Network

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Networks have proliferated in periodical studies, and it is no surprise that much of the research centered on networks looks at nineteenth-century texts.[1] As that century's new railroad systems, electric telegraph wires, and telephone lines powered a process of "networking the world," the word "network" arrived at its modern meanings.[2] First used in the sixteenth century to evoke the interlacing pattern of fabric or netting, by the nineteenth century, network came to mean "any netlike or complex system or collection of interrelated things, as topographical features, lines of transportation, or telecommunications routes" and also "an interconnected group of people."[3] In recent years, a range of studies have patched periodicals back into the material and social networks in which they participated—in order to trace transnational trajectories and to unsettle dominant historical narratives by uncovering competing voices and ideas.[4] Many such studies, at times bolstered by computational methods, have also made the network central to new conceptual models that reveal, in varying ways, the diversity and complexity of print cultural history.

The network plays this dual role—as a means of recovering literal routes of circulation and transculturation, and as a metaphor for conceptualizing the cultural work of periodicals as they follow such routes—in Ryan Cordell's investigation through the NULab Viral Texts Project of the networks of newspapers that frequently reprinted the same content. He proposes that "an idea of the 'network author' accounts for the ways in which meaning and authority accrued to acts of circulation and aggregation across antebellum newspapers."[5] Stacy Margolis traces pathways of political influence within the United States in the early nineteenth century "through invisible networks of friends, acquaintances, and strangers" to elucidate the role of texts that she calls "network fictions" in imagining forms of democratic participation.[6] In my own work on nineteenth-century Spanish-language literary magazines published in the US and Latin America, following the lines of a hemispheric network of publications, contributors, and readers reanimates ideas that were later obscured by twentieth-century notions of literary value. The Havana-based *La Habana Elegante* (*Elegant Havana*), for example, developed an alternative idea of the literary—what I call "networked literature"—centered on activism, a more participatory role for readers, and an aspiration to create a dominant Spanish-language print culture throughout the hemisphere.[7]

In these and other studies, networks reveal paths of influence and exchange, which in turn enable new conceptual models that challenge long-standing assumptions about authorship, literary form, and the centers and peripheries of cultural production. As Edward Whitley notes, "Networks invite attention to the limbs and offshoots that might otherwise be pruned from literary histories concerned with smooth and continuous progress over time."[8] Whitley's observation elucidates the impulse behind much recent work that engages notions of the network: to gain a

vantage point on earlier media systems that shows more than just what scholars have since chosen to privilege. Or, to put it in terms of another set of metaphors that Whitley engages here, the goal is to see more of the garden beyond just those blossoms that scholars have plucked and put on display. The gardening language should not be mistaken to mean that such a perspective is somehow more natural and less cultivated; a garden, of course, is still a display and far from a return to some kind of nineteenth-century media wilderness. Perhaps a less slippery choice of words comes from Thomas Augst's recent observation that, "encountered across digital archives, US literature becomes a collection rather than a canon."[9] The expanded scope of texts relevant to literary history that Augst describes here is also what scholars who have employed notions of the network have sought to bring into view through their own acts of collection and—to employ another powerful metaphor discussed in this collaboration—curation.

In their apparent ability to break from tradition, however, networks can also be deceiving. As my own reflections here demonstrate, networks are metaphors that invite spatial thinking. It is difficult to write about networks without articulating some kind of space in which they operate, and the most readily available points of reference are the very constructs from which networks initially seem to free scholars. Cordell, Alpen Razi, and Trish Loughran, among others, have all defined notions of the network in conversation with Benedict Anderson's imagined communities, even as they have challenged and revised his nationally bounded model.[10] In many studies that employ notions of the network (my own included), it has also proven difficult to discuss networks without also engaging notions of print culture or of the public sphere.

In addition, as Bruno Latour has noted, the word "network" simply "has too many meanings!"[11] Certainly, not all of the meanings employed by scholars are compatible or built on the same theoretical foundations—or theorized at all, in some cases. Latour's idiosyncratic definition of the network operating in actor-network theory as "an expression to check how much energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture" only adds to the confusion.[12] Unlike the examples from periodical and literary studies that I have highlighted, Latour's network is explicitly not "a thing out there that would have roughly the shape of interconnected points, much like a telephone, a freeway, or a sewage 'network.'"[13] And yet the metaphorical network employed by Latour and others to mean the assemblage, in any shape, of actors identified through the study of some new social formation intersects with periodical studies in a way that has yet to be fully explored.[14] For the networks of actor-network theory—which one might argue are more purely metaphorical than the examples from periodical studies that I have cited here—are meant to shed light on "situations where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain."[15] What Latour describes are the very moments of emergence, negotiation, and transition toward which scholars of periodical and literary studies have also gravitated as they have worked to redraw the boundaries of print cultural history in order to create space for lost voices, communities, and ideas. For all of its hotly debated constructions of subjectivity and agency, actor-network theory suggests that

a network metaphor might be honed still further, as scholars seek "to reorient colonial centers and peripheries, to detach place-names from their mythic accretions, to forget the stories that we think we know."[16]

In *La Habana Elegante,* for example, the hemispheric network of writers, readers, and peer publications mediated by this late nineteenth-century Cuban literary weekly is revealing less for what its nodes have in common than for the many different points of negotiation and competing innovations—or one might say the networks in Latour's sense—that it brings into view. As I have noted elsewhere, while scholars have long discussed the role of *La Habana Elegante* and other late nineteenth-century Latin American periodicals associated with the literary movement of *modernismo* in establishing a more autonomous and elevated idea of the literary in the region, that idea of the literary is merely the one that became most recognizable in the twentieth century.[17] *La Habana Elegante* is varied in its formulations of the literary; throughout the periodical's run, writers and editors engaged in an ongoing debate about how literary writing might be used to advocate for political causes (such as the struggle that was then underway for Cuban independence), to increase greater participation in the creation and spread of ideas, and to combat US imperialism in the hemisphere. The magazine thus becomes a site for examining the messy process of reimagining literary writing for a changing world of print. It also shows how assembling new readerships to circulate and invite conversation about new ideas (as in *La Habana Elegante*'s literary innovations) is deeply implicated in the formation of notions of community and identity. For along with the competing notions of the literary circulating within *La Habana Elegante* and its peer publications were emerging and varied ideas of *latinidad* and of the role that people of Latin American descent might play in spreading culture throughout the hemisphere.[18]

My purpose here is not to argue whether more of the work of understanding nineteenth-century media change and the formation of *latinidad* in Latinx and Latin American studies should be taken up under the banner of actor-network theory. Rather, I am suggesting that Latour's approach intersects with studies in these fields that have gone by other names, including comparative media studies and unsettlement studies, all of which might help us to rethink metaphors that have seemed to obscure difference and specificity. From the vantage points provided by recent efforts to traverse disciplinary boundaries and avoid teleological approaches to literary history, as in my own study of *La Habana Elegante,* the monolithic views of print history for which scholars have widely critiqued imagined communities and the public sphere give way to specific sites of media transition, literary innovation, and cultural negotiation.

Rethinking the metaphors we use might help us to provide alternative conceptual models to pair with notions of the network. Among the metaphors considered in this forum, "printscape," as described by Mark J. Noonan with its emphasis on describing more dynamic and place-specific contexts in which periodicals do their work, might be paired productively with a notion of the network meant to recover the diversity and complexity of a given community of cultural producers. Of course, recovery itself is another rich metaphor that requires attention to its assumptions

and particularities, as Brigitte Fielder points out. How might our metaphors allow us to get better at finding and understanding specific sites of cultural struggle and negotiation? How might we navigate the vast collection that US literature, for example, becomes when we use traditional and digital humanities methods of reaching beyond the canon to find voices, ideas, and ambitions that literary history has previously overlooked or obscured? These are questions that remain to be answered as scholars employ notions of the network to reimagine the innovations and aspirations circulated in periodicals the past—and to reflect on the making of their history in our own networked present.

NOTES

[1] One notable exception is Matt Cohen, *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[2] Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[3] *Oxford English Dictionary,* 20th ed. (2018), s.v. "network."

[4] See, for example, Alpen Razi, "'Coloured Citizens of the World': The Networks of Empire Loyalism in Emancipation-Era Jamaica and the Rise of the Transnational Black Press," *American Periodicals* 23, no. 2 (September 2013): 105–24.

[5] Ryan Cordell, "Reprinting, Circulation, and the Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 418.

[6] Stacy Margolis, *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1, 2.

[7] Kelley Kreitz, "Networked Literature: The *Crónica Modernista* and Nineteenth-Century Media Change," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 50, no. 2 (2016): 322.

[8] Edward Whitley, "Networked Literary History and the Bohemians of Antebellum New York," *American Literary History* vol. 29, no. 2 (2017): 287.

[9] Thomas Augst, "Archives: An Introduction." *American Literary History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 4.

[10] Cordell, "Reprinting," 430; Razi, "Coloured Citizens," 107; Trish Loughran, "Introduction," in *The Republic of Print: Print Culture in the Age of U. S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[11] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social : An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 131.

[12] Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 131.

[13] Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 129.

[14] A growing community of scholars is considering the relevance of actor-network theory to the humanities and to literary studies. See, for example, Rita Felski, "Introduction," in "Recomposing the Humanities—with Bruno Latour," special issue, *New Literary History* 47, nos. 2–3 (2016): 215–29.

[15] Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 11.

[16] Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "Unsettlers and Speculators," *PMLA* 131, no. 3 (2016): 744.

[17] See my "Networked Literature."

[18] I have discussed this in detail in my "Telephonic *Modernismo: Latinidad* and Hemispheric Print Culture in the Age of Electricity," *English Language Notes* 52, no. 2 (2018): 90–103.