



# A “Careful” Reading of Latin/x American Women’s Electronic Literature

ARTICLES – DIGITAL  
MODERN LANGUAGES

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the recurrent narration of caring relationships and attempts to construct communities of care in electronic literature created by Latin/x American self-identified women. It addresses this topic by reading a select number of these works in relation to the significant body of theory that has emerged since the 1980s around feminist care ethics and its more recent updating to address questions of intersectionality, networked digital media, and our imbrication in networks of relationships with non-human entities. In particular, the article focuses on the narration and/or creation of non-heteronormative, non-white communities of care in works that have tended to be excluded from studies of Latin/x American electronic literature. Case studies thus include a number of queer cyberfeminist fiction and non-fiction blogs by the Afro-Cuban writers/academics/activists Yasmin S. Portales Machado and Sandra Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, as well as two science-fiction games/interactive narratives with trans of color protagonists made by Latina digital media and performance artist micha cárdenas and collaborators. It argues that the need to imagine and create alternative webs of care is of paramount importance for LGBTQI+ as well as racially marginalized groups, and that (networked) digital technologies have proven to be highly significant in terms of the way they can support the development of affinity-based groupings, as well as offering new ways of narrating complex and shifting intersectional identities and relationships.

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## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pitman, Thea 2023 A “Careful” Reading of Latin/x American Women’s Electronic Literature. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 12 pp. 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.426>

She looks for the eruptions of unexpected liveliness and the contaminated and nondeterministic, unfinished, ongoing practices of living in the ruins. She performs the force of stories, she shows in the flesh how it matters which stories tell stories as a practice of caring and thinking. (Haraway 37)

Literature can give us an invaluable perspective on care by playing out examples of caregiving in diverse, richly detailed cultural contexts [...] Specifically, care communities reveal how care works over time, helping us to think about care as a process, a duration, and a performance. (Schaffer 521–2)

In the quotations that form the epigraphs to this article, Donna Haraway is discussing the academic work of anthropologist Anna Tsing on mushrooms while Talia Schaffer is discussing Victorian literature. Despite the diversity of contexts, both underscore the force of storytelling as a form of caring in itself and/or as a way of narrating acts of care and the construction of communities of care and hence addressing some of the most important questions of our times. In this article I propose to draw on my previous work in relation to Latin/x American self-identified women’s digital cultural production (Pitman, “La narración”; “Latin American”) to focus my attention on the recurrent narration of caring relationships and attempts to construct communities of care in this body of work. I propose to address this by reading a select number of works in relation to the significant body of theory that has emerged since the 1980s around feminist care ethics, and its more recent updating to address questions of intersectionality, networked digital media, and our imbrication in networks of relationships with non-human entities.

The narration/creation of communities of care is, of course, not an essential attribute of Latin/x American self-identified women’s digital cultural production, nor something that never happens in relation to works created by self-identified men, where, for example, Eduardo Navas’s *9\_11\_2001\_netMemorial* (2002) springs to mind. Nonetheless, it is a persistent theme in this body of work, from the early provision of a message board in the kitchen of Jacalyn Lopez Garcia’s *Glass Houses: A View of American Assimilation from a Mexican-American Perspective* (1997)<sup>1</sup> to the encouragement of a contributor community to feed into María Mencia’s *El poema que cruzó el Atlántico* [The Poem that Crossed the Atlantic] (2017).<sup>2</sup>

What interests me particularly here, however, is the narration/creation of non-heteronormative, as well as non-white, communities of care in works that have tended to be excluded from studies of Latin American electronic literature ostensibly either because of their literary genre (blogs) or because of an overly strict policing of the border between Latin America and Latinx communities north of the Mexico–USA border. Nonetheless, these works are arguably more tacitly excluded because of their emphasis on non-heteronormative, non-white subjects in a field of academic enquiry that evidences an overriding interest in analysing avant-garde technopoetics rather than exploring how these new forms of writing can help address the complexities of human experience.<sup>3</sup> Yet the need to imagine and create alternative webs of care is of paramount importance for LGBTQI+ as well as racially marginalized groups, and (networked) digital technologies have proven to be highly significant in terms of the way they can support the development of affinity-based groupings as well as offering new ways of narrating complex and shifting intersectional identities and relationships, and for this reason it is important that they also receive scholarly attention.

My case studies thus include a number of queer cyberfeminist fiction and non-fiction blogs by the Afro-Cuban writers/academics/activists Yasmin S. Portales Machado and Sandra Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, as well as two sci-fi, cli-fi<sup>4</sup> games/interactive narratives with trans of color<sup>5</sup>

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1 N.B. Lopez Garcia is Chicana and, perhaps because of the prevalence of English in her daily life, writes her name without the accents expected in Spanish.

2 All translations from Spanish and Portuguese are my own, unless otherwise noted.

3 See case studies for further discussion of these omissions.

4 While sci-fi is an obvious abbreviation, it is worth pointing out that the neologism cli-fi refers to climate fiction, i.e. narratives focusing on the environment, climate (crisis), and ways to save the planet.

5 I have chosen to use the American spelling for the expression “of color” in formulations such as trans of color, queer of color or woman of color as it is overwhelmingly in a US context in which these expressions have currency. I do so without the addition of italics or quotation marks as I do not want such markers to be construed as a form of othering.

protagonists made by Latina digital media and performance artist *Micha Cárdenas*<sup>6</sup> and collaborators. I will first turn my attention to the field of feminist care ethics and the narration of communities of care, before considering the case studies in turn in order to address the following questions: What communities of care are narrated and created in these works and how? To what extent is the choice to narrate a form of care in itself? What communities of care come to exist between these works/their authors and their readers/players, or between the works/authors and other works/authors?

## FEMINIST CARE ETHICS AND COMMUNITIES OF CARE

Since Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice* (1982), the literature on feminist care ethics has been vast and various and it is not the purpose of this article to attempt to provide a comprehensive review of it all. What I am interested in here is that part of the literature that can help us to talk about the kinds of non-heteronormative, non-white, sometimes also “more-than-human” (to use David Abram's formulation) “communities of care” that will appear in and between the works of electronic literature studied in detail in this article. I am here borrowing the term “communities of care” from Talia Schaffer, who argues that such groupings are implicitly voluntary, informal and flexible, and hence different from the more official, recognized community structures of “religious institutions, tribes, castes, and nations” (538, n.6). This, I hope, justifies the continued use of the term “community” in the specific formulation of “community of care”, although I am aware that some argue that the term can never lose its normative charge and prefer to use terms such as “togetherness” instead (Bakardjieva 294).<sup>7</sup>

While the first generation of feminist care ethics was quite predictably premised on a universalist, essentialist, cisheteronormative understanding of “woman” that overlooked the impact of the intersection of all sorts of gender identifications with race, class, sexual orientation, disability or geopolitical location in relation to care, this has been addressed more recently by critics such as Cooper and Malatino for questions of gender and sexuality, and Raghuram and Girvan et al. for questions of race. The work on non-cisheteronormative gender and sexuality helps to prise apart the reliance on the heteropatriarchal nuclear family as care unit *par excellence*, suggesting alternative, more flexible arrangements for small-scale care structures that may, or may not, be referred to as families of any sort. It also allows for looser groupings based on affiliation and allyship, forming as assemblages or constellations, and it expands the reach of care from being a form of doing tied to such recognizable scenarios as the family drama to being a more open-ended form of mattering and “attentiveness”. (Indeed, if one attends to definitions of “queerness” as something inherently troubling, elusive, changing and unrecognizable by formal institutional structures [Sedgwick xii; Pierce 305–7], one might even argue that “communities of care” are *per se* “queer”.) As Davina Cooper argues:

Adopting a non-normative approach to care brings different culturally-coded models of care to the fore. It allows the frequently conflict-laden, intense, gritty, and fleshy character of relationships to surface as care rather than remaining submerged by a paradigm which sees them as messy exceptions or flaws. (257)

And as Hil Malatino writes in relation to trans care specifically:

transing care also means grappling with the fact that the forms of family and kinship that are invoked in much of the feminist literature on care labor and care ethics are steeped in forms of domesticity and intimacy that are both White and Euro-centred, grounded in the colonial/modern gender system. (7)

The above links neatly to the work on the intersection of gender and race in relation to care. This work is particularly useful for addressing the legacy that colonialism and slavery have had on caring relationships, where Black, Brown and Indigenous women are still disproportionately identified as those who should undertake caring roles (as maids, nannies and nurses, for example) for whites, even while being denied the ability to care for themselves or their

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<sup>6</sup> N.B. *Cárdenas* writes her name without capitalization, thus adopting a decolonial, antinormative stance *vis-à-vis* the expression of personal identity.

<sup>7</sup> There are also points of intersection to be found between my discussion of “acts of care” and “communities of care” and discussions of affect and the creation of “communities of feeling” (cf. *Sierra-Rivera*).

own kin, and being furthermore systemically undermined in their ability to perform such professional care (Raghuram; Girvan et al.). Elizabeth Freeman is also attentive to the different, “more expansive notions of kinship that supersede the genealogical grid” (303) that can be found beyond middle-class, white Euro-America and its reliance on the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, and that arguably also bear some resemblance to the non-heteronormative communities of care discussed above.

Questions of care have also been addressed by researchers exploring the difference that networked digital environments such as the Internet make to human relationships. Cyberfeminism, or the wide “range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture”, was also guilty in the first instance of speaking from a purportedly universalist, but tacitly white, Western, educated, middle-class positionality (Daniels 102–3). Nonetheless, more materialist cyberfeminist work attuned to intersections with race and LGBTQI+ subjectivities as well as different geopolitical contexts has been in evidence since the early 2000s, with notable attention paid to the way in which the Internet can facilitate support for transitioning and transgender lives more generally (Bryson) as well as cyberfeminist practices that embrace women of color from the Global South (Fernandez; Gajjala and Oh). Most recently, Graciela Natansohn and Josemira Reis’s work on contemporary Brazilian “transhackfeminist” groups underscores the way that their hacking focuses on:

o levantamento dos problemas sistêmicos e estruturais que se manifestam nas sociedades e na tradição tecnológica (racismo, sexismo, transfobia, queerfobia, etc.) em contraposição à ênfase autocentrada e libertária de produção de conhecimento compartilhado das comunidades hackers, geralmente masculinizadas... (16)

[surveying the systemic and structural problems that manifest themselves in societies and in the field of technology specifically (racism, sexism, transphobia, queerphobia, etc.) in contrast with the self-centred and libertarian emphasis on the production of shared knowledge to be found in generally masculinized hacker communities...]

Consequently they underscore the importance of contemporary feminist care ethics above hacker ethics in this context, as these women engage in “um processo de constituição ativista onde o cuidado assume lugar central, que visa dar respostas as condições de vulnerabilidade, adversidade e precarização que se encontram as mulheres nos ambientes tecnológicos” [a process of activist formation where care plays a central role, and where they aim to respond to the conditions of vulnerability, adversity and precariousness that women experience in technological environments] (Natansohn and Reis 12).

Finally, questions of care have also been addressed by those interested in the dependence of all living beings on nature, “Mother Earth”, for sustenance and who hence explore care as extending to non-human agents. Definitions of care have long expanded beyond deliberations about one set of humans providing for the perceived needs (rather than the desires) of another set of humans. Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher’s much-cited conceptualization of care as

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Tronto 103)

recognizes this by including care for “our environment”, yet they do still centre humans – the species – as the (potential) care-giving agents. The fact that climate change has been scientifically proven to be driven by human activity has led many to speak of our geological epoch as the Anthropocene and to impress upon us all the need for more careful stewardship of our shared environment. However, Donna Haraway prefers to decentre humankind as the sole agent capable of care in this equation in order to provoke more radical responses to the situation. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, she argues that our geological epoch should be termed the Chthulucene (after the spider, *Pimosa cthulhu*, among others), in recognition of the webbed and entangled/tentacular interdependence of all things and thus of “multispecies response-ability”, as well as of the need for more “attentive practices of thought, love, rage and care” and a shift on our behalf in the language we use to talk about such things (56). In *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, María Puig

de la Bellacasa also follows Haraway's lead in her theorization of a radical more-than-human or "alterbiopolitical" ethics of care that is "about working within bios with an ethics of collective empowerment that puts caring at the heart of the search of transformative alternatives that nurture hopeful thriving for all beings" (167).

Before I move on to discuss the examples of electronic literature selected for analysis in this article, I want to be clear that my interest here is not in attempting to answer any of the core ethical questions relating to matters of care *per se*, but in examining through literature the narration and creation, either real or imaginary, of the kinds of voluntary, non-institutionalized communities of care that respond in some way to the debates and developments in the field of feminist care ethics outlined thus far. I also want to underscore the importance of literature in this endeavour to imagine things otherwise. Talia Schaffer argues that re-reading literature to tease out what it has to say about communal relationships rather than to better understand the psychology of individual characters allows us to make an important shift of emphasis towards centring relationality (537). Donna Haraway is also insistent on the need for a new kind of "careful" storytelling to try to imagine alternatives which, for example, might entail a shift away from the quest-based narratives of human heroes to "ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with" (55).

Given that all the works that I will be analysing here narrate and create non-heteronormative communities and relationships, I also want to emphasize the role of narrative – albeit hybridized, cut with other forms of prose and with poetry – as the medium for such an endeavour. In Tyler Bradway's insightful discussion of "queer narrative theory", contrary to many who position narrative as an innately conservative form that "turn[s] queerness into LGBT identity, normalizing deviance into a difference that makes no difference and domesticating sexuality to fit the marriage plot" (Rohy 177–8), they argue quite categorically that, "Narrative is not the antithesis of queerness. It is a form through which queers forge, experience, sustain, renew, and reimagine relationality" (Bradway 712). And this, Bradway argues, holds even for more mundane forms of narrative (such as non-fiction blogs, one might suppose); it is not just the preserve of avant-garde narrative experimentation.

This "reimagined relationality" requires blasting away institutionalized forms of community – a term Bradway describes as "too inert to render the morphology of bonds forged through sex, heartbreak, and care" (723) – and using narrative as an open-ended, "sympoietic" (in Haraway's terms) unfolding where newer forms of kinship and relationality that bear little if any resemblance to previous forms of kinship, family, couple or nation can be explored. Bradway goes on to identify a selection of rhetorical features of narrative queerness in surprising shifts and blurrings of point-of-view, in metonymic relations of "contiguous dependency", and in "palimpsestic" layers of relationality built up over time. These are all rhetorical features that we will see in evidence in the analysis of the blogs and the games/interactive fictional narratives below as their authors seek to reimagine relationality from the perspective of queer Afro-Cuban women and Latinx trans of color.

## LAS VIDAS NEGRAS QUEERS IMPORTAN

My first case study focuses on a number of queer, arguably cyberfeminist, fiction and non-fiction blogs by the Afro-Cuban writers/academics/activists Yasmin S. Portales Machado and Sandra Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez. I want to start by making a case for the inclusion of at least some non-fiction blogs within the genres of electronic literature. As I have argued elsewhere (Pitman, "Latin American"), blogging has not been embraced with open arms in definitions of e-lit. See, for example, the definition given by Scott Rettberg in *Electronic Literature* where he argues that "electronic literature is fundamentally experimental literature" (5), listing as prominent examples hypertext fiction and kinetic poetry (3). Where blogging has been included, the tendency has been to accept the odd experimental "blog-novel" but not non-fiction blogs. Indeed, Rettberg finds space in one of the later chapters of his book dedicated to "network writing" to very briefly discuss "fictional blogs" (168–70) and, in a Latin American context, Osvaldo Cleger has published a whole book dedicated to the subject, offering Argentinian writer Hernán Casari's politically dubious but entertaining *Weblog de una mujer gorda* [A Fat Woman's Blog] later renamed *Más respeto, que soy tu madre* [Show Some Respect, I'm Your Mother] (2003–05), as his primary case study.

The reticence to accept non-fiction blogs as electronic literature may be because they are seen as being too easily “printed out”, albeit in reverse date order, so not “electronic” enough (although this is disputable given their dependence on the inclusion of hyperlinks and their increasingly multimedia composition), or because they are self-published and there is thus no gatekeeper to ensure “literary quality” (although many are authored by more traditionally published writers, and others self-present as literary in some way). Indeed, in a Latin American context, blogging fits very well with that *sui generis* Latin American literary genre, the chronicle. As the Bolivian-American writer Edmundo Paz Soldán wrote in 2007, when blogs were first coming into their own in the region,

The literary star of the day is the blog [...] In Latin America the chronicle has been, since the end of the nineteenth century, one of the privileged genres of our modernity [...] But perhaps the true contemporary form of the chronicle is being written on the Internet by the authors of blogs. (260)

The prominent Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez also specifically defined her writing as sitting “a medio camino entre la crónica, el exorcismo personal y el grito” [halfway between chronicle-writing, an exercise in personal offloading and an angry outburst] (9) in the introduction to *Cuba Libre*, the 2010 book of her *Generación Y blog*.<sup>8</sup>

But if we are going to read non-fiction blogs as literature, we would be well advised to have a think about the defining rhetorical features of the genre, rather than rely on loose value judgements about literary quality that might elevate one such as Sánchez’s to being worthy of consideration as literature and condemn another as no more than verbal diarrhoea or “information”. Scholars of the blog, such as Jill Walker Rettberg, point out that it takes a journal form in reverse date order with the newest entries appearing first; relies on brevity and frequency of posts; and on being unfinished and hence lacking in narrative closure, with each post largely working as a self-sufficient unit. This latter aspect is suggestive of a “queer” approach to narrative in Bradway’s terms outlined above. The blog format furthermore relies on a pact of trust between writer and reader in terms of the non-fiction status of the writing and in terms of the writer’s being who they say they are in the “about” section, so that “personality” may be developed to draw the reader in, but this should not go so far as to embrace fictional “characterization”. Intimacy and confessional writing are also prominent features of much blogging and can provide voice/visibility for those writing from minority subject positions, though at the risk of dangerous over-exposure because of the traceability of their authors.

The overall aim of this form of writing is furthermore to create connections; to build new, affective communities based on shared interests and values rather than geographical contiguity and formal membership of recognized institutions. As Walker Rettberg writes, “blogs are social”, and what we get out of them is “a stronger sense of belonging to a community, of belonging to a group of people who not only see who we are, but who care about us as well” (62, 89). It is thus the case that, in terms of rhetorical features, the genre relies on the blogger sharing hyperlinks to other blogs and resources and on the use of the comment function for dialogue between the blogger and their readers. Indeed Julie Rak argues that the genesis of blogs may be found in the curated lists of “‘pre-surfed’ links” that came about in the days before the boom in search engines such as Google (170). With the development of usually free, user-friendly software tools, blogs boomed in the early 2000s, ceding terrain since the 2010s to the microblogging platforms of social media. During their heyday, “media filter” blogs around particular topics that continued the legacy of the lists of links gave way considerably to the appropriation of the software by those with a desire to upload more personal, diary-type content or to practise citizen journalism (Rak 171), though of course these different purposes often overlapped.

It is thus clearly the case that blogs are a hugely important source if we want to discuss questions of care and affective communities, and extant research confirms the degree to which blogs have been used to support the development of specifically queer and trans communities, or counterpublics, in different parts of the world (Rak; Ferreday and Lock; Mitra and Gajjala).

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8 For a more detailed study of Sánchez’s blog, see Pitman, “*Revolución.com?*”. Jeannine Murray-Román’s study of blogs written by Cuban writer Zoé Valdés and Jamaican writer Staceyann Chin also argues convincingly for considering blogs as a form of literature.

The caveat to this is that blogging is premised on the same liberal values that underpinned the early hacker ethics that Nathanson and Reis critiqued *vis-à-vis* transhackfeminism: “early blogs participated in the early ideology of the web as a non-corporate public space for individual expression”, where “the individual blogger is assumed to be singular, unique, and capable of being understood as a cohesive personality and a free agent who chooses content” (Rak 171, 174). This is a conundrum for those who would wish to queer the construct of identity, expressing non-unified, shifting, multiple selves, in counter-distinction of course to those who are happy to commodify queerness into being an identity that can be recognized by heteronormative institutions.

Blogging has proven to be a notably prominent and tenacious genre in Cuba. In particular, it has played a key role in allowing for the development of communities of care for dispersed and/or minoritized groups, for whom offline, formal association can either be dangerous or else is not facilitated by the State and its stranglehold on community formation. It continues to flourish as a genre on and off the island, in the “Cuban blogosphere”, even today, despite the shift to newer social media elsewhere in the world. The first blogs in Cuba emerged in the early 2000s and were associated with official journalism outlets. Nonetheless by the mid-2000s more independent, personal blogs were beginning to appear, despite ongoing restrictions on public internet access.

While much attention has been paid to the work of Yoani Sánchez, some of the earliest independent blogs were authored by Afro-Cuban queer/lesbian feminist writers/activists/researchers such as Yasmin S. Portales Machado and Sandra Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, who were specifically seeking to create visibility and community around their particular intersectional demographic.<sup>9</sup> In the profiles to her various different blogs Yasmin Portales Machado typically presents herself in the following terms: “Vivir en Cuba y ser Queer ha sido elección. Mi vida es un fino equilibrio entre el ejercicio de la maternidad, el feminismo y el marxismo crítico” [Living as Queer in Cuba has been my choice. My life is a delicate balance between being a mother, a feminist and a critical Marxist.] In her single, long-standing blog, Sandra Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez presents herself as “Negra cubana” [Black Cuban woman], an activist who blogs about “feminismo antirracista decolonial abolicionista” [abolitionist, decolonial, antiracist feminism]. There is a greater emphasis in Portales Machado’s self-definition, and consequent blogging, on questions of non-heteronormative sexuality, and in Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez’s on questions of race. Nonetheless, lesbianism, sexual diversity, “cuidadad” [queerness] and questions of discrimination are recurrent topics in the latter’s blog itself and in one recent post she also chooses to describe herself as an “activistamujerfeministanegralesbianaantirracistaantiespecistaveganasocialista” [socialistveganantispeciesistantiracistlesbianblackfeministwomanactivist] (“Soy la Negra cubana” [I Am that Black Cuban Woman], 18 July 2020).<sup>10</sup> Portales Machado has, in the past, described herself as a “mujer negra y bisexual” [black and bisexual woman] (“Mis deberes” [My Duties]) but seems to have progressively moved towards a more radical articulation of non-heteronormative identity and to paying less direct attention to her own racial identity, despite an ongoing commitment to addressing racism in society. Although both clearly self-identify as feminists, Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez is explicit about being a cyberfeminist who undertakes a “creative feminist appropriation” of digital technologies and identifies Portales Machado as one too (“Practices of Resistance” 215, 221), while the latter, in response to the former’s questions on the subject, prefers to identify as a “feminista marxista” [Marxist feminist] who blogs, rather than as a cyberfeminist. Both now live outside Cuba – Portales Machado in the United States and Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez in Germany – and thus form part of the wider Cuban blogosphere.

Portales Machado has set up a number of blogs over time. She started with the slash fiction blog *Palabras robadas* [Stolen Words] (2005–14) where she posted homoerotic fanfiction based on novels such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series or J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. These works were also posted on the *FanFiction* website under the pseudonym Pulsares. Over approximately the same period, she also co-authored the blog *Bubusopía* (2006–16) with her

<sup>9</sup> Both have received some scholarly attention as bloggers (see Byron on Portales Machado and Sierra-Rivera on Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez). However, neither has been studied within the scope of electronic literature, except in my own previous work which briefly touches on Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez (Pitman, “Latin American”).

<sup>10</sup> All references to blog posts will be given parenthetically in the following format: shortened title of blog post and date of posting only. The name of the author and of the blog itself will only be given if necessary for clarity.

husband, the scientist Rogelio M. Díaz Moreno.<sup>11</sup> This focused on reporting on questions of science and politics, as well as gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba. Portales Machado has also gone on to set up a number of other personal blogs including *En 2310 y 8225* [23.10° N, 82.25° W] (2011–15) – the title references the longitude and latitude of her home in Havana – and she describes it as being made up of “crónicas, reflexiones o relatos” [chronicles, reflections or stories] (*Pulsares*). On moving to the United States, this blog was imported wholesale into a new personal blog entitled *Mi vida es un fino equilibrio* [My Life Is a Delicate Balance] which has since changed names to *Diario de viaje* [Travel Journal] without changing URL (2015–). These blogs contain reflections on her personal life, for example around the challenges of maternity and motherhood and her resistance to social expectations of her in this most conventional of care-giving roles, as well as her experience of queer nightlife, alongside more journalistic posts relating to LGBTQI+ issues in Cuba. Although *Diario de viaje* is still ongoing – Portales Machado posts two or three times a month, often podcasts – since leaving for the United States she has generally dedicated less time to blogging and more to her social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, reflecting the relative importance of these forms of communication for community building in the two countries (*Byron 92*).

Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez has stuck to just one blog – or “bloga” as she often calls it, grammatically feminizing “el blog”, the accepted masculine noun in Spanish – since 2006. Entitled *Negra cubana tenía que ser* [It Just Had to Be a Black Cuban Woman], it is comprised of original posts, copies of articles that its author has published elsewhere and an increasing number of reposts of relevant material by third parties. Although Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez has argued that the blog “devino reflejo de mi propia vida durante los últimos trece años [...] Ella se parece a mí, o para decirlo de otra forma, soy yo misma” [became a reflection of my own life over the last thirteen years [...] It resembles me, or, to put it a different way, I am my blog] (*Negra cubana, Wanafrica, 20*), material narrating Álvarez’s life and loves is relatively thin on the ground, and instead the blog serves more media filter, activist and journalistic functions relating to her areas of interest. Materials posted since the blog’s inception sixteen years ago are truly voluminous, albeit less so in recent years, and, as a hallmark of its success, a homonymous book combining an edited selection of posts plus a few other articles published elsewhere has recently been published by Wanafrica Ediciones in Barcelona.

In the “About” section (“Curriculum Vitae”), Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez stakes a claim for the blog’s being “la primera que desde Cuba abordó la temática racial” [the first blog in Cuba to deal with the topic of race]. It is divided into two main sections entitled “Negritudes” [Negritudes, or ways of being Black] and “Femineando” [an invented word meaning “all about being a woman”] which place emphasis on race and gender respectively, while still retaining an intersectional lens in both. However, the blog goes beyond the intersection of race and gender in the lived experience of Afro-Cuban women, to also focus on non-heteronormative sexual orientations, and as the information on the back of the book’s cover says, it aims to “da[r] cuenta de una sociedad cubana alternativa, underground y no normativa que suele estar fuera del foco mediático” [give an account of an alternative, underground, non-normative Cuba that tends not to get much media attention]. Since moving to Germany in 2013, Álvarez has also become much more active on Twitter.

With respect to *Negra cubana tenía que ser*, Judith Sierra-Rivera examines the nature of Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez’s networking through the blog, both in terms of how the blog relates to its growing readership and how its author uses intertextuality – that form of hypertextuality that predates the internet – to work up a sense of intellectual community that her readership can share. With respect to the former, she characterizes Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez’s networking as a “small and intimate” endeavour to “educate and advocate for black women”, “connect Cuban black women’s voices with other voices around the world”, and “create safe online networks where women can openly discuss any issue without being threatened” (*Sierra-Rivera 332, 330, 339*). In terms of numbers, while the blog does not currently display the total number of visits, at the time of writing it has c. 7,100 regular followers, and this number has grown slowly but surely over the years that it has existed. With respect to intertextuality, Sierra-Rivera traces the similarities and direct allusions in Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez’s blog to writers

11 The title is extremely difficult to translate. “Bubú” is a common name for pets, and is often used as a term of endearment between couples. “Sopia” is presumably a morphological distortion of “sofía”, thus referring to knowledge or thought. It thus means the musings of the couple that are its authors.



such as Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, Nancy Morejón and Virgilio Piñera, as she develops a radical, queer, Afro-feminist discourse, and to Donna Haraway and others in her self-presentation as a cyberfeminist. Furthermore, Sierra-Rivera identifies Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez's discourse around love as central to her agenda, arguing that the blogger seeks to break with the conceptualization of idealized, unsatisfied love (for one's country, for the Revolution) enshrined in the discourse of the Cuban government since the time of the Revolution, to propose a more immediate, realizable and flexible form of love for both self and others as the basis for the community she is attempting to build. Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez discusses this kind of love in terms of polyamory in her work, and Sierra-Rivera argues that the blogger is trying to "form another kind of (more fluid) 'we'" through this proposition, and to "assemble a community whose members share the cyberfeminist goal of a love/sexual revolution that radicalizes body politics (gender, race, and sexuality) thanks to (dis)embodiment processes in virtual space" (Sierra-Rivera 331).

We can judge the success of Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez's counterpublic community-building endeavour in a number of ways. The development of spin-off group projects such as the *Directorio de Afrocubanas* [Directory of Afro-Cuban Women] – an online resource that documents c. 350 prominent Afro-Cuban women from all walks of life – is significant in evidencing the growth of a real community of Afro-Cuban women who want to work together to support each other through the visibility accorded by research and its dissemination online (cf. Rubiera Castillo). The publication of a book of the blog itself also attests to the recognition accorded to Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez by others for her work overall. Furthermore, the growing number of posts on the blog that are authored by others is another indication of its community-building success – indeed, the blog is arguably not really a personal blog of a unified, liberal subject, nor explicitly a group blog either, but a work that evidences a form of blogging from the more fluid, rhetorically queer, subject position outlined above, where "I," "you" and "we" shift meaning from post to post.

Finally, rather than take it as read that all of the above illustrates the existence of a queer Afro-Cuban community of care, I want to explore the question of how care is evidenced in the subject matter of *Negra cubana tenía que ser*, by way of a focus on select keywords. My reading of the blog suggests that Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez and the other contributors are quite guarded in their use of a term such as "cuidar" [to care] and related forms. They use them infrequently and, when they do, it is to critique the standard patriarchal assumption that women, and Black women even more so, will undertake caring roles in society – Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez herself works as a nanny in Germany (see, for example, "Nueve aclaraciones" [Nine Explanations], 16 July 2019). Care for these Afro-Cuban women is a term corrupted by its institutional usage. However, terms such as "amig\*" [friend, in a gender-neutral form suitable for corpus-based searches] provide a far more effective way to take the pulse of the kind of community that the blog has created. While many of the posts narrate vignettes of the life experiences of Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez's friends, or are indeed written by those friends, others serve a more metatextual function. For example, in a recent post summing up her blogging experience, Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez concludes by giving thanks: "A mis profesores, colegas, amistades, amigas, amantes, amadas: Gracias por las enseñanzas, por tantos mensajes de amor, por la lealtad, por el camino recorrido. Gracias por el codo a codo, por las preguntas, por los debates" [To my teachers, colleagues, casual friends, close friends, lovers and loved ones: Thank you for everything you've taught me, for so many messages of love, for your loyalty, for the road we've travelled together. Thank you for being by my side, for your questions, for our debates] ("Soy la Negra cubana", 18 July 2020; original emphasis). This statement first gives an account of the membership of the community created and the thanks given effectively reference the wide variety of different forms of voluntary care that underpin that community.

One aspect of blogging that I have not discussed with respect to *Negra cubana tenía que ser* is how it grew its readership from its very first post back in June 2006. What blogging platforms did it belong to? Which other blogs did it link to? I have perhaps inadvertently presented it as growing a community from scratch, with readers attracted to the blog as if responding to a magnetic force, rather than the blog's actively drawing together other people, groups and networks to elaborate its particular intersectional profile. It is easy to forget that this is the case with a very successful blog where we can focus on concrete evidence of what it has achieved. In the case of Portales Machado, it is not that the blogs have been less successful. *En 2310 y 8225* has received just over 152,000 visits to date; *Bubusopía* just under 212,000, and it still

displays a link to prove that it was ranked as one of the “top” Cuban blogs by [bitácoras.com](#) in its day. However, because Portales Machado has set up more blogs, it is more productive to look at how she relates to other groups as she seeks to build the communities she desires, rather than at end products.

*Palabras robadas* is of particular interest for the kind of community that Portales Machado seeks to participate in. The blog contains works of “standard” slash fiction rather than examples of femslash as has been claimed (Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, “¿Ciberfeminista yo?” [I’m Not Really a Cyberfeminist], *Negra cubana*, 13 September 2013). That is to say, the narratives uploaded to the blog describe homoerotic encounters between male characters – for example, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy – rather than between female characters. This is the most widely practised form of slash fiction, irrespective of the fact that it is predominantly written by women and consumed by women readers (Neville 385–6), forming a “queer female space” online (Lothian, Busse and Reid 103). Slash fiction sites have been described as “narrative safe havens” where women “can experiment with identity, find affirmation, and develop the strength necessary to find others like themselves and a sense of belonging” (Welker 866), and as creative practices that “elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations [...] including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment” (Warner 57). These are clearly crucial communities of care for their practitioners, most of whom both read and write slash fiction and whose shared narrative explorations of queer love echo Sierra-Rivera’s discussion of the radical power of polyamory in Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez’s work. *Palabras robadas* has received nearly 40,000 visits to date, and continues to attract readers even since the blog stopped being updated in 2014. The same slash fiction posts that Portales Machado put on the *FanFiction* site also generated a steady amount of comments from a small but eager group of readers who frequently pressed her for the next instalment in a story. Portales was also very attentive in responding to those readers.

But slash fiction, however much a popular queer narrative practice, also tends to be rather white, with the main base narratives being taken from anglophone popular fiction and film. Portales Machado’s practice is no different in this respect. Instead she uses her other blogs to explore other aspects of her identity and interests. Portales Machado includes hyperlinks on all of her blogs to her other blogs – “Mis otros yo” [my alter egos] – and, depending on the blog, to her profiles on Facebook, her Twitter feed as @nimlothdecuba and her YouTube channel, as well as her academic publications. This multiplicity of blogs, as well as the fictional nature of *Palabras robadas* and the inclusion of “cuentos” [short stories] and “crónicas” [chronicles] in some of the others, and the fact that she co-authors a blog with her husband, also helps Portales Machado to combat the liberal underpinnings of blogging.

Portales Machado’s use of hyperlinks also gives a good idea of the other communities to which her voices contribute. To take just the example of *En 2310 y 8225*, the links in the right-hand column indicate that the blog is part of the Comunidad Blogosfera Cuba [Cuban Blogosphere Community], a member of the Comunidad Bloggers Cuba [Cuban Bloggers Community], and that it is indexed on [bitácoras.com](#). There is also a separate link to the blog of Proyecto Arcoiris [Rainbow Project], a project initiated by Portales Machado to challenge the prevalence of homophobia in Cuba, another to the annual Jornada de Lucha contra la Homofobia en Cuba [Day of Protest against Homophobia in Cuba], and a last one to the *Compendio del Observatorio Crítico* [Compendium of the Critical Observatory], an online leftwing newsletter. There is also a list of recommended links to other blogs relating to questions of sexuality in Cuba (“Cuba bloguea sexualmente” [Cuba blogs about sex]), another relating to blogs about Cuba more generally (“Bloguean a Cuba muy OK” [Pretty good blogs about Cuba]), and a last one to an international set of “Sitios que te (me) recomiendo” [Sites that I recommend to you (and me)], tellingly blurring the first- and second-person pronouns in her address to the reader. And last but not least, intercalated in the list of hyperlinks is a simple quotation of the same verse from Virgilio Piñera’s “[La isla en peso](#)” [The Whole Island]<sup>12</sup> that Sierra-Rivera detected traces of in *Negra cubana tenía que ser*.

While it is worth underscoring the sheer volume of links provided here, it is also worth highlighting one link in particular. In the list of Cuban blogs about sexuality, the most prominent by far, one that only mentions the title of the blog itself rather than describing briefly what it

12 Translation by Mark Weiss (Piñera).

is about, together with a long, thin, cropped image of a painting showing a Black torso with breasts and chest hair and lower face with beard, is a link to *Negra cubana tenía que ser*.<sup>13</sup> It is the dense web of references that criss-cross between Portales Machado's and Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez's work that I want to address here. Both have supported each other since the very beginning of their blogging endeavours, recommending others to read each other's sites, tagging each other in tweets (Byron 114–16), interviewing and writing about each other,<sup>14</sup> and participating in each other's spin-off projects and activist initiatives such as the *Directorio de Afrocubanas* and Proyecto Arcoiris. This is not just a synecdochic reflection of an extant offline community of care but a form of writing, of hyperlinking as care that extends over nearly two decades and that directly contributes to the building of the desired community. As a testament to that endeavour, in 2018 Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez posted a manifesto in response to the furore caused by the white Argentinian lesbian reggaeton artist Romina Bernardo's self-presentation as Chocolate Remix, or Choco for short, which was seen by many as an example of black-fishing. This manifesto was signed by 94 other people and collectives, including Portales Machado of course, and ends with a set of statements that articulate clearly the different intersectional demographics that can mobilize to care for one another and, through that collective strength, demand due care from others: “Las vidas negras importan. / Las vidas negras lesbianas importan. / Las vidas negras queers importan. / Las vidas negras trans importan” [Black lives matter. Black lesbian lives matter. / Black queer lives matter. Black trans lives matter] (“¡El Feminismo Negro importa!” [Black Feminism Matters], *Negra cubana*, 14 May 2018).

## SHIFT FOR SURVIVAL, STITCH FOR CARE

My second case study focuses on Latina digital media and performance artist micha cárdenas and her work in the field of interactive fiction and computer games. Scott Rettberg argues that computer games offer “the most predominant form of storytelling in contemporary digital media” (116) and have provoked “some of the most developed thinking about the potentialities of computation for narrative, interactivity, and multimedia” (87). “Interactive fiction and other game-like forms” (Rettberg 87) thus fall rather more squarely within the parameters of electronic literature than the non-fiction blogs discussed in the previous section and, indeed, cárdenas has not been overlooked on this account – the works studied here both figure in the *Electronic Literature Organization's* curated collections of such works.

cárdenas's work also fits comfortably within the community of care that is the independent, and specifically queer, games scene in the USA. With respect to interactive fiction, Rettberg flags up the importance of “affiliations of enthusiasts who share works, infrastructure, reviews, and archives within a community of practice” for its development, characterizing it as “one of the best examples of a creative community developing outside of a commercial market or academic environment” (88–9). He also notes the importance of this narrative form for offering the potential for “modeling ethical choice and moral complicity” (Rettberg 102) as well as, with particular reference to the community that has formed around the Twine hypertext-based storytelling software package, “a place of avant-garde experimentation with language, gender, and identity” (Rettberg 105). Furthermore, Merritt Kopas argues that a significant part of this independent game-developing creative community constitutes a “queer games scene” that “has been spearheaded by trans women” (“*Trans Women*”), citing herself, Anna Antropy and Porpentine Charity Heartscape as key examples.<sup>15</sup>

While Kopas's work focuses explicitly on the potential of digital games “to facilitate care relationships and to build emotional skills [...] to imagine the kinds of worlds we'd like to inhabit, where care is a more celebrated and widely practiced activity” (“*Edgy Sex Games*”), Porpentine presents players with some very bleak moral choices to make in a world seemingly

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13 The painting is “Todes” (“Everyone”; spelled “es” to be gender neutral in Spanish) by Odaymar Cuesta, and it has appeared prominently on Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez's blog over time.

14 See, for example, Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, “¿Ciberfeminista yo?”, *Negra cubana*, 13 September 2013; and Portales Machado, “Podcast 0108”, *Diario de Viaje*, 5 December 2021; as well as two more academic presentations/publications: Portales Machado, “*Voces femeninas*” [Female Voices] and Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez, “*Practices of Resistance*”.

15 See also Ensslin and Skains for a detailed study of Twine and its enthusiasts.

lacking in any sense of community, care or hope (Rettberg 105–8). cárdenas’s work is clearly inspired by this group of trans women game designers – she too is a trans woman who, at least at the point of writing in 2010, described herself as “radically queer and polyamorous and independent” (“*Trans Desire*” 61), and she has furthermore written about her relationship to this group, arguing for “Game creation as an act of solidarity” (“*Dilating Destiny*”). Her work itself, I would argue, is rather more in the spirit of Kopas than Porpentine with regard to the question of communities of care.

In the context of Latin American electronic literature, however, it is most obviously cárdenas’s identity as a Latina rather than as a Latin American that sees her excluded from works studying specifically Latin American e-lit.<sup>16</sup> In terms of ethnicity cárdenas is a first-generation Colombian-American who, while she identifies as *mestiza* (mixed-race), also recognizes the extent to which she passes as white and thus benefits from white privilege (Himada), and is also acutely aware of her own complex imbrication in processes of settler colonialism/migration, both as a Colombian with Spanish ancestry and as a Latin American immigrant in the United States. In addition to her work in the field of game design, she is known both for her activist work in conjunction with the Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0/b.a.n.g. lab such as the development of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2007–12) – a mobile phone app to help illegal immigrants to the USA find water (and poetry) in the desert – as well as for her solo and collaborative bioart performances and digital media projects, most of which explore questions of transitioning and trans identity, particularly as it intersects with questions of race and ethnicity. Her work has been summed up by one critic as evidencing “a digital materialist cyberfeminist approach that is situated in trans of color knowledge and experience” (Casalini 12).

*Redshift and Portalmetal* (2014) is an online interactive fiction developed using the Scalar e-publishing software package, combining poetry/narrative, performance and video footage of landscapes.<sup>17</sup> The text, concept, programming, design and performance are credited exclusively to cárdenas and it circulates as a sole-authored piece. Nonetheless, in the work itself Bobby Bray is credited for the sound and Tobaron Waxman and Sam Nasstrom are credited alongside cárdenas for camerawork. Extensive thanks are also given to a whole host of people who helped inspire, develop and disseminate the work (live performances were also given), including trans game designers Merritt Kopas and Anna Antropy.

Set at a point in the not-so-distant future, the narrative depicts a scenario where the planet is dying and the reader must help the main protagonist, Roja, a trans Latina cyborg, make choices about where to go and how to behave as she considers possibilities for human survival on neighbouring planets and moons. The narrative is made up of a relatively simple set of around fifty “screens”, each of which comprises a box containing a fairly short text – or lexia, in hypertext terminology – and between one and three hyperlinks to select from, set against a background comprising images or video footage with ambient sound. The reading experience is fragmentary and potentially always incomplete – even with a fairly limited set of lexia, no reader’s experience will be like another’s, and even on multiple readings any given reader may not access all of the screens in the set. Any anticipated quest structure to the space-travel narrative – a purpose that the reader might try to guide the player-character towards – is gently diffused by the fragmented, non-progressive narrative. It is therefore very much more about characterization and affect, about moving the reader through empathy with the main protagonist, her words and physical performance, and as a response to the environments shown on screen, than it is about plot. Nonetheless, some kind of narrative closure is reached when the player comes across one of two screens that offer a single hyperlink made up of three dashes which takes them to a screen containing the credits and the option to start over.

More recently, cárdenas and a more prominently recognized set of collaborators have released *Sin Sol / No Sun* (2018–20), an augmented reality (AR) poetry-based “game” made with industry-

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16 For example, her work is not included in the *Antología Literatura Electrónica Latinoamericana y Caribeña* [Anthology of Latin American and Caribbean Electronic Literature] or the *Cartografía de la Literatura Digital Latinoamericana* [Map of Latin American Digital Literature], and it also does not appear in Nohelia Meza’s recent study of Latin American women’s electronic literature, though it does feature briefly in my own previous work on the topic (Pitman, “Latin American”).

17 There are many similarities between Scalar and Twine including the fact that they are both free, open source and do not require any knowledge of coding to use. Although the latter has been most widely used for independent games development, Scalar has the advantage of including video.

standard Unity video game software and designed for use on iOS platforms.<sup>18</sup> Created by the Critical Realities Studio at the University of California, Santa Cruz, which cárdenas directs, and crediting cárdenas for game design, writing, direction and performance, alongside collaborators Marcelo Viana Neto, Adrian Phillips, Kara Stone, Abraham Avnisan, Wynne Greenwood, Morgan Thomas, Zia Puig, Clara Qin, Dorothy Santos, Rachel Raymond and Robin Cruz, the game clearly builds on some of the scenarios and issues raised in *Redshift and Portalmetal*.<sup>19</sup> The “action” is set in 2077, according to the date given in the game itself (“Danced the connections...”),<sup>20</sup> sixty years on from a report published in 2017 by the United Nations warning that life on Earth would have become unsustainable by that point if no changes to rein in climate change had been made (cárdenas et al., *Sin Sol / No Sun* iOS app, “about” information).

On entering the game via iPhone or iPad the player must physically step forward – without any explicit prompting – towards the nearest of a series of cerulean blue AR “plants” that look as though they are made out of Lego, with steely grey outer casings that can “mechanically” fold up around them.<sup>21</sup> These plants are layered over the player’s real surroundings as seen via the device’s camera viewfinder, and they seem to “float” around instead of being programmed to coincide with the ground of the player’s surroundings. When the player gets close enough to the plant, the figure of a woman emerges from its centre in a swirl of particle effects and accompanied by pulsing, dramatic, electronic music. This is Aura2019, a glitchy, 3D, animated model who self-describes as an “errant navigational AI” hologram with a “latinx girl body” (“Danced the connections...”) – she has dark skin, a curvaceous body, dark purple hair, and cerulean blue eyes and dress. The player learns that she is an avatar created by an “original”, human Aura who has presumably died some decades previous to the moment of encounter and who created Aura2019 as a way of recording her memories in the hope of finding future companions of any sort with whom she might share them.

In an inversion of typical game play, Aura says she is pleased to have discovered someone – you, the player, undoubtedly AI yourself if you have managed to make it that far into the future – to talk to, and as she does so, she recalls fragmented memories of her life experiences of self-discovery as a trans woman and the violent imposition of conformity with normative gender and sexual configurations that she has experienced, as well as her affinity with other people of color and illegal immigrants. Interwoven with those memories are others recalling scenes from the final moments of the planet before the collapse of human life – massive forest fires, consequent air pollution, humans struggling to breathe and isolated in their individual “pods” because the air is too toxic to go out, especially for the clinically vulnerable. This scenario broadly correlates with the player’s present moment in time.

Aura is accompanied in her narrative by her dog Roja, a border collie rendered as a 3D object in white and metallic purple in the game and modelled on cárdenas’s own dog of the same name. The dog serves to draw players further into the game space as a kind of guide. Another object in the game is a large 2D screen depicting what was originally a 3D image of Pacific redwood forests. This “hangs” at awkward angles as the player moves around and is perhaps the least explicable or successful element of the game. Nonetheless, overall the aesthetically mixed, lo-fi, clunky nature of the game is also arguably a deliberate expression of glitch (trans) feminism.<sup>22</sup>

As with *Redshift and Portalmetal*, there is no clear goal or way of winning, or even playing, the game that is made explicit to the player. By the side of the first plant there is a transparent 2D screen bearing text in cerulean blue which is the poetic narrative that Aura performs when triggered to emerge from the plant. When her performance of the poetic text is over, she freezes, flops and disappears, and the plant closes up. The player may then physically move on to get closer to other plants that appear further away in their viewfinder. As they do this they trigger Aura to emerge from each plant in turn to perform the other poetic fragments that appear

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18 The game premiered in gallery spaces in 2018 and was released as an app in 2020.

19 This list of collaborators and roles is a combination of that given in the credits in the game itself (cárdenas et al., *Sin Sol / No Sun*) and that provided on the game’s website (cárdenas et al., *Sin Sol*).

20 For quotations from cárdenas’s work, I have identified individual lexia by the first words of their first line.

21 These plants are elsewhere described as “oxygen capsules” (cárdenas et al., *Sin Sol* webpage).

22 For the relationships between glitch feminism and transfeminism, see Sundén.

beside them, thus piecing together her narrative. There are around twenty such fragments to read/experience, including a set of credits in red rather than blue, and these fragments may be accessed in any order. The player can also approach objects from behind and even walk through them. As with *Redshift and Portalmetal*, the player's experience is of only having accessed a partial amount of the narrative and of having no certainty that they have put the pieces together in the right order to form a narrative arc. Furthermore, their experience of the narrative is hard to compare with other players' experiences since it is further conditioned by their external environment at the time of accessing the game. Indeed, it is worth noting that the game has to be played outdoors for there to be enough room for the player to physically access all the game objects – from an ecopoetic perspective, the key achievement of the game is to make players “Go outside and play it!”, in cárdenas's own words (“*Sin Sol & Oceanic*”).

Beyond the very real communities of supportive practice in independent game design underpinning the creation of these works, what I want to discuss here is the central importance of questions of care and communities of care in these “transreal” games/interactive narratives themselves and the poetics that support this, as well as the relationship established between them and their readers/players, and the wider practices of allyship that they seek to engender. *Redshift and Portalmetal* uses the scenario of space travel becoming necessary to escape a dying planet to raise questions about how we can build new, inclusive communities either by salvaging our own planet or setting up elsewhere in the solar system, but without going down the route of colonizations past. We read that, after the “colonizers' civilizations” on earth fall prey to climate change,

the majority, / who knew through the eons that / connection with the planet, with  
the self, communications channels to gods, spirits and souls / were more important /  
than cell phones and wifi. / The majority began to organize the planet again, / in their  
own fractal, local ways, / connecting across translocalities with respect and love. (“A  
few scientists knew”)

While this scenario is ostensibly bold and hopeful for “the majority” to construct more respectful, caring communities, one should note that Roja's “majority world”, her “we”, is implicitly comprised of all those who have been “colonized” in one way or another; all those who have suffered from the imposition of the settler, capitalist, white, cisheteronormative paradigm. Yet settler colonialism is not just a simple us versus them dynamic after so many centuries, as Roja acknowledges:

we are learning and teaching each other / ways of building homes / while trying to  
undo what we and our people have done as settlers / we are learning the spells so  
that instead of taking space / we can bend and warp and create our own timespace /  
and build new homes and families that can last longer than capitalism / and ways of  
loving that can sustain and heal. (“We have traveled through timespace”)

Family remains a care unit of reference in the above, but it is a non-normative “new family” that Roja is talking about; one founded on “ways of loving that can sustain and heal”. Roja elsewhere speaks of playing a maternal role: “I have found that to be a mother / to myself and others / I have to be able to hold / hold my own feelings, hold space, hold power, / to hold with the strength of softness” (“I have found...”). It is notable that this mothering is not specifically in relation to any children, but it is a radical type of care in the spirit of Audre Lorde's essays in *Sister Outsider* (1984), in relation to herself and others, including no doubt her lover, Cora. In her narration of her relationship to Cora, Roja also challenges the traditional, colonialist racialization of care in which Black people care for whites: Cora is pointedly described as having “brown glowing skin” (“I trust more”) and as being “much darker” than Roja, as well as disabled. Roja repeatedly returns to the anxiety of crossing borders as a trans woman, expressing additional concern for Cora who does not benefit from white privilege in such situations and finds it harder to defend herself (“What the fuck...”). Roja thus articulates a caring relationship in which she potentially takes the role of lead carer, or at least of someone exhibiting an equal level of care for their partner as their partner does for them.

This relationship between the two lovers also blends seamlessly into a wider kindred “we” rather than isolating itself by rhetorically policing the boundaries of any heteropatriarchal nuclear family. For example, in one of the narrative's endings, Roja underscores the vital importance for her of a wider community of care while transitioning and the need for mutual support:

Because solidarity matters, / love matters, / my sick and disabled loved ones have shown me, / when I need help just to stand, / from the pain of transformation, / that we need each other, / interdependence. / We cannot just split endlessly into smaller and smaller atoms, / more specific groupings, / tiny electron clouds, / because that would only lead to individualism, / we have to help each other, / to be able to survive the tearing winds of these worlds, / and travel across the stars together, / more important than anything else: connected, connecting. (“Because solidarity matters”)

“My sick and disabled loved ones”, in the plural, are the most obvious members of this community of care. But the passage also hints at the need for more extensive “solidarity”. Indeed, *Redshift and Portalmetal* was designed primarily, *cárdenas* tells us, for “other queer and trans people of color who are having similar experiences” (*Poetic Operations* 118), and the narrative works through the necessary identification between the narrator – Roja – and the reader who advances by selecting choices for her, and who becomes embroiled in the narrative through Roja’s many shifts in narrative point-of-view, from first- and third-person singular to second-person singular and first-person plural. Furthermore, in its discussion of alternatives to settler colonialism both in terms of its impact on native peoples and on the health of the planet, *Redshift and Portalmetal* also aims to “go beyond empathy towards solidarity” by “honoring the Mississauga, New Credit, and Grassy Narrows” First Peoples of Ontario, Canada, with whom *cárdenas* was conducting a residency as she developed the work, and encouraging the reader to follow a link to their webpage to find out more information and get involved in Indigenous activism (*Poetic Operations* 121). Elsewhere, *cárdenas* has written extensively of the community-building, through creative world-building, aims of her work:

The strategy that I propose for the contemporary situation is one of world building, one of creating communities and learning the skills needed to live together in the world we want. In this way, desire can be seen as a foundation to imagine the world we want so that fantasy becomes lived, on a small scale, in daily life, among friends, building understanding, engaging in self-defense of our communities, creating structures based on shared desires for an egalitarian, feminist, anti-patriarchal world. (“Trans Desire” 72)

The text of *Redshift and Portalmetal* also takes the narrative threads of mutual support in the face of danger and attempts to create alternative communities of care and amplifies them through its poetics. In her theorization of trans of color poetics, *cárdenas* speaks most notably of what she terms the “poetic operations” of the “shift” and the “stitch” as “trans of color strategies for safety and survival” (*Poetic Operations*, “About”). While *cárdenas*’s “poetic operations” clearly relate to the process of transitioning, and gender reassignment surgery in particular, she also abstracts them to apply to narrative and creative processes in general. The “stitch” can refer to the way different narrative elements such as *lexia* can be sutured together in different ways and “used to create relation” and “build solidarity among people” (*cárdenas*, *Poetic Operations* 25) and/or to the metaphorical evocation of such an operation. In *Redshift and Portalmetal*, the reference to the invented concept “portalmetal” in the work’s title refers to jewellery that can help the wearer connect with ancestors or with kindred spirits on other planets, thus “stitching” together distributed communities of care.

On the other hand, the “shift” can, for example, refer to sudden changes in narrative perspective in relation to the need for trans people to be able to swiftly modulate their visibility in social interactions. In *Redshift and Portalmetal*, the scientific reference to redshift in the work’s title – a reference to the way light from distant galaxies is absorbed at the red end of the spectrum as a result of the space between the Earth and the galaxies expanding – is reworked in the narrative to refer, on a most basic level, to “embodied transformations” (*cárdenas*, *Poetic Operations* 117) such as the use of lipstick and other aspects of self-presentation that can help trans people reveal different aspects of their identities to different audiences, and thus avoid dangerous confrontations. It is further abstracted to refer to the shifting that is at the base of *cárdenas*’s “transreal” form of narrative where autobiographical and science-fiction fantasy are welded together to avoid the voyeuristic expectations of a heteronormative society that imagines that trans writing will perforce take the form of the tell-all memoir (*Poetic Operations*

128).<sup>23</sup> The shift is thus a strategy for survival for trans people; the stitch a way of suturing bodies and communities and thus of providing care.

The poetics of *Sin Sol* are also very much bound up in the operations of the “shift” and the “stitch”: The premise of the game continues the “transreal” form of narrative seen previously in *Redshift and Portalmetal*. Furthermore, Aura makes references to herself being a hologram and therefore only revealing herself when viewed from certain angles as a “shift”-based survival strategy. And the use of augmented reality in the game, with its palimpsestic layering of real and digital elements, gives a new twist to the operation of “stitching” things together, encouraging the reader to make connections between the game narrative and their own reality, and hence develop a more caring relationship with those around them and with the environment.

In terms of questions of care in the narrative itself, most of the lexia that make up *Sin Sol* describe scenes of daily survival at the end of humanity’s reign on earth, with vivid poetic descriptions of the impact of wildfires on the environment and elliptical narration of Aura’s loneliness in voluntary isolation from her friendship group, and remembering the abuse she has previously received for “Loving black people / Loving all my latinx friends and lovers / Loving all that is femme, dark, left, trans and queer in the universe and / refusing to reduce her to an object” (“Every time I rebelled...”). Here there is no residual urge to create family structures, not even queer ones, but instead a focus on non-normative communities of care made up of the above cast of multiply marginalized friends and lovers.

However, care in *Sin Sol* also stretches beyond different configurations of humans caring for each other to address more-than-human caring relationships. As cárdenas has observed in interview, “The main question of the game is to ask how we can care for all people and all species, and perhaps even care about beings we might consider virtual, which will be necessary if we’re all going to survive climate change” (Gardner). As in *Redshift and Portalmetal* where Roja not only speaks in custodial terms of human care for the planet, but also of the essential nurturing role that Earth plays for her (“I thought I could stay”), here too Aura refuses to reduce the “universe” to an object, and indeed her emergence from the plants, however artificial, suggests that they provide vital care for her. Furthermore, Aura dreams of “plugging in to the networks of multispecies solidarity that will outlive / the broken world they trained me for” (“Danced the connections...”), and the relationship with her dog, Roja, offers the most immediately recognizable suggestion of a relationship of “multispecies response-ability”, to use Haraway’s terms. Indeed, if we read/play across *Redshift and Portalmetal* and *Sin Sol*, we may see another aspect of this interdependence between humans/cyborgs/AI holograms and animals in the “shift” between Roja, the largely human character with only modest cyborgic adaptations, in *Redshift and Portalmetal*, with Roja, Aura’s dog and only companion, in *Sin Sol*.<sup>24</sup>

*Sin Sol* also seeks to create a community of care with its players. Beyond simply seeking to elicit empathy by encouraging players to “deeply consider how climate change disproportionately effects [sic] immigrants, trans people and disabled people”, as the project website claims (cárdenas et al., *Sin Sol* webpage), Aura does not just narrate her life but engages the player directly – she is speaking to you! A metanarrative thread in the fragments relates to her reason for writing poetry:

I write this for a future people / in the hope that you have found ways / to still see  
the blue sky / and not just the grey orange sky of smoke / in the hope that you have  
found each other / that there is still love across all the lines / that the cruelty of  
borders has ended / that poetry still matters / and is still written / because you are  
also hoping / for a better future / for a future reader / who cares / and holds your  
words / with love. (“I write this for a future people”)

And in what would appear to be the final words of the final lexia of the game, everything boils down to the meeting of “me” and “you” to form a “we” (“Dancing the connections”), as the AR layer of the game overlaps and melds with the real life of the player.

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<sup>23</sup> See also cárdenas’s *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* (2011) for her early theorization of this concept.

<sup>24</sup> Roja also appears as a character in yet another of cárdenas’s games, *Dilating Destiny*, this time as a post-op trans woman belonging to an alien race (cárdenas, “*Dilating Destiny*”).



Unlike blogs, games and interactive narratives do not typically leave permanent traces of other players'/readers' reactions within them, and with single-player games there is also no chance of connecting with other players while in the game and thus of forming a fan-based community from within the work itself. While there is no evidence of communities forming around these works, there is of positive feedback from individual readers/players who are encouraged to submit messages with personal responses. For example, some of those for *Redshift* and *Portalmetal* appear on the relevant part of *cárdenas's* [personal website](#) and seem to be mainly from other creatives, curators and researchers. Furthermore, more elaborate reviews and academic articles relating to both works tend to offer personal narratives of, and affective responses to, game play. Giulia Casalini, for example, writes that “a trans woman of color opened up her soul to me, sharing her story of despair and resistance”, and of the way the work provoked her to experience a feeling of “femme solidarity” (17); of care for the work’s protagonist and for its lead creator. It is this appearance of personal narrative in otherwise analytical, academic articles that gives a strong sense of the impact of *Roja* and *Aura* on their audiences and of the particular demographic that is attracted to these works.

## CONCLUSION

This article has not only attempted to challenge some oversights, exclusions and overly strict policing of boundaries in the scholarly work on electronic literature, and specifically that which may be defined as “Latin American”, but has also sought to explore the non-heteronormative, non-white communities of care that are described in the corpus of works selected and/or created around and between those works. The body of evidence presented demonstrates the prevalence of questions of care – the need to narrate and create alternative webs of care – for LGBTQI+ as well as racially marginalized groups. It also homes in on the particular affordances and technopoetics of certain (networked) digital technologies (blogs and interactive fiction/computer games) for the ways in which they can support the development of affinity-based groupings in situations where offline visibility is still limited, difficult or dangerous, as well as the ways in which they can facilitate the narration of complex and shifting intersectional identities and relationships.

In a recently published article entitled “[Contexts of Digital Literature Criticism: Feminist, Queer, Materialist](#)”, Jessica Pressman argues that “Too often in digital literary studies we focus on the technological or the poetic, the medium or the message, and we neglect to consider the cultural situations that inform technopoetics and our experiences of them”, or if we do focus on context, we seek only to tell the history of new media forms through the lens of generations of creators or platform-specific genres. While Pressman is discussing specifically anglophone electronic literature and its criticism, I would contend that this tendency has also been in evidence in much of the criticism of Latin American electronic literature to date. Pressman’s hope is that her work “opens paths for pursuing electronic literary criticism with renewed attention to and appreciation of feminist, queer, and materialist orientations”. I agree with her that more work needs to be done to explore the way that works of electronic literature intersect with key social dynamics and demographics. This article is thus my contribution to Pressman’s agenda.<sup>25</sup>

I would like to conclude with a final observation about the way that this article has evolved and how telling it is of the nature of the topic selected. The materials that I have chosen as my case studies multiplied during its writing, or, to use a more idiomatic expression, they mushroomed. My original plan to just select two works was entirely inadequate to provide the kinds of evidence that exploring queer of color communities of care in electronic literature required. *Sin Sol / No Sun* was unthinkable without *Redshift* and *Portalmetal* because of the thematic continuities that suture the two works together, as well as the telling shifts of perspective evidencing multispecies “respons-ability” between them. *Negra cubana tenía que ser* needed to be understood not just on its own terms, but in the context of other blogs, as their authors collectively write and create a queer, Afro-Cuban, cyberfeminist blogosphere to support and

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<sup>25</sup> I think it is fair to say that this situation has started to change in just the last couple of years, particularly with respect to ecocritical readings of electronic literature and digital media more generally (see, for example, works published since 2020 in the *Electronic Book Review* by [Pereira](#), [Rettberg and Coover](#), [Saum-Pascual](#), and [Kozak](#)). However, there is still an overall deficit and the provocation here to critics remains.

care for each other. And these different case studies are not discrete either. On Twitter, Sandra Abd'Allah-Álvarez Ramírez and Yasmin Portales Machado follow each other, as do Yasmin Portales Machado and micha cárdenas.<sup>26</sup> This is a steadily growing, international, queer of color community of care with both pragmatic, activist aims, as well as the desire to imagine different futures through what Anita Girvan, Baljit Pardesi, Davina Bhandar and Nisha Nath have termed a “poetics of care”; a poetics that seeks “alternative pathways of community and being-in-relation – those that foreground interconnected joy, collaborative interactions that foster and sustain relational care for differences, and openings for revolutionary imaginings” (718).

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26 This article was written before Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter in November 2022 and the movement of so many people to other platforms.

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**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Pitman, Thea 2023 A "Careful" Reading of Latin/x American Women's Electronic Literature. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 12 pp. 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.426>

**Published:** 01 March 2023

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