

The country and the platform, or the issue of *nanofundia*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of the platformization of culture from a Latin-American perspective. The issue of *latifundia* and the consolidation of vast productive land a very reduced minority of wealthy elites has been one of the distinctive traits of lasting inequalities in Latin-American countries. And the diaspora of migrants to the slums of major cities has been a defining trait of the 20th century. This has seemingly nothing to do with digital culture, and yet this paper will stress the links between the reprimarization of production in the developing world and the digital extractivism of platform economy described by Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) in order to assess the consolidation of culture enhanced by digital technologies. Such consolidation goes well beyond the scope described in Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of cultural industry, since everything digitized can be treated as "digital content".

Drawing from previous work on the ontology of digital objects (Blanco & Berti, 2016), and my critique of "content dynamics" (Berti, 2015). Platforms strive on the automated algorithmic administration of access and reproduction of creative works (be they text, sound, video, or code-based). The common trait of current platform culture is the maximization of profit by means of garnering data and attention in order to capture more attention (and more data). My claim is that this data extractivism is enabled by the ability to treat artistic works as interchangeable digital content. It is a form of standardization of cultural production akin to that of nature into agricultural parceled land. The emergence of corporate cultural platforms has led to an unprecedented concentration of media and cultural production ownership that flourished in the platform ecosystem that the COVID-19 pandemic has once accelerated, configuring what I will discuss as the specific form of primitive accumulation in digitized societies. A phenomenon well characterized by Srnicek (2017), platform economy is the way of capturing surplus value in the age of digital connection.

In previous shared research (Berti, 2015, Ré & Berti, 2021; Ré, Costa, Célis Bueno & Berti, 2020), I have explored the attempts to obstruct digital addressability in electronic literature and digital arts as a reaction to the extraction of surplus by means of the normalization of content. My partial assessment is that these aesthetic strategies provide examples of resistance rather than an alternative model of digital (and platform) culture. Meanwhile corporate media has advance towards the consolidation of actual *nanofundia* characterized by the massive purchased of copyrights and of infrastructure ownership, strategically located in the global North. Taking on from Williams (1973) classical study of English literature, if there is to be a politics of electronic literature, the class struggle will be located on the servers and the protocols. Expanding Jameson's concept of a "geopolitical aesthetics" (2018), if there is to be a geopolitics of electronic literature, the struggles will be about national and regional digital infrastructures and the local regulations over the globalized attention economies. The problem is about how much can we tolerate the expansion of cultural *nanofundia*.

Keywords: platforms, digital content, national literatures, neo-extractivism.

1. On Nanofundia

The issue of *latifundia* and the consolidation of vast productive land a very reduced minority of wealthy elites has been one of the distinctive traits of lasting inequalities in Latin-American countries. And the diaspora of migrants to the slums of major cities has been a defining trait of the 20th century. This has seemingly nothing to do with digital culture, and yet this paper will stress the links between the reprimarization of production in the developing world and the digital extractivism of platform economy described by Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) in order to assess the tendencies of consolidation of culture in oligopolies (mostly the GAFA but some other minor players as well) enhanced by digital technologies. Such consolidation goes well beyond the scope described in Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of cultural industry, since everything digitized can be treated as "digital content". The issue I want to present in this paper is that corporate media has advanced towards the consolidation of actual *nanofundia* characterized by the massive purchase of copyrighted collections of works and contents and of infrastructure ownership, strategically located

(and managed from) in the global North. Drawing inspiration from Raymond Williams' (1973) classical study of English literature on the relations between economic modes of production and literature, I would like to present the case of contemporary platform capitalism as a form of land ownership. To do so I have to make several counterintuitive claims. (Although some of them may be obvious to some, they are necessary nonetheless): First, digital culture is **not a process of dematerialization and ubiquity** but rather, one of **miniaturization and acceleration**.

Second, miniaturization makes way for **large economies of scale** based on data collection and processing.

Third, such data collection is allowed by infrastructures of networks and servers operating according to protocols which are a form of **standardization** (that is, of mathematization of the world).

Fourth, digital reproducibility of cultural forms reduces them to **unspecific forms of digital content**. (Such process has been deemed as convergence culture, the implications of this assessment are not politically neutral to say the least).

Fifth, "convergence culture" has **expanded author and copyright based ideas of culture**.

Sixth, the **platform capitalism** stage of 20th century cultural industry depends on the corporate control of **huge collections of digitized and digital content** of cultural entities formerly known as *works* (of art, literature, science or knowledge).

This brings us to the issue of *nanofundia*. Basic economic power now not only resides in the control of land from the extraction of mineral, vegetal and animal resources, but also in the miniaturized landscape of information, that is, on servers. Contrary to what it may be expected, the cost of IA and large databases makes *nanofundia* a digital equivalent of *latifundia*, rather than a tiny form of *minifundia*.

So, my claim is that **server farms are a form of land ownership**. And, if there is to be a politics of electronic literature, class struggle will be located on the servers and the protocols.

2. The issue of *latifundia* in Latin-American Literature

“The men in former days believed that above all moderation should be observed in landholding, for indeed it was their judgment that it was better to sow less and plough more intensively. Virgil, too, I see agreed with this view. To confess the truth, the latifundia have ruined Italy, and soon will ruin the provinces as well. Six owners were in possession of half of the province of Africa at the time when the Emperor Nero had them put to death”
-Pliny’s *Natural History*, 18.7.35.

Latifundia as a mode of production has a long history in Western societies. Accumulated from the spoils of war, confiscated from conquered peoples, it can be traced as early as the 2nd century before Christ. Though modern Europe has modified the structure of landownership, it is still one of the defining traits of Latin American societies (and its inequalities), with white class elites of European descent owning most of the most productive land in each country. Such model has been deemed both as economically inefficient and as socially regressive. The opposition to such land concentration has come in the form of agrarian reform in two ways: either by redistribution or by modernization. Just to name an example of the persistence of this issue, in 1969 Tizon’s experimental novel *Fire in Casabindo* used modernist narrative alongside ancient oral narrative techniques to depict the peasant and native American population struggles over land ownership in the Argentinean northern provinces in the late 19th century, a conflict that is still ongoing well into the 21st century. The expansion of the agricultural border for transgenic soy extraction and the exploitation of gold and lithium mineral reserves (crucial for the existence of digital culture) has only deepened these conflicts over land ownership. This is not the place to comment on the vast critical tradition on the impact of *latifundia* on Argentine culture (and, especially, literature), as there is on Colombian, Brazilian, Mexican and Peruvian literature as well (only to name the few I am somewhat familiar with), but I would like to draw attention on the fact that during the 19th and 20th centuries Latin American literature has

repeatedly looked into the relation between the question of national identities *vis-a-vis* cosmopolitanism and restaged the ongoing tensions between the country and the city, a opposition that, as Williams very well contends, is far from being as linear or as clear a dichotomy as it is usually presented.

3. Platforms as Plantations: Nanofundia

As Nick Snricek (2017) has pointed out, there is a shift on internet economy which is not as new as it seems. Current consolidation is but another iteration of what Marx characterized original accumulation. That is, the extraction of surplus that has pervaded the concentration of landownership in fewer hands and, later on, the ownership of machines. Oligopolistic tendencies are nothing new and platforms are just its current form. For the sake of argument, let me draw some parallels between early village entrepreneurs and internet entrepreneurs. Prior to the dot com bubble burst, the technoptimism about cyberculture was thriving on the internet as a space for freedom. But what kind (or kinds) of freedom?

1. Most notably, a sense of freedom from the constraints of the physical world, the **illusion of dematerialization** which fed all the convergence tropes and that I have discussed as the digitization of culture as a “dynamic of contents” (Berti 2015). Eventually, the enhanced copyright enforcement and the accumulation of collection in fewer hands has led to what Striphas (2011) has defined as “controlled consumerism”, one of the distinctive traits of *nanofundia*.
2. The hails of **democratization and actual freedom of speech** of course, only to be subdued by surveillance capitalism as the Snowden revelations would make clear. What we actually gained was “**freedom**” of **input**, which led to massive data-collection and what Pasquinelli and Joler (2020) have denounced as “knowledge extractivism”.
3. The promise of **universal accessibility**, only to end up stratified by premium accounts and paywalls, where the internet actually is mirror-world of material inequalities.

4. The siren chants of **optimization and rationalization**, illustrated by the growth of precarious labor and the loss of work rights, that ends up in “lean platforms” (Snricek 2017) fueled by biker blood and “collaborators” own cars or homes.

Today some people yearn the “non-commercial” internet that fascinated the world between 1993 and 2001. But, just as Williams has pointed out about the idealization of a rural past, older people were then longing for the BBS [Bulletin Board System] and its local, face-to-face, communities of users. But then again, back then, some may also have also been missing the good ole days of ARPANET, with no cyberpunks or yuppies, and so on.

Some had hoped that the Internet was a new country, or a newfoundland to begin society anew, such utopianism ended up crashing against a Wall... street. Financial capital rushed to invest liquidity in the start-ups. And Patriot Acts started policing those green pastures. The internet, just as Williams’ rural Britain, came to the Age of Enclosures (and a brief battle for the survival of the Commons). It took music almost a quarter of a century to migrate from a closed industrialized product (that is the sale of CDs) to the management of streaming flows (by premium accounts and advertising), editorial houses went down a similar road, as well as film and television industries. In the end, culture did not get freer, a flow of information, it just got coded in nanoscopic inscriptions and light-speed fast, harvested in copyright holders’ server farms.

There is a striking similarity between server farms and soy beans, the ever-growing efficiency in the extraction of surplus out of the plows of arable land mimic those of the hard drive tracks. The analogy stops working in solid state drives but I assume you get the point. Literary, artistic, scientific and other cultural “works” are coded into digital contents. Just as plantation slave and peasant workers, works *are* migrated (note the stress on the passive voice).

4. Cultural Extractivism and the Reprimarization of the Global South

The main point of this intervention is political. Under the modernizing imaginaries of digital cultures there is nothing more than a form of good old colonialism. Pasquinelli and Joler

presented (2020) Pattern Recognition and IA as an instrument, a magnification tool, as the telescope and the microscope. But, as current copyright over COVID-19 vaccines painfully shows, no instrument of knowledge is ever neutral. The nooscope actually strengthens the positions held by the copyright owners in the digital landscape, that is, the nanofundists. There is a breeding, underlying class struggle, the unstable, precarious labour of the cognitariat, the freelancers (yet another form of work traced by Williams) and the precariat. Argentine e-lit also illustrates this issue, the disputes over ownership took place between Borges' widow and Pablo Katchadjian over his *El Aleph engordado* [Fattened Aleph]. He had previously subverted the national poem, *Martín Fierro* by alphabetically rearranging its 7165 verses. Let me suggest here that verses are another form of plow, by which we can harvest language. This is not the place to discuss this but it has received critical attention (Kozak 2018, 2019; Berti 2016).

5. Towards a geopolitics of electronic literature: Going beyond *nanofundia* and *unaddressability*

The relation between platforms and e-literature in general, and to Latin American e-lit, in particular cannot be properly understood without contrasting it to the global flows of goods and information (and goods as information). The current role of developing countries as source of commodities, cheap input and cheap data processing expresses global design led by the global North. There are many ways to contend such geopolitical inequalities. Thus, if there is to be a politics of electronic literature, the political debate will have to take a stance on the servers and the protocols which are the way land is distributed in the digital realm. Expanding Jameson's concept of a "geopolitical aesthetics" (2018), if there is to be a geopolitics of electronic literature, the struggles will be about national and regional digital infrastructures and the local regulations over the globalized attention economies. The problem is about how much can we tolerate the expansion of cultural *nanofundia*.

With Anahí Ré (Ré y Berti 2018, 2020; Ré, Costa, Célis Bueno y Berti 2020) we have proposed the term of unaddressability as a poetics for intervening the workings of the code to render it useless for the algorithmic administration which is at the heart of platform capitalism. The limits of it is that such artistic procedure is that is a resistance tactic rather

than a sustainable strategy for technical, cultural and political equality. My intuition is that e-lit is a fertile ground for developing forms of digital culture other than platform capitalism, towards a fairer redistribution of digital space, that is, a politic and an aesthetic for the *nanocommons*.

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