forms of friendship. In *Chat,* for instance, Nan McCarthy's character Bev writes an e-note to her friend, Max, explaining her resistance to meeting him in person: "Even if two people are just friends online and they meet as friends in person, the reality of the situation is that the chemistry is usually wildly

different (or nonexistent) from any kind of chemistry that may have been happening online. And what's worse, once two people have met each other F2F (that's face-to-face) and they try to return to their online relationship, the magic has disappeared" (56-57). Unlike McCarthy's chatty online couple, Civale's Luz immediately negotiates the shift from online to F2F only to discover to her dismay that Bev is absolutely correct—when Luz is pursuing an intimate relationship rather than her standard business fuck, meeting her lover in person is crashingly disillusioning and has the effect of sending her fleeing back to the computer, only to discover that the online chemistry cannot be recovered.

While Civale uses the Internet chatroom to explore the darker aspects of human relationships in the F2F world, Conde focuses more specifically on the stylistic implications of electronic communication and, more broadly, on rethinking the genre of the epistolary novel with respect to the personal computer revolution. Conde's characters rely heavily on e-mail to keep in contact with family and friends, but the novel is also peppered with references to, and examples of, other forms of modern communication as well: old-fashioned snail-mail letters and cards, telegrams, faxes, and telephone calls. There is even one longish informational note in English technospeak from the "CompuServe Postmaster" on the proper way to format Internet addresses. The novel consists of a collection of such varied written communications, as if—in good, old-fashioned style—printouts and documents were thrown together in a box, to be ordered and reread after events have come to closure. Most of these communications take place between two sisters: Genara, who lives in Tijuana, and Luisa, who is pursuing a graduate degree in Mexico City. To a lesser extent, the novel also includes e-mail, letters, and faxes from the women's parents, from Genara's estranged husband, Eduardo, and from her boyfriend, Fidel. The plot of the novel is that of a familiar melodrama: Genara learns that her husband is cheating on her, she dumps him, and begins a new relationship with Fidel. Luisa's newsy letters from Mexico City gradually shrink and disappear; it turns out that her stories of life in the big city are purely fictional and that she is gravely ill with anorexia, so that her shrinking letters match her shrinking body. A cousin, Federico, dies in a car accident. Various bit players—friends, relatives, acquaintances—float through the letters.

In Conde's text, the manipulations of form are definitely of more interest than the rather banal plot. One of the novel's leitmotifs is its insistence on finding the most appropriate form of communication for a given set of circumstances, and its interest in fixing certain (local, fluid) protocols for the different forms of communication. The older generation—Genara and Luisa's parents—do not have an e-mail connection, and use phone and fax as their preferred means of rapid communication. For privacy, however, there is no substitute for the sealed envelope. Thus, for example, the mother faxes Luisa: "This morning I received your letter. What a good thing that you didn't send it by fax, because your father could have received it" ("Hoy por la mañana recibí tu carta. Y qué bueno que no la enviaste por fax, porque pudo haberla recibido tu padre") (93), indicating that Luisa has correctly, if perhaps inadvertently, preserved the privacy of the mother-daughter communication on a delicate subject. The same faxed letter continues with the admonition that the mother has pretended to lose the letter so as not to have to show these inappropriate daughterly musings to her husband. Thus, she urgently needs Luisa to resend a toned-down version in order to keep peace at home: "I repeat: send your father a fax" ("Mándale a tu padre un fax, insisto") (94)—clearly, the mother is much less concerned about father-daughter privacy, or the mother reading a fax addressed to someone else, and more interested in assuaging her husband's current anxiety about the supposedly missing letter.

If her parents love their fax machine, Genara, on the other hand, prefers to use e-mail for her communications, especially with her sister, who lives a long-distance call away in Mexico City and who, in any case, is not always easily available. However, on at least one occasion she sends a fax to Luisa because she worries that her sister won't read her e-mail (37). Later in the novel, she sends an e-mail because she can't get through on the phone lines with a message she considers urgent, and assumes that the prolonged busy signal on the phone means her sister is online (84). In other circumstances Genara also prefers e-mail over the phone with her correspondents because she wants to explain something in greater detail and depth without interruption to her flow of thought. This is the case in her longer e-mails to Fidel, who lives nearby, as she feels that a phone call would not allow her to develop her point adequately. She also argues that a phone conversation is somehow colder and more impersonal than a written e-note (109).

For some purposes, the only socially correct form is a traditional handwritten note. Upon hearing of a death in the family, Luisa sends her mother a letter, and includes with it a condolence card: "Give my father the card I wrote for him" ("Entrégale a mi padre la tarjeta que escribí para él") (29). On another, more lighthearted occasion, Genara sends a card to her sister from a local tourist spot: "I hope you like the postcard. I bought it especially for you" ("Espero que te guste esta tarjeta. La compré especialmente para ti . . .") (60). When Genara joins her sister for a vacation in Cuernavaca, Eduardo sends her a telegram to let her know that he will be unable to join her (the reader soon discovers that Eduardo's telegrams, like his complaints about the pressures of his job, are stereotypically obvious excuses to cover up an affair): "impossible to go work problems" ("imposible ir problemas trabajo . . .") (39). In each case, the choice

of e-mail, regular mail, fax, telegram, or phone call responds to increasingly refined (if still nebulously unwritten) rules and protocols regarding standards of privacy, delicacy, ease of communication, convenience, and the like. Because there is a wide range of choices available to the sisters and their families, the decision to use one form over another—letter over fax, e-mail over phone, telegram over phone call—always carries in this novel an additional charge of meaning above and beyond the tailoring of a written communication to the individual reader that we have come to expect from the epistolary form.

Thus, if the choice of technology is meaningful, following certain expectations of context and form, it is a marked error to use the wrong form in a given set of circumstances, even if those circumstances may vary by individual. For instance, although Genara's unresolved marital difficulties with Eduardo have tempted her to listen to Fidel's sweet nothings, she considers e-mail as the only appropriate forum for their dialogues and sends a furious e-note to her aspiring lover when Fidel is so tactless as to send her a paper letter to her home address: "What made you think of sending love letters to my home? Don't you realize that you are compromising me? . . . You knew I was married, right?" ("¿Cómo se te occure enviarme cartitas a mi casa? ¿No te das cuenta de que me comprometes? . . . [S]abías que era casada, ¿o no?") (63). On another occasion, Luisa complains to her mother about a snailmail letter, when a fax or a phone call would have been better: "Why didn't you phone me or send me a fax to let me know that Federico had died?" ("¿Por qué no me llamaron por teléfono o me enviaron un fax para avisarme que Federico había muerto?") (28). Luisa also scolds Genara for using e-mail almost exclusively to keep her sister informed about family gossip in the form of long, chatty e-letters: "Is that why you signed up for electronic mail? I did it to be connected with the intellectual world, not to bother myself with that damn gossip!" ("¿Para eso te inscribiste en el correo electrónico? ¡Yo lo hice para estar conectada con el mundo intelectual, no para ocuparme de sus malditos chismes!") (99). We can conclude that, for Luisa, the forms proper to informal family affairs are phone, fax, and—when a more leisurely or distanced or formal communication is desired—an old-fashioned letter. For Luisa, ostensibly at least, e-mail is a tool of international intellectual exchange (although the novel includes none of her academic communications). Genara, on the other hand, prefers e-mail for almost all her personal meditations; she finds in the combination of a writerly style of composition and the rapidity of connection a perfect medium for dialogues that are both distanced and immediate. She is also by far the most electronically committed member of the family; she complains when her letters go too long without a response, as in this e-mail to Luisa: "Why such a long silence? Your last letter . . . I read it almost immediately after you wrote it . . . . From that point on, I've written to you three times and nothing about you" ("¿Por qué tan largo tu silencio? Tu última carta . . . la leí casi, casi inmediatamente después de que la escribiste. . . . A partir de entonces, te he escrito tres veces y nada sobre ti") (73).

One of the oft-noted advantages of e-mail is precisely the immediacy of long-distance exchanges. In Conde's novel, the long, meditative e-mails are interspersed with brief notes and rapid-fire exchanges. While Luisa and Genara's letters belong to period 1989-1991 and thus predate to the widespead use of online chatrooms, there are moments in which the sisters take part in chatlike exchanges, such as this dialogue between them, occurring March 6-8, 1990:

> Genara: ¿Estás segura que nunca manifestó cariño o, en realidad, no te diste cuenta?
> Luisa: No, no había manifestado cariño.
> Genara: . . . ¿No será que la vida académica te está enfriando? ¿O la soledad de la que me hablabas?
> Luisa: No sé. A lo mejor . . . (83-84)
>
> Genara: Are you sure he never showed any affection for you, or, maybe you just didn't notice?
> Luisa: No, he never showed any affection.
> Genara: . . . Might it be that academic life is chilling you? Or the loneliness you told me about?
> Luisa: I don't know, perhaps . . .

There are no "transcripts" of phone conversations in this novel, only written documents and electronic files susceptible to downloading and printing. This conversation is perhaps the closest approximation we have to what a dialogue between the sisters might look like. Yet, the very nature of e-mail, and the necessarily interrupted flow in the e-mail dialogue, force us to imagine Luisa's brief answers to Genara's complex queries as both actually delayed and potentially immediate, theoretically making them more considered than a standard conversational brush-off.

More common in the brief e-mails are the businesslike series of rapid exchanges between Genara and Fidel, often to set a time and place to meet. E-mail for these two provides greater privacy than a local phone call, since phone messages could force Genara into uncomfortable explanations to her husband. Consider, for example, this note of September 15, 1989: "Fidel: Look for me in the Chiqui Jai, today at 5:00. Under no circumstances should you not come" ("Fidel: Búscame en el Chiqui Jai, hoy a las cinco de la tarde. Por ningún motivo vayas a faltar") (67). Underlying Genara's note is, of course, a double assumption: both that the message will be delivered

without computer glitches and that Fidel logs on to his e-mail regularly and consistently.

The wealth of communication possibilities also multiplies their intrusiveness, as when Eduardo floods Genara with e-mail, faxes, and phone calls in a vain effort to convince her to give their marriage another chance. Genara fires off an indignant plea in response: "You're right in saying that I received your faxes yesterday and the day before and that I refuse to answer your phone calls. I don't need to speak to you. . . . I beg you to quit bothering me" ("Tienes razón al decir que recibí tus fax de ayer y anteayer y que me niego a contestar tus llamadas. Yo no necesito hablar contigo. . . . Te suplico que ya no me molestes más") (16). Unfortunately, Genara's effort to distance herself from her unfaithful husband runs into a conflict with her old-fashioned parents, who feel that marriages should be kept together and use one of the ruses of modern technology to try to achieve their goal; Genara complains to her sister of the problems caused by their parents when they forge and send Eduardo a conciliatory fax supposedly signed by her (19). Eduardo's paper trail is thus supplemented and augmented by the parents' decision to rectify their daughter's impolite ignoring of her husband. The parents' efforts are temporarily successful in bringing the couple back together, but later, when Genara is visiting her sister in Cuernavaca, several anonymous e-mails convince her to make the definitive break. While out of town, Genara receives these anonymous messages informing her that despite his promises, her husband has been seen around town going out with his mistress (41-42). In all three of these cases—the messages from Eduardo, the well-meaning, intrusive parental fax, the anonymous e-mails—what is highlighted beyond the ease of communication is the facility with which they impose themselves upon Genara's private space. Likewise important is the reminder that online communication offers unprecedented opportunities for disguising and / or hiding identities.

Reading Rosina Conde and Cristina Civale alongside each other provides us with two different points of entry into the cyberfictional world. Civale explores the intersection of Internet-fiction effects and corporeally based role-playing, while Conde asks her readers to consider the way various communication options poses stylistic and structural challenges to narrative form. Together, they begin to trace an innovative aesthetic position for a post-Gutenberg world, and look forward to new forms of fictional expression.

Until recently, most discussions of such computer-facilitated and computer-conscious works have tended to variations on the theme of ideological demonization familiar to us in popular press discussions of cyberporn or to the high theory celebrations of the joys and depravities of simulation and virtuality—both of which often seem like two sides of the same coin, and in any case oddly disconnected

from the day-to-day experience of the growing number of online service users. There is no doubt that the new technologies do more than provide ease of access and rapidity of connection to their patrons; by the same token, for literary scholars they also pose aesthetic challenges to the print-oriented literary and cultural studies base. Strangely enough, despite our quotidian immersion in the Internet, discussions of the way the computer age has been reshaping narrative are still radically undertheorized. If I were to propose possibilities for such theory building, texts like those of Civale and Conde provide excellent starting points. Who better than our fiction writers to help us think about the intersections between the virtual and the corporeal? Civale asks, in essence, How does the computer reshape interpersonal relationships? Conde would add that the study of such questions also requires a rethinking of underlying assumptions deriving from a print-and-postal system that has become increasingly outmoded. Together, their works remind us that in an evermore technologically aware world, literature too is exploring new ways of writing, and requiring of its readers different kinds of reading and interpretative practices.

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