Hacking the Past: Edmundo Paz Soldán's El delirio de Turing and Carlos Gamerro's Las Islas

J. Andrew Brown

➡ *For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214551

Hacking the Past: Edmundo Paz Soldán's *El delirio de Turing* and Carlos Gamerro's *Las Islas*

J. Andrew Brown is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of Test Tube Envy: Science and Power in Argentine Narrative *and several articles on the intersections of science, technolo-gy and Latin American culture. He recently edited a special volume of* Revista Iberoamericana *devoted to technology and literature in Latin America.*

When Beatriz Sarlo described her experience in an early 1990s video arcade in Buenos Aires, she could sense the shifts in culture that such places portended even if she could not have imagined the cybercafés and Internet portals that would appear nearly every 500 meters in the Argentine capital city. With the rise of computers and the Internet in Latin America, the literary and cinematic representation of the denizens of these technological environments has also gained a larger presence. The recent Mexican film *Nicotina* (2003) centers on the adventures of a hapless hacker whose talent for computers, stereotypically, leads him into serious trouble as well as being mutually exclusive with an ability to develop a romantic relationship. While *Nicotina* presents the young hacker somewhat superficially, recent years have also seen novels that leverage cultural constructions of the hacker as subversive to decrypt neoliberal Latin American regimes and, essentially, hack the dictatorial past that continues to run in their roots. In *El delirio de Turing* (2003), Edmundo Paz Soldán's award-winning novel about hackers and cryptography in modern Bolivia and *Las Islas* (1998), Carlos Gamerro's Argentine novel about a virtual reinvasion of the Malvinas islands, we find rethinkings of hacker figures and hacker ideology in explorations of a post-dictatorial Latin American landscape configured by political trauma, neoliberal policy, and computer technology.

Edmundo Paz Soldán has gained a significant presence among younger Latin American authors in the last 10 years, winning the Bolivian national book award in 2003 and earning distribution deals with Alfaguara that give his books access

not only to the Bolivian market, but also to Spain, Spanish-speaking US, and recently Argentina. His novels explore the hybrid reality of a modern Bolivia marked by the extreme poverty that surrounds a bursting bubble of a young class of technologically savvy professionals. His most recent, *El delirio de Turing*, follows several threads that converge on the life of one Miguel Sáenz, a cryptographer who began his job under a dictatorial government and continues under the democratic version of that same government. Paz Soldán alludes here to the Bolivian governments of Hugo Banzer, the democratically elected former dictator, using the character of Montenegro, a bloody dictator who enjoys similar democratic success and who appears in many of Paz Soldán's novels. Sáenz's job was to decode messages intercepted by the Cámara Negra, an NSA-like organization charged with the surveillance of possible domestic threats. Under the dictatorship these threats were embodied by the so-called communist subversives; under the democratic government the threat appears as a group of anti-globalist hackers called the "Resistencia." The novel begins when Sáenz receives an encrypted email that, when decrypted, reads "ASESINOTIENESLASMANOSMAN-CHADASDESANGRE" (22), a message that leaves the man thoroughly nonplussed as he has never considered himself a part of the abuses of the dictatorship. Through the course of the narrative, Sáenz comes to understand his role in the decoding of messages that resulted in the torture and murder of "subversives" in the late 1970s. Paz Soldán combines this storyline with several others that range from the demented ramblings of Albert, Sáenz's now bed-ridden boss during the 1970s to Sáenz's daughter Flavia's work as a hacker and investigative journalist, to the mysterious leader of the Resistencia code-named Kadinsky and his anti-globalist activities, to the vendetta of the cousin of one of the victims of Sáenz's decoding. Throughout all these threads (and many others), Paz Soldán uses the figure of the hacker to organize a reality where identity is always mediated, represented, and distorted by the codes, handles, and virtual realities that are the realm of the hacker. In so doing, Paz Soldán forges connections between oppressive dictatorship and neoliberal policy, bureaucratic government and state terrorism.

Cultural constructions of the hacker figure invest it with a unique ability to signify being and representation of being simultaneously. Douglas Thomas, in his study of hacker culture, has explored extensively the ways in which hackers move between states of embodiment and disembodiment as they interface with computer technology in their quest to free information from the security that keeps it secret. On one level, they become their handles, the names they invent for their online personas that come to represent their achievements in software programming and in gaining access to secret systems. As society has become more aware of the presence of hackers and of their influence on an increasingly computerized world, these figures have also morphed into the, at times impossible, menaces that tend to appear when a society is at the cusp of massive cultural shifts. That is, the hacker becomes a kind of wizard or guru who has access to knowledge that mere mortals are unable to attain. Alan Liu develops on this mystique by associating the hacker with new developments in artistic expression, noting the link between the hacker's dedication to the free flow of knowledge and the sometimes illegal methods used to liberate that knowledge to the artistic paradigm "destructive creativity" (Liu 396-98). Whether as technical wizard

or artistic innovator, the cultural emphasis on the hacker's technological abilities and encrypted identity disassociates the person from his or her body, converting the figure in a vague menace/hero that can represent several forces and ideas simultaneously. Due to his or her perceived ability to steal those codes that make up our financial identities: bank account numbers and passwords, credit card numbers, governmental identification numbers, etc., the hacker comes to signify that metaphorical process at work in society where codes are identity, where bodies are constituted by the numbers and language that computers use to refer to them. The hacker, then, is that being that exults in this process, using names like Phiber Optik and Acid Phreak and spelling that trades 3s for Es and 1s for Is and Ls all in an effort to foreground their place in an evolving representational reality (Thomas 56-61).

This blurring of names and codes, organic bodies and computer technology, in the production of identity underlines the importance of posthuman and cyborg theory for an understanding of hacker representation. Katherine Hayles defines the posthuman in the following way:

> the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals. (3)

Donna Haraway emphasizes the subversive hybridity of the fusion of flesh and metal in her "A Cyborg Manifesto," observing,

> The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling [sic] a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. (152)

The hacker's tendency to breach and subvert the boundaries of knowledge, combined with the constant and explicit identification with his or her technological tools, associates the figure with representations of the posthuman generally and, as we shall see, specifically in the novels considered here. It is also worth noting that, while the terms "cyborg" and "posthuman" conjure images of science fiction or physical prosthetics, they can also be used to describe the "view" that Hayles advances. That is, one need not have technological grafts to appear as posthuman, one need merely operate within the assumptions that Hayles and Haraway describe. As Chris Gray has argued,

> The few of us who are not in some way already 'borged' through immunizations, interfaces, or prosthetics are embedded nonetheless in countless machinic/organic cybernetic systems. (2002:2)

Hackers are, in that case, particularly suited to the posthuman imaginary, as they are explicitly associated with the systems that constitute the "cyborg society" that Gray describes (2002:131). Bruce Sterling's *Hacker Crackdown* provides one such example of this kind of thinking, "Hacking can involve the heartfelt conviction that beauty can be found in computers, that the fine aesthetic in a perfect program can liberate the mind and spirit" (qtd. in Liu 397). The investment of the aesthetic experience within a computer and, in particular, the code of a

program that suggests movement towards a kind of posthuman art culminates in the hacker's libertarian objective, though, in this case it is the spirit that is freed (from the body, presumably) rather than the information that is freed from its code.

Paz Soldán employs the hacker's posthuman possibilities as a conduit for his exploration of a metaphorical reality where poststructuralist theories on the interconnections of language and reality culminate in a world where people are their PIN numbers, hackers' bodies melt into their virtual avatars and dictatorships re-codify themselves as democratic governments dedicated to neoliberal policy. In *El delirio de Turing*, we find two storylines devoted to self-described hackers, Kadinsky and Flavia, webmaster of a page titled "TodoHacker." As we navigate the chapters devoted to these two characters, we encounter various other hackers, all modeled on descriptions we find of hacker culture in Thomas's work. We encounter, for example, Phiber Outcast, a self-identified script kitty—a script kitty is a hacker who is unable to write his or her own code, depending on the work of more skilled hackers in order to carry out intrusions of secure systems—who gives Kadinsky his start and attempts to persuade him to continue with the illegal hacking that has made them both rich. The name is a fairly clear reference to one of the more famous hackers of the 1990s (the aforementioned Phiber Optik), a move that shows the author's familiarity with hacker lore as it serves to describe a character who in his name and in his function as a script kitty is always derivative. Characters constantly access the internet, chat on IRCs, and play in the Playground—a virtual reality world inspired by Neal Stephenson's Metaverse in his well-known novel *Snow Crash*, a novel Paz-Soldán references with an epigraph.

While *Turing* revolves around the impact of Albert and Sáenz's work in the Cámara Negra under both iterations of the Montenegro regime, the computerized world of the hacker is omnipresent and literally infects the reality occupied by all of the interlacing stories and characters.

Paz Soldán presents Sáenz as a kind of unwitting proto-hacker whose work in cryptography anticipates the computer coding of the next generation. While he does not exhibit any of the revolutionary tendencies ascribed to hackers, Sáenz does share a number of other characteristics with them. Through his work in the Cámara Negra, he becomes known as "Turing," a nickname his boss Albert gives him assumedly based on his uncanny ability to decrypt the messages he receives as a part of his work. This moniker, a reference to the well-known cryptographer Alan Turing, becomes Sáenz's handle, a name that replaces his identity as Miguel Sáenz, husband, father and embodied individual with an identity that emphasizes his ability to decode, that conflates the man with his cryptographical ability, in a sense converting him into one of the codes that he cracks. The novel casts him in this vein from the beginning, presenting him first in the context of his work, decoding messages and, in particular, the email that accuses him of murder. Sáenz, or Turing, is what he does, much as a hacker's online identity is based on his exploits rather than on any kind of embodied presence.

Paz Soldán extends this depiction of Sáenz as a part of the prehistory of hackers by establishing a connection between his or her work decrypting codes and the work a hacker does as he or she penetrates the encoded façades of secure networks, revealing the secrets that they attempt to hide. Not only do we see this in the logical connection between decrypting coded messages and decrypting

computer networks but also in a series of meditations in which a demented Albert imagines himself as the spirit of cryptography that has existed throughout history.

> Soy una hormiga eléctrica. Conectado a la tierra. Y a la vez más Espíritu que todos… Soy el Espíritu del Criptoanálisis. De la Criptografía ¿O son una las dos? […]
> Que. Yo. Recuerde… Mis. Trabajos. Empezaron… El año mil novecientos antes de Cristo. Yo fui quien escribió jeroglíficos estraños. En vez de los normales. En la tumba de Khnumhotep II. Lo hice en las veinte últimas columnas… De los doscientos veintidós de la inscripción. No era un código secreto. Desarrollado del todo… Pero sí fue. La primera transformación. Intencional… De la escritura… Al menos… Entre los textos que se conocen.
> Ah. El cansancio. Fui tantos otros. Imposible enumerarlos todos. (31-32)

Paz Soldán uses these passages to provide a kind of continuity between ancient cryptography and virtual reality that belies the kind of fundamental changes that have been ascribed to the "information revolution." Furthermore, Albert is connected to a literary history as well. His statement "Soy una hormiga eléctrica" makes direct reference to the Philip K. Dick short story "The Electric Ant" about a man who wakes up from an accident to discover that he is actually a robot programmed to believe in his humanity. The construction of a historical and literary continuity that depends in part on a metaphoric dynamic between codes and the humans they represent not only connects the hacker with the history of cryptography and computers, it avails itself of the hacker's representational possibilities by leveraging

the constant transitions and transformations between the hacker's organic body and the electronic information that constitutes his or her computer identity.

The institution of the Cámara Negra also operates as a linking mechanism within Paz Soldán's examination of the dual histories of cryptography and Bolivia. The institution's curious position as a synecdoche of both iterations of the Montenegro government emphasizes the kinds of hybridity suggested by the image of the hacker already discussed. Paz Soldán emphasizes this hybridity in the ambiguous identities of the heads of the organization. First we see Albert, the German ex-CIA agent who founds the agency as an integral part of Montenegro's oppressive apparatus. While we will discuss his hybrid body more fully in another context, his shifting allegiance from Nazi Germany to the US to Bolivia contributes to the unstable definitions of citizenship, nation, and government that allow the organization to operate in both dictatorship and democracy. The current head, Ramírez-Graham, is the US born son of Bolivian parents whom the Bolivian government woos from a job with the NSA. He is immediately granted Bolivian citizenship, producing in that way a situation where Bolivian identity is grafted onto an American who speaks a heavily accented Spanish bereft of the subjunctive and longs for his home in Washington DC. Just as the Cámara Negra metonymically links the neoliberal and dictatorial governments, the hybrid identities of its directors suggest a similar dynamic. While the directors change, they function as doubles who share a similar semiotic construction. When combined with the presentation of its employee Sáenz as a proto-hacker, we see a vision of an agency that uses cryptography within a program of state sponsored terror that

survives the end of dictatorship to continue its work under democracy in a menacingly similar function.

Both the proto- and actual hackers inhabit a country navigating a new global culture and economy where people are identified by their ability (or lack of ability) to consume goods, and in particular, consume technology. Aside from within Montenegro's corrupt government, neoliberal policies are also represented in the Playground, a multinational virtual computer world that charges its participants monthly fees to participate. Its arrival in Bolivia was heralded by advertisements and excitement and its reality is marked by more advertisements and surveillance software that makes sure that its citizens comply with the rules of commerce.[1] The novel presents this virtual reality world in the following terms:

> Hacía poco más de un año, tres adolescentes que acababan de graduarse del colegio San Ignacio se habían prestado dinero de sus papás para adquirir la franquicia del Playground para Bolivia. Creado por una corporación finlandesa, el Playground era al mismo tiempo un juego virtual y una comunidad en línea. Allí, cualquier individuo, por medio de una suma mensual básica—veinte dólares que podían convertirse en mucho más de acuerdo al tiempo de uso—creaba su avatar o utilizaba uno de los que el Playground ponía a la venta, e intentaba sobrevivir en un territorio apocalíptico gobernado con mano dura por una corporación. El año en que transcurría el juego era 2019. El Playground era exitoso en varios países; Bolivia no había sido la excepción. (72-73)

The Playground functions as a hyper-commercial, global entity, with virtual streets characterized by their advertisements for global brands like Nike. While the Playground clearly recalls Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, the Playground is decidedly not to be considered as science fiction. Paz Soldán more explicitly models it on contemporary virtual reality communities, like Second Life or Worlds of Warcraft, that operate in much the same way as the Playground is described.

The commercialism and consumerism extends far beyond the advertisements. Not only do people pay for the privilege of "living" in the virtual city, the virtual characters they inhabit become themselves traded commodities, with people developing digital beings that are then sold to people who do not want to have to dedicate the time to starting the experience from scratch. The ubiquitous virtual prostitutes are, then, commodities on commodities as the avatars that sell themselves for cybersex have already been packaged and sold to their flesh-based operators. The Playground becomes an avatar of reality that attempts to supplant the "real realidad" that it re-creates. Indeed, one of the most important rules of the Playground is that no one can make reference to its artificial nature. If anyone does, the Playground police appear and expel the avatar of the person making the illegal statement. With the inclusion of this police force, Paz Soldán suggests that the Playground recreates the kind of oppressive, disciplinary society that was explicitly used in the dictatorial iteration of Montenegro's government and implicit in the democratic version. The way in which both global capitalism and governmental discipline are

reconstituted within the virtual playground allows the computerized reality to function as a metaphorical link between contemporary neoliberal regimes and the 1970s Operation Condor dictatorships. The computer code that creates the images and sounds of the Playground simultaneously point at the global trade and consumerism of neoliberal policy and at the restrictions on expression so widespread under the anti-communist dictatorships.

While all the characters are aware of the Playground, with Sáenz complaining about his daughter's bills to the Cámara Negra's surveillance of possibly subversive activities, the hacker characters are those that we see interact within this virtual space. Their exploits in the Playground establish the themes already seen even as they introduce other elements of the meditation on technology and identity that we see throughout the novel. The use of virtual characters as extensions of the self introduces the concept of posthuman identity in the representation of the hacker. As Flavia and Kadinsky send these avatars of themselves into cyberspace, their identity shifts from one that is fundamentally corporeal and organic to one that exists at the interaction between flesh and technology. Here the avatars become prosthetic bodies, arms, legs, and sexual organs made up of bytes that respond to the instructions that emanate from the organic bodies that direct them. This very obvious construction of posthuman identity is reinforced by a series of references throughout the novel that emphasize these characters' dependence on technological prostheses. Flavia is never without her cellular phone, a device she uses to view Lana Nova, the digital newscaster (now with all new expressions!) as well as access the Playground. She engages in cyber-sex via the Playground in a meeting that

prefigures the physical erotic encounter with another hacker in an internet café booth. Her room and her descriptions are always mediated by the technology that surrounds her. The same is true of Kadinsky, and as we read the chapters that make up his biography, we see a person whose reality is always configured according to his relationship with computers, his name (handle) a reference to a hacker whose work he appreciates. His very reputation depends on his use of various avatars, from the Playground "Recuperación" movement that is the digital avatar for his anti-globalist Resistencia, to the various personas he inhabits, "Kadinsky" not the least of them. The fact that we never learn his real name, even when we see him in contact with his biological family, further emphasizes the presentation of Kadinsky as an identity that appears not within the body of the adolescent hacker but in his relationships with computers and with his various cyber-personalities.

This suggestion of the hacker figure as posthuman forges yet another connection with the old guard of Turing and Albert. Throughout the chapters dedicated to the ramblings of the senile Albert, we see him described more as a cyborg than as a human being. Note his initial presentation.

> Mi nombre es Albert. Mi nombre no es Albert.
> Nací… Hace. Muy. Poco.
> Nunca nací… No tengo memoria de un principio. Soy algo que ocurre. Que siempre está ocurriendo… Que siempre ocurrirá.
> Soy. Un. Hombre. Consumido. Y. Terroso… Ojos. Grises… Barba. Gris… Rasgos. Singularmente. Vagos… Me. Manejo. Con. Fluidez. E. Ignorancia. En. Varias. Lenguas… Francés. Inglés. Alemán. Español. Portugués de Macao.

Estoy conectado a varios cables que
me permiten vivir. Por la ventana de
la habitación miro el fluir del día en
la avenida. […]
No recuerdo de qué pueblo se
trata… Pero la imagen está… Hay
un niño. Que corre y corre.
No soy yo. No puedo ser yo… Yo no
tengo infancia. Nunca la tuve. (31)

As Paz-Soldán describes the machinery sur-
rounding Albert, we see created a kind of
medicalized cyborg whose existence func-
tions as a product of the failing organic body
and the medical apparatuses that have fused
with it. Albert's rejection of an infancy, of an
existence outside of organic procreation also
configures him as posthuman. The lack of
an origin myth, of a birth within a nuclear
family to human parents, is one of the prin-
cipal characteristics of posthuman identity,
at least as critics like Donna Haraway have
described it.[2] Albert's presentation as flesh
dependent upon tubes and machines raises
a disturbing theme. Albert's cyborg nature is
akin to a kind of virus that has infected his
organic body. That is to say, his continued
contact with the oppressive state via its ob-
session with decrypting coded messages has
resulted in the kind of cybernetic monster
that is dependent upon medical machinery.
When Paz Soldán links the posthuman
condition to exposure to dictatorial practice,
he problematizes the contemporary hacker's
posthuman nature that we have already
noted. Kadinsky, and to a lesser extent Fla-
via, are seen to fight against the neoliberal
policies that have become avatars for the
Montenegro dictatorship in the metaphori-
cal flux of the novel. The cybernetic imagery
that connects these iconoclastic hackers with
the establishment undercuts the ability of
Kadinsky to function as a kind of folk hero.
In fact, Flavia spends most of the novel try-

ing to prove that Kadinsky is as corrupt as
the corporations and government against
which he works.

This vilification of technology and of
the technological component of the posthu-
man, while not in keeping with the most
recent theorizations of the cyborg, does fit
within hacker representation and, specifi-
cally, self-representation. Thomas notes:

The hacker, unlike technology itself,
which is almost exclusively coded
as evil, is an undecidable character.
Both hero and antihero, the hacker
is both cause and remedy of social
crises. As the narratives point out,
there is always something danger-
ous about hacking, but there is also
the possibility of salvation. While
hacking is about technology, it is
also always about the subversion of
technology. (52)

Jon Adams concurs in his discussion of
hacker literature, noting that one is as likely
to see an anti-cyborg theme as one is the
kind of subversive cyborgs that we see in
the novels of writers like Philip K. Dick and
William Gibson (296). In this sense, Paz
Soldán's choice of *Snow Crash* as the source
of one of his epigraphs is once again perti-
nent, as Hayles uses it as a counterexample
to her generally positive vision of posthu-
man identity in science fiction literature.
She observes:

So it is necessarily bad that humans
and computers merge in this way?
For Stephenson, apparently, the
answer is 'yes.' For all his playfulness
and satiric jabs at white mainstream
America, Stephenson clearly sees
the arrival of the posthuman as a
disaster. (276)

The fact that much of the novel's posthuman identities appear in the markedly neoliberal space of the Playground further suggests a vision of cyborg identity where the market forces that drive technological innovation and adoption are never overcome by the hybrid possibilities that the cyborg's body promises to some. Indeed, the carpal tunnel syndrome that Kadinsky suffers functions as another indicator of the posthuman condition as a virus, one that damages the organic body rather than complete a new kind of identity.

The culmination of this condemnation of the posthuman hacker comes in Albert's reasoning behind Sáenz's nickname Turing. He states:

> Se me viene a la mente una imagen borrosa. La de Miguel Sáenz en su primer día de trabajo en la Cámara Negra. La espalda inclinada sobre el escritorio.
> Me dio la impresión de un ser tan dedicado a su labor. Tan poco afecto a las distracciones… Que parecía una computadora universal de Turing… Todo lógica… Todo input… Y todo output… Ahí se me ocurrió bautizarlo como Turing.
> Él siempre creyó que el apodo se debía a su talento para el criptoanálisis.
> La razón era otra. (284)

The name Turing, then, describes Sáenz's machine-like ability to focus exclusively on decrypting messages with no thought to the human consequences of his work, the political assassinations of those who had used encryption to hide their actions from Montenegro surveillance apparatus. The description of Sáenz/Turing, not as a genius of cryptography but as a Universal Turing Machine becomes, then, the ultimate condemnation of posthuman identity. Paz Soldán opposes mechanistic thinking to mercy, equating the former with a kind of bureaucratic mindset that allows people to participate in murder without feeling any guilt or responsibility. While the organic bodies of Albert and Kadinsky are ravaged by technology, Sáenz's conscience is presented as mechanical and therefore culpable. The different avatars of the technological reality, the extensions of the flesh found in the codes that both hide and reveal humanity, all those things that allowed Sáenz and others to distance themselves from the organic bodies of the victims of the dictatorial regime become symptoms of the deeper disease that the novel condemns, that tendency to forget the bodies of those affected by state terror. The hackers' representational undecidability links the technologies of dictatorship and of commerce and visits that linkage on the bodies of those that are caught within and contribute to those systems.

If Paz-Soldán focuses on the codes that these posthuman hackers must break as both *ciberhacktivistas* and as agents of the system they attack, Carlos Gamerro, an Argentine novelist that has enjoyed moderate success in his country, uses his first novel, *Las Islas* (1998), to focus on the physicality of the hacker's posthuman body in his exploration of neoliberal Argentina just before the crisis of 2001. The novel loosely follows Felipe Felix, a veteran of the Malvinas War who now earns his living as a designer of computer games and as a hacker in general. As he wanders his way through the narrative, he uncovers not only a series of governmental and business conspiracies related to the dictatorship and its aftermath, but a virtual re-invasion of the Malvinas Islands organized by fellow veterans. The novel extends from Felix's adventures as he works for corrupt and

eccentric business mogul Tamerlán, erasing all the computer evidence of a murder the mogul's son has committed, to the virtual journals of Argentine soldiers in both the real and imagined invasions of the Malvinas Islands. Of interest in this study, beyond the fact that Gamerro chooses to assign these adventures to a computer hacker, is the imagery of this hacker's presentation and the commentary on technological identity that this character implies.

Felix engages in the following conversation when he enters the Tamerlán office building for the first time.

> —Vengo a ver al señor Tamerlán— expliqué, finalmente.
> —¿Por qué?
> —Él me llamó.
> —¿Para qué?
> —Supongo que necesitará de mis servicios —arriesgué.
> —¿Cuáles?
> —Especialista en seguridad de sistemas. Detección de anomalías. Redes telemáticas. Virus.
> —Una palabra.
> —Hacker—contesté sin dudar.
> —El detector de metales—lo vi consultar apenas un comando incorporado al brazo de su sillón— indica un objeto extraño en su cabeza. Muéstremelo.
> —No puedo. Está adentro.
> —Aclare.
> —Un pedazo de casco. Un casco de soldado. Un recuerdo… (17)

The encounter emphasizes Felix's talents with computers, the technical explanations of his abilities preceding the one word description that identifies him as hacker. The phrasing progresses from descriptions of his contributions to the security of systems and detection of problems to a one-word virus that suggests that he encapsulates both the

problem and the answer, with the answer preceding the problem rather than the more traditional structure. The syntax here is important as his self-description culminates in the virus, in his ability to infect rather than his ability to resolve the infection. The one word "virus" also sets up the one word description of his occupation, "hacker," strengthening the threatening connotations of a word whose definition has been debated *ad nauseum* in computer forums.

The idea of the hacker as virus is then played out on a semiotic level as this human detector of anomalies is detected as carrying something metallic in his head. The helmet shard that he carries as a souvenir of his time in the war incorporates a second level to Gamerro's creation of the hacker protagonist. Felix's body is not completely organic, a portion of his skull converted from bone to metal as a result of serious injury. If Felix had originally characterized himself as a computer virus, associating his identity with non-organic technology, the metal in his head makes him literally a cyborg, a true cybernetic organism as opposed to the more metaphorical expressions of posthuman identity that we saw in Paz-Soldán's novel. Felix is, then, particularly suited to manipulate machines as he can be seen as partly mechanical. Just as he uses his abilities to insinuate himself into information networks, the mechanical has insinuated itself into his body. Gamerro extends this rather traditional description of cyborg identity by including the function of memory within Felix's cybernetic condition. So, the souvenir plate inside his head acts as a kind of computer disk that contains the traumatic memory of injury. That is, in addition to the presentation of Felix as a kind of uniquely qualified cyborg hacker we have the accompanying vision of Felix as a cyborg survivor, a human whose organicity

has been compromised by trauma but who also survives thanks to the reminder of that trauma.

His mechanical component prepares him uniquely for his introduction into the corporation, another living machine. Tamerlán describes his building in the following terms:

> —No sea ridículo —me cortó. Ya no estamos en el Antiguo Egipto. El edificio se construyó con grúas. Vaya, hable con el ordenanza y pregunte si por barrer acá ocho horas por día se le va la vida en algo. No. Hablo de la mía. En el centro de este organismo hecho de espejos y cañerías y cables telefónicos y fibras ópticas y redes de computadoras late un solo corazón: el mío. Todo el edificio es una mera prolongación multiplicada de mi propio cuerpo. (31)

Tamerlán gives the most succinct definition of the posthuman as described by Hayles that we have yet seen by identifying the building with its mechanical components as technological prostheses of his own body (Hayles 3). If Felix's technological component constantly reminds him of his injury, Tamerlán's are an extension of his body, welcome prostheses instead of the uninvited metal scar in the hacker's head. This distinction is essential to Gamerro's construction of hacker identity as it corresponds to Argentina's history. Tamerlán's mechanical body is an agent of surveillance, the building serving as a modern-day panopticon.[3] Tamerlán can observe any of his employees instantly as he can make transparent any wall, ceiling, or floor revealing their activities not only to his gaze but to everyone in the building. This results in remarkably full restrooms as employees try to hide in the stalls in the hope that he will not bother to

watch them while they use the facilities. It also leads his receptionist to engage in a very literal form of phone sex when he calls to speak with Felix, his constant surveillance leading to fetishistic obsessions with objects in the building that are, after all, extensions of his body. The association functions, then, between Tamerlán as a corrupt businessman with ties to the dictatorship and the technology of control, an association strengthened by the fact that Tamerlán inherits the use of surveillance technology from that dictatorship.

The dictatorship's use of technology of control was much more pervasive than that employed for surveillance. The incorporation of electricity in the torture of so-called "subversives" was widespread, and the insinuation of a connection between Tamerlán and the dictatorship based on technology evokes not only the electronic recording of subversive activities but also the subsequent electronic torture of those recorded. The novel strengthens this extension of imagery with a sexual encounter between Felix and Gloria, a woman he meets as he investigates the conspiracy he uncovers while in Tamerlán's employ. As they begin foreplay, the reader is privy to Felix's thoughts:

> Descubrí que besaba despacio, la boca toda floja, la lengua remolona y lánguida, los dientes apenas amagando sombras de mordiscos. La quiero ver a Sandra simulando esto por computadora, pensé un instante, lograr una interfase acuática como ésta va a requerir de un salto tecnológico cualitativo que cuando se dé quién va a derrocharlo apretando con una vulgar mina; Kevin tiene razón, estamos todavía demasiado apegados a la limitación de la realidad cuando las posibilidades del sexo virtual son ilimitadas: pensemos, por ejemplo,

coger con tu Harley Davidson o tu Porsche o, si te da por el arte, la Venus de Botticelli o, más perverso, la de Milo, y por qué no digamos una orgía con las señoritas de Avignon, especialmente las de la derecha —se dio en vagar mi mente por el ciberespacio ilimitado y cuando volví me encontré con una mina desconocida,…. (292-93)

Instead of the expected use of virtual sex as a substitute for the physical, Felix finds that real physical contact is a pale shadow of the possibilities of virtual eroticism. Physical contact with Gloria's flesh and blood body inspires thoughts of sex with a motorcycle, another kind of cybernetic fusion that suggests the posthuman blurring of boundaries that have appeared so prevalently in the novel. While one might attribute these thoughts to Felix's work as a hacker and his obsession with computers, we quickly find that there is something special about this woman, and in particular her skin. As Felix returns to the real world erotic encounter, he notices:

Esta piel, esta piel tan linda, repetía una voz adentro mío mientras refregaba en ella la nariz, los ojos, la boca como en una toalla secada al sol al salir del mar. Había pequeñas zonas de energía alternando con la suavidad de la piel, puntos tan intensos que las yemas de los dedos sentían casi como relieves, y perseguí el dibujo que formaban por todos los rincones de su cuerpo, […]. (292)

Her skin is a series of electrical conduits that work almost like a battery, the zones of energy attracting his attention and producing intense reactions in his own body. One could say, then, that the cyborg hacker

comes in contact with the woman who can fuse virtual and physical eroticism in a body that excites his organic and technological components.

The reason for these "zones" becomes clear when he turns on the light despite her protestations.

Le habría hecho caso, pero llegó tarde, porque mi mano ya estaba sobre el interruptor. Alcanzó a cubrirse, pero no como suele hacerlo una mujer desnuda: […] sus manos habían volado a tapar zonas perfectamente inocentes del pecho y el vientre. Enseguida supe por qué. No había en diez personas manos suficientes para tapar las marcas que le cubrían todo el cuerpo, adensándose como enjambres de insectos en las áreas que intentaba ocultar. […]
Eran estas pequeñas cicatrices brillosas lo que mis dedos habían detectado antes, en la oscuridad confundiéndolas con una ilusión táctil fruto de mi embeleso; el mapa que yo había trazado uniendo estos puntos con mis dedos recién ahora empezaba a tomar forma. (300)

Just as the metal in Felix's head identifies him as a kind of wounded cyborg, Gloria's scars create a body that is more than its organic components. While the scars are not literally mechanical prostheses, they fulfill the same semiotic function as Felix's metal as they act as markers of trauma, reminders of the injury that has altered the nature of the body. Indeed, the scars form a map, a series of written markers on her body just as the metal plate was referred to as a souvenir of the war. What cements this interpretation of Gloria's body as a kind of cyborg survivor is the already observed description of the scars as zones of energy, as if the scars emitted the

electricity that the skin had received from the *picanas* that produced the scars in the first place.

As she describes the torture that created her body, we see a development of this type of body imagery where organic flesh converts into technological prosthesis, the link between mind and organic body severed, much as Elaine Scarry has described in her work on pain and the body. Gloria's posthuman nature comes not as a mechanical prosthesis replaces flesh as in the case of Felix but as the relationship between consciousness and flesh is fundamentally altered. Gamerro develops this idea by having her recount experiences that include the grotesque rapes and tortures that Nunca Más uncovered in its report, noting that relief would only come when she blacked out, disconnecting from her body. The novel then takes it a step further when Gloria remarks that her body was used as the literal conduit for a practical joke that her torturers would play on each other, that is, they would apply the *picana* to her while one of them was raping her so that her body would absorb and transmit the electrical current to the man engaged in her violation (305-06). The act literally makes her flesh an extension of the *picana*, thereby converting flesh into machine and completing the creation of a literal cyborg body. We see that kind of thinking repeated when she talks about her twin daughters, both of whom suffer from Down Syndrome. As she talks about their innocence, she repeatedly refers to her body as a kind of filter, an apparatus that served to remove the evil of the moment of their procreation (310). Once again the flesh of the victim serves as a mechanical device rather than as an aspect of self and the cyborg body becomes the physical representation of the torture that engendered it. In that sense, Gamerro's posthumans

are the embodiment of Scarry's theories on what she calls the "objectless" state of the being in pain whereas the imagination (the post-pain being) as consisting of "wholly its objects" (162). At the same time, their conversion into a kind of cybernetic text rescues the very real trauma that they have suffered from any kind of textual or semiotic obfuscation. That is, these cyborg bodies (and especially Gloria's skin) function as unmediated physical texts where prostheses and cybernetic scars tell the abstract story of dictatorial abuses while simultaneously exhibiting the personal horror suffered by a single human victim of those abuses.

Felix as hacker is presented as not only another wounded cyborg but also as the figure that can read the map of the torture, that can decipher the prosthetic scars left by the technological implements used in that torture. Gamerro proposes, then, a Latin American hacker whose ability with technology qualifies him uniquely to "hack" a traumatic past, to crack the codes that guard governmental secrets. His ambiguous presence as a product of governmental abuse and threat to its technological existence taps into the overarching hacker mythology while contextualizing it specifically for an Argentina marked by brutal political realities much more real than the imagined governmental conspiracies against which the first world hacker characters usually work. In this case the technological infection that Paz-Soldán suggested in the bodies of his hackers is much more acute. At the same time, Gamerro's hacker is more hopeful, as his posthuman body, while still emblematic of physical pain, uniquely prepares him to reveal and resist the abuses of government and commerce.

Joseba Gabilondo has dismissed the revolutionary potential of what Paz Soldán's characters call *ciberhacktivismo* as,

the utopian appropriation of cyber-
space as the final frontier for hacking,
terrorism against the system, etc.
is nothing but wishful libertarian
thinking. (428)

In these two novels we see a more complex
dynamic that vacillates between this "wish-
ful thinking" and real political action. For,
even though the citizens of cyberspace
are generally configured as global subjects
(Gabilondo 428), the particular political,
economic, and historical contexts that the
hackers we have considered occupy qualify
them peculiarly for social activism. In that
sense, both Paz-Soldán and Gamerro cre-
ate posthuman, Latin American hackers
that extend and challenge contemporary
visions of both posthuman identity and the
representation of hacker culture. We do not
see the standard cyborgs of science fiction,
menacing creations of a culture with too
much faith in technology, nor do we see
an acting out of Haraway's cyborg myth.
What we do see are the inevitable results
of an abusive culture that appears either
as dictatorship or as neoliberal regime, but
always in conjunction with technology.
These posthumans are survivors, scarred by
their experiences and left as texts of flesh
and metal that can subvert the authoritative
structures that engendered them because
they remain and can use their bodies as
testimony in acts of "ciberhacktivismo,"
for even in the case of Paz-Soldán's more
pessimistic view, we still have ravaged bod-
ies whose technological infections cannot
be silenced. These figures appear elsewhere
in Latin American literature; from Ricardo
Piglia's cyborg narrator Elena in *La ciudad
ausente* to Alicia Borinsky's metal-skinned
muchacha llagada in *Cine continuado*, where
biomechanical bodies tell the stories of
torture and the abuse of power.[4] The stories

they tell, mediated as they are by the global
technological Social Imaginary that Jerry
Hoeg has engaged convincingly, continu-
ally hack the codes of silence that neoliberal
regimes use to encrypt their past and use
technology to ensure the survival of flesh
that would otherwise decompose.[5]

Addressing this more hopeful version,
Hayles concludes her book with the follow-
ing passage:

> Although some current versions of
> the posthuman point toward the
> anti-human and the apocalyptic, we
> can craft others that will be conducive
> to the long-range survival of humans
> and of the other life-forms, biological
> and artificial, with whom we share the
> planet and ourselves. (291)

The posthuman bodies we see in these
novels sidestep the dichotomy that Hayles
suggests, they are neither apocalyptic nor
are they wholly positive. They are certainly
not anti-human, indeed, they suggest a vi-
sion of humanity where the combination
of the mechanical and the organic assures
the survival of both the individual and the
subversive story that the individual has to
tell. By including hackers in the mix, Paz-
Soldán and Gamerro extend this posthuman
mythology by including a cyborg body that
is not only a text, but also a reader who can
hack the codes imprinted on the flesh of the
victims of political and economic trauma.

Notes

[1] For further discussion of the intersections
of consumerism, capitalism and cyberspace, see
Gabilondo.

[2] See Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto."

[3] I refer here, of course, to Benthem's
nineteenth-century prison as well as Michel
Foucault's theorization of that space (Foucault
195-228).

[4] I develop this idea in relation to Piglia's work in "Life Signs" (2006).

[5] For an alternative (but certainly not mutually exclusive) theorization of the Latin American cyborg's political potential, see Chela Sandoval's discussion of Haraway's theories as interpreted from the context of Third World feminism.

Works Cited

Adams, Jon K. "Hacker Ideology (aka Hacking Freedom) in Recent Science Fiction Novels." *Bildschirmfiktionen: Interferenzen zwischen Literatur und neuen Medien.* Ed. Julika Griem. Tübingen, Germany: Narr. 295-303.

Borinsky, Alicia. *Cine continuado.* Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1997.

Brown, J. Andrew. "Life Signs: Ricardo Piglia's Cyborgs." *Science, Literature, and Film in the Hispanic World.* Ed. Kevin Larsen and Jerry Hoeg. New York: Palgrave, 2006. 87-107.

Dick, Philip K. *Selected Short Stories of Philip K. Dick.* Intro. Jonathan Lethem. New York: Pantheon, 2002.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. 2nd. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Gabilondo, Joseba. "Postcolonial Cyborgs: Subjectivity in the Age of Cybernetic Reproduction." Gray, 1995. 423-32.

Gamerro, Carlos. *Las Islas.* Buenos Aires: Simurg, 1998.

Gray, Chris. *Cyborg Citizen.* New York: Routledge, 2002.

———. ed. *The Cyborg Handbook.* New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.

Hoeg, Jerry. *Science, Technology, and Latin American Narrative in the Twentieth Century and Beyond.* Bethlehem: Lehigh UP, 2000.

Liu, Alan. *The Laws of Cool.* Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Nicotina. Dir. Hugo Rodríguez. Arenas Entertainment, 2003.

Paz Soldán, Edmundo. *El delirio de Turing.* La Paz: Alfaguara, 2003.

Piglia, Ricardo. *La ciudad ausente.* Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1992.

Ramos González, Rosario. "La 'fábula electrónica': Respuestas al terror político y las utopías informáticas en Edmundo Paz Soldán." *MLN* 118 (2003): 466-91.

Sandoval, Chela. "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed." Gray, 1995. 407-22.

Sarlo, Beatriz. *Escenas de la vida postmoderna: Intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina.* Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

Stephenson, Neil. *Snow Crash.* New York: Bantam, 1992.

Thomas, Douglas. *Hacker Culture.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.