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T@pped into the W3rldWideWeb: C0nfigur-ing [Net(I)Ana(S)]

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which loneliness has become the epitome of contemporary human condition for the Millennial generation, together with its impact on the psychological and emotional side of human expression and the urban landscape, as expressed through art and the virtual. Modern megacities are shaping and configuring what we nowadays understand as art. In the case of *Alt [C]Lit* poets, whether it is New York City or Los Angeles, the US urban landscape has a great influence on how these young authors have configured their poetic production: their experiences and referents belong to these cities. In this paper, I would like to discuss how spaces, especially urban spaces, have generated physical isolation and have transitioned into a mental landscape, to which the virtual contributes to increase anxious alienation that manifests itself through the body and the configuration of human subjectivities. Therefore, I will analyze hypermodern identity/ies that result from the urban landscape of megalopolises, the manner in which the virtual has generated online communities and has contributed to (hyper)sexualization, and the way in which Zafra's concept of *netianas* can be applied in order to analyze the paradoxical position of loneliness and early-adulthood through the *Alt [C]Lit* poetry and other related-literary and visual production.

Keywords: overexposure, online identities, loneliness, non-places, visual culture, *Alt [C]Lit* poetry

Humanity seems to be currently going through an extended existential crisis. The hypermodern individual has internalized the naturalization of precariousness and consumption in every aspect of their daily lives, submitting to the dominion of technology and becoming subordinate to constant productivity. This obsession with productivity and availability contributes to making no time for leisure and to a disconnection from the constant performance of tasks for capitalistic production, blurring the boundaries between work and consumption, which affects people's exhausted bodies and anxious minds. Le Breton argues that these exigencies are more focused on the adaptation of the individual to the current times: the times which demand a high level of flexibility and efficiency and which require an urgent need for speed, promoting competitiveness, amongst others (*Desaparecer* 4). These are the circumstances that surround the individual, instead of those which would allow her to focus more on her personal growth or her development as an individual.

There is a need, even an urge, for disconnection in the hyper-connected society we live in now: Le Breton states that the hypermodern individual is characterized by a paradoxical disconnection that lingers between a longing for the presence of others as well as a need for keeping a physical distance from them (*Desaparecer* 4). There is no doubt that authors such as Le Breton and Byung Chul Han speak about the *burnout syndrome* to describe the current mood that de-humanizes the individual in order to turn her into an exhausted and de-motived machine, too tired to fight or rebel against her current condition. Han agrees in this respect with Le Breton: the external pressure to excel creates a sense of distrust about the external world and leads the individual to

look for a refuge inside themselves, which results in the "drilling and the emptying of the self" (Han 13). Hence, the virtual becomes a psychological, and even emotional, shelter for those who are too tired of living in a hostile and demanding real world. How has the city become a place of loneliness and bodily alienation? Is the virtual the next promised land for the tired and exhausted hopeless generation?

In *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing offers an interesting analysis of the history of loneliness in New York by exploring the lives of some of the most famous twentieth-century artists who lived and worked there. Through the art of Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Henry Darger and David Wojnarowicz, Laing reflects on how big cities have influenced the way these artists have employed art in order to explore and to express their alienation from society:

> Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. *Unhappy*, as the dictionary has it, *as a result of being without the companionship of others*. Hardly any wonder, then, that it can reach its apotheosis in a crowd. (Laing 4, emphasis in the original)

As a form of disconnection, the modern architecture that configures big megapolises like New York, loneliness has become a state of being rather than an option. Laing makes an interesting comment on this issue by analyzing Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942): she describes the diner as "an urban aquarium, a glass cell" (21), as if the characters from the painting were trapped inside the glass structure of the diner that shows no exit to the exterior. Also, it is interesting to note that there is little, if any, interaction between the characters depicted in Hopper's painting. This is the kind of urban landscape in which you can visualize Sarah Jean Alexander, Gabby Bess, Ana Carrete, Mira Gonzalez or Melissa Broder, working on their writing in any crowded café in Manhattan or Los Angeles, alone in their virtual bubbles, disconnected and absorbed in an online dimension. It is not hard to imagine these *Alt [C]Lit* poets hiding their faces behind the shining screen, self-centered, composing or browsing the web as if reality did not exist.

In *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett explores the evolution of urban spaces from ancient Greek to the contemporary, most modern megapolis, specifically New York. In his analysis, he focuses on the interaction between bodies and spaces. In particular, he points out how the mobility of the body is connected to the dissociation of the individual from her surroundings:

> The physical condition of the travelling body reinforces this sense of disconnection from space. Sheer velocity makes it hard to focus one's attention on the passing scene…. Thus the new geography reinforces the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography. (Sennett 18)

In this sense, Augé's concept of non-places can be useful for the analysis of urban spaces as places for transit-movement: by using de Certeau's concept of space as a "frequented

place, an intersection of moving bodies," Augé argues that "it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defined as a place by town planners) into a space" (Augé 79). It seems that both Sennett and Augé apply de Certeau's theory of the body and space in order to explain the interactions between individuals and places through the materialization of corporeal movement that is produced within a space. It is as if the mind potentially disengages from the tedious and repetitive process of spatial movement that becomes a transition or displacement from one location to another.

Now, it seems evident that being and not being is connected to this idea of commuting as a moment of disengaging from one's own body, while putting one's mind in the next thing one plans to do, as is the case of Gabby Bess in her poem "BAD BITCH"[1] from *Alone With Other People* (2013):

> We mapped out every conceivable route through the
> subways of New York
> in our search to find Jay Z to show him our poetry (189)

As it is evident, Bess's goal is not "mapp[ing] out every conceivable route through the subways of New Yok" (189) as a way of exploring the underground tunnels of the city, but it becomes rather the means through which to succeed in meeting her idol, Jay Z, and to validate her poems. Transportation is not about enjoying the ride, but is rather the medium through which to get to the finish line, paradoxically not moving but still getting one's body to a different place. The subway as a space makes the individual disengage temporarily from her immediate medium, becoming a passive body from which the mind dissociates through daydreaming or thinking about something else. This view is supported by Augé, who identifies the means of human transportation in big cities as "non-places," that is as "installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods" (34): this is what he has denominated as "spatial overabundance," one of the three figures of excess that Augé identifies as characteristic of "supermodernity" (40-41).

In Ana Carrete's "Cute taxi driver" from her poetry zine *make-believe love-making* (2012), the car and the taxi become two different spaces where abandonment and attraction take place through the absence or presence of transiting from one place to another: the absence of an ex-partner is evoked in the line "your car wasn't there anymore," and the sense of abandonment is reinforced in "you left without me" (Carrete 16). In the next stanza, the speaker's coping with this overwhelming emotion is expressed in "I vomited on the sidewalk," and her hesitation about having a breakup closure in "I texted goodbye" (16). Then, she immediately forgets about it, "but saved it as a draft," after finding out that life goes on and new opportunities arise in front her, as in "the taxi driver flirted with me / later" (16). The sequence that Carrete makes in the poem clearly presents a parallelism between how these "non-places," so overlooked in our daily experiences, interestingly mark emotional attachment and condition our emotional states without being noticed: these spaces of transition show one's inner landscape as an urbanely-conditioned individual.

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1   The titles and the poems are reproduced in this essay respecting the author's original use or lack of capitalization.

It seems that young people today escape from the alienating hostility of big cities to look for some reassurance or relief through virtual reality and other social media. Disconnecting from the body helps to relieve the pain that loneliness causes by projecting oneself virtually, literally disintegrating into bits. Merleau-Ponty explained in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) how virtual subjectivities dissociate from their bodies in an attempt to regain the control that has been lost in the real world, through the simulation of self-spectacle:

> The virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is… he inhabits the spectacle. The spatial tilts and takes up its new position. It is, then, a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world. Being projected, in the absence of anchoring points, by the attitude of my body alone… when my actual body is at one with the virtual body required by the spectacle, and the actual spectacle with the setting which my body throws around it. (291-292)

Post-modernity has become the battleground of what seems to be a conflict between image, or immaterial idealization, and the body, or fleshly embodiment. According to Le Breton, the centrality of the body relies on its social symbolism that seems to tie up together at the same time that it constitutes one as an individual (*Antropología* 7). The social rupture of the individual with the other collectivities, which has also led her to abandon other moral and spiritual constructs, has left her with a sense of vast emptiness that is filled with constant activity as an attempt to cope with the existential void of nothingness. This radical division between individual and the collective is manifested in the extreme reclusiveness of *hikikomoris*, but it has also become a standardized symptom of the individualism that characterizes our times: the 'Me/Selfie culture' has become a norm that affects not only Millennials, but also other individuals across the generations that coexist now.

This obsessive reinversion of the external self through physical corporality is a problem that Melissa Broder explores in her book *So Sad Today* (2016), as it forms part of her reflections on her addiction to the online world in the chapter "I took the Internet Addiction Quiz and I won." The following fragment from Broder's work explores the interactions between subjectivity and the body through virtual media:

> Reality was never my first choice. I like that I can be somebody else on the Internet. I like that I can present one facet of myself and embody that. I don't have to live in a body on the Internet. It's so much easier to present an illusion of oneself than to contain multitudes. Illusion is easier than flesh. I like that other people can be a hologram version of themselves on the Internet, too. I like tweets and nudes, romantic emails, avatars and dick pics. I like that get to fill in blanks. Who are you? I'll decide. (*So Sad Today* 76)

In this fragment, Broder expresses the appeal of the Internet for her: the transformational power of online identity/ies. This view is close to what Zafra called N*et(i)Ana(s)*: a generation of "posthuman and immaterial" women, an "alternative theoretical figuration of the Internet subject" that transgresses "the frontiers of gender, class and race" by raising "new questions on ways of being and relat[ing] to the online

universe" (23).[2] What Zafra tries to explain is that the virtual has opened the door, at least theoretically, for exploring subjectivity and finding ways of subverting realities through new languages available on the net. These new forms of construction of the immaterial are directly connected to the production of "desire," "meaning," "affection and emotivity," according to Zafra (148). Broder seems to express her distress about reality; in order to cope with it, she uses the Internet as a way to escape from those parts of her current existence that she does not like: "The Internet has given me the dopamine, attention, amplification, connection, and escape I seek…. The Internet has enhanced my taste for isolation. It has increased my solipsism and made me even more incapable of coping with reality" (76).

Broder's fear of reality is expressed in the poem "In want of rescue from the real" from her last book of poetry *Last Sext*:

> Fantasies die so dry
> Still I held on
> Because the real is arctic
> …
> And I am scared of death
> And I am scared of life (11)

The "fantasies" that "die so dry" in the poem refer to the "illusion" from the fragment of *So Sad Today*. The poetic voice argues that "the real is arctic" (Broder, *Last* 11): reality represents an extremely cold world while "fantasies" are ephemeral and leave her emptier each time ("die so dry") (11). It is interesting to note the synesthetic metaphors implied in each element of the opposition, "fantasies" versus "the real," as described in terms of sensations: one is "dry" while the other is "arctic." It seems that what the speaker finds relieving about fantasies is that, despite their futility, she does not have the sense of being living or dying in a real sense, as it is described in the closing lines: "And I am scared of death / And I am scared of life" (Broder, *Last* 11). As Broder claims in *So Sad Today,* the addictive power of the Internet relies on its infinite sense of "potential" and the fact that one loses contact with the real, with the materiality of corporeal sense of time and space: "There is something about the Internet that, even when it sucks, holds infinite potential all times" (88). As Broder claims, everything is possible in the online sphere. For Broder, the online space allows her to transcend the limitations of real corporeality, in a Cartesian fantasy that prioritizes the immaterial mind over the material body.

Hence, the Internet has become the epitome of social placebo: a fake supply of social interaction that is as volatile, flaky, and uncompromised that we are still not really certain about its future consequences, and how radically it is going to change the social fabric in the long term. What was once imagination is now supplied by the Internet in a way that passivizes, and even damages, one's creative potential to project mental images rather than being constantly exposed to the stimulation of the visual.

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2   *NETIANA: SUJETO POSTHUMANO* e inmaterial que n(h)ace en Internet. Figuración teorética alternativa del sujeto en red. Ficción política que rebasa las fronteras de género, clase y raza y que sugiere nuevas preguntas sobre las formas de ser y de relacionarnos en el universo on line (Zafra 23, my translation in the main text).

As it is evident, the communication has been de-materialized as the body has been disembodied. As she keeps living, as Lipovetsky describes, as "glued to the screen and connected to net" (271), the body is left behind as a carcass that merely contains this highly virtualized subjectivity, a mind that is sucked into the addictive tentacle-like-threads of the online world wide web. In *El Hombre Postorgánico*, Sibilia speaks about the *post-organic man* as the new humanistic ideal to transcend this fleshly prison(cell), a similar vision to the one that is also mentioned in Plato's *Phaedo*: that the soul is imprisoned inside the body, just like the body has now become another limitation for the virtual possibilities of the hypermodern wo/man. Finally, the soul, that is our subjectivity, has found a way to get rid of, at least momentarily, the burden of corporeal existence by means of the virtual. This is what Sibilia argues in the following extract:

> These biotechnological projects understand life as information, as a code that can and has to be manipulated and improved with instrumental digital help. As it happens in the "angelic" tendencies of the cyberculture and tele-informatics, with their proposals of the immortal mind through artificial intelligence and the overcoming of the physical space through the virtualization of the bodies in the data network. (*El Hombre,* 118)[3]

As she explains further, the quest for the hypermodern wo/man is a search for the "ethereal and eternal 'essence'" by employing "artificial intelligence and biotechnologies" that contribute to "cut[ting] off life by separating it from the body" (118). It is what Deleuze and Guattari defined as the "body without organs": "The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole" (151). This form of disembodying the mind, our subjectivity, from its fleshly carcass corresponds to the accelerating form of identity construction through identities produced online.

There are some examples of this form of dissociation from the body in the poems by Mira Gonzalez from her first published book of poetry *I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013). What is fascinating about these poems is the way Gonzalez expresses physical experiences of a detached, almost scientific, interaction between two individuals: as if dissecting the sensations through the language of the specific and the unemotional. The following fragment belongs to "I just need you to know exactly what I want without me having to say anything":

> do you remember that dream I had
> where my fingers touched your fingers
> and we came to understand that our hands were capable of
> expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies
> could you just put your mouth on my mouth next time you talk
> I have been trained through operant conditioning

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3   Esos proyectos [biotecnológicos] comprenden la vida como información, como un código que puede y debe ser manipulado y corregido con ayuda del instrumental digital. Como ocurre en las tendencias "angélicas" de la cibercultura y la teleinformática, con sus propuestas de inmortalidad de la mente mediante la inteligencia artificial y de superación del espacio físico a través de la virtualización de los cuerpos en las redes de datos (Sibilia, *El Hombre Postorgánico* 118). All quotes from Sibilia in the main text in my translation.

> to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus
> now I feel comfort because your brain
> is encased in a skull a few miles away from here (17)

The memory that this poem deals with is triggered by the physical contact made possible by "my fingers touch[ing] your fingers" (17), as the poetic voice expresses her concern, and even astonishment, about how "our hands were capable of / expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies" (17): what she is describing is the power of bodily performance to communicate emotions. What is also interesting to note is how reluctant she still is to totally engage in such experience, as it is expressed in the lines: "I have been trained through operant conditioning / to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus" (17). The learning process that is mentioned in the poem is what is also known as *instrumental conditioning*, mostly consisting of modifying a certain behavior by reinforcement or punishment. In Gonzalez's case, her resistance to let her emotions overflow her goes hand in hand with the acceptance of punishment and the rejection of traditional romantic clichés in intimate interactions. This is what makes her avoidant since she finds "comfort because your brain / is encased in a skull a few miles away from here" (17). Somehow, it seems as if the poetic voice is relieved that the connection is not at a mental level, and the other person is not able to perceive the way she is thinking about that particular situation. But at the same time, the voice of the poem seems to find the idea of seducing her counterpart, of having a "loving" effect on the Other appealing:

> now look at my face and tell me
> that my physical presence in the world
> has caused you to experience extreme disequilibrium
> are you able to confirm my existence
> in a strictly biological sense (17)

The chemical effects of love and affection on the body are clearly expressed in the lines "to experience extreme disequilibrium / are you able to confirm my existence in a strictly biological sense" (17): is she referring to experiencing emotions as a medium to re-connect with her physical body in a physiological sense?

Gonzalez's poem brings to mind a poem by Sarah Jean Alexander, "Human adults," from *Wildlives* (66-67), in particular due to its employment of biological metaphors in order to express a set of emotions related to affection, attachment, and love:

> I want to tap on your skull from the outside:
> *Is anyone alive in there?*
> *Is anyone alive anywhere, really?*
> I want to put my ear against the hair on your head
> and hear the *ahhhhh* of a low, distant voice. (66, emphasis in the original)

Contrary to the indifference and lack of concern for the Other's well-being presented in Gonzalez's poem, the perspective offered by Alexander differs in the sense that there is an interest in getting to know what the other person might be thinking, by "tap[ping]

on your skull from outside" (66). As Gonzalez also does, Alexander acknowledges that despite physical connection made possible by means of touch or direct physical contact, the ability to enter another person's thoughts is almost impossible, even frustrating, as it shows in her insistent rhetorical questions: "*Is anyone alive in there? / Is anyone alive anywhere, really?*" (66). Later, her longing for a reaction from the other person is expressed through the onomatopoeia "*ahhhhh*" (66-67), which is repeated two more times throughout the poem. The lines from the onomatopoeia are clearly related to the myth of Echo: the nymph who fell in love with the self-absorbed Narcissus and was unable to express her desire for him. Like Echo, Alexander's poetic voice unsuccessfully attempts to communicate with her love interest: "I am whispering *ahhhh* / and waiting for you to hear" (67). She recognizes her own humiliating situation by describing her way of loving as "between stupid fast love / and not being able to see" (66). Hence, the poem by Alexander speaks from the point of view of unrequited love whereas Gonzalez sides with the unrequiting part.

　　Last, but not least, in Mira Gonzalez's "I will inevitably ruin our relationship," the poetic voice of the poem again describes her struggles to engage emotionally through bodily contact as a way to both dissociate from her own body and to disconnect from the Other(s):

>   I had this specific shitty feeling
>   I closed my eyes and thought about virtual particles
>   that cease to exist when they are not observed
>   the momentum of a virtual particle is uncertain according to the
>   uncertainty principle
>   it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you (31)

In the fragment presented above, the "virtual particles" stand as a metaphor for visibility and perception: this is evident when the poetic voice relates the existence of these particular objects through the perception of vision: "I closed my eyes when they are not observed / that cease to exist when they are not observed" (31). It seems that the hypermodern motto of the current times is to be seen in order to be. This is what in her book *La intimidad como espectáculo* (2008) Sibilia calls "the tyrannies of visibility," which consist of constant public exposure of the self, mainly through the social media, that leads towards "a mere exacerbation of certain narcissism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, always latent" (105).[4] As the Argentinian anthropologist suggests, one has "to *appear* in order to *be*" (Sibilia 130, emphasis in the original), which directly links one's existence with the performativity of "appearances, the spectacle and visibility" (Sibilia 130). This form of performativity also seems to be validated by "other people's eyes and, above all, the coveted trophy of *being seen*" (Sibilia 130, emphasis in the original). In Gonzalez's poem, the gaze of others does not only determine one's existence, but also one's gaze determines one's own existence in the world: as she closes her own eyes while kissing, she "is also uncertain whether or not… [she] existed," which is "this specific shitty feeling" (Gonzalez 31) the poetic voice mentions at the beginning of the poem: she compares herself to the "virtual

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4　…una mera exacerbación de cierto narcisismo, voyeurismo y exhibicionismo siempre latentes
　　(Sibilia, *La intimidad* 105).

particles / that cease to exist when they are not observed" (31), as the virtual bodies that disappear in front of our voyeuristic eyes when the screen shuts off.

As I have presented through this analysis, illustrated by the poetry of Millennial authors such as Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez, corporeality and subjectivity are highly conditioned by our relationship to the urban landscape we inhabit as well as to the social media we daily use to connect beyond our physical limits. To conclude, I would like to propose the following set of questions in order to further research the challenges that the virtual is posing to contemporary society as well as to the individuals that configure it: Is our subjectivity really independent from its corporeal representation in the Internet era? How is the paradox of duality being reworked and problematized as one's identity formation is conditioned by performativity and the influence of online networks? In which new ways femininity is challenged and reinforced by these new technologies of the virtual?

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