



Mayte Gómez Molina

# I are: avatars as a wave of being

*Across the quantum collapse of teenage years, literature, illness and avatars, Mayte Gómez Molina (and her body before her) came to understand that people, like particles, change under observation. Here she traces a fractured map of her journey from suffering to the celebration of being fragmented.*

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I remember the light shining through the windows and buttering the tables—anywhere outside those windows was where I wanted to be. A sports field remained an unbothered green as the students were inside the school. On my table, a physics book lay open, oddly material, like the Bibles you find in hotel bedside tables. I asked many questions the teacher tried to avoid, but I was the only one asking. I had to leave school for a year when I was thirteen and I lost my chance of learning the basics of more complex sciences. For me, science had more to do with the laws of magic than with the laws of reality. But we were living abroad and to be able to validate my school years in Spain, where I'm from, I had to take a physics course. So, there I was, sitting in the last row, looking through the window, thinking about what it meant that a celestial object could bend the safety net of the universe, as if a giant football fell onto the green field and made it sag under its weight. Or in the better words written by Benjamín Labatut in his astonishing book *When We Cease to Understand the World*, in relation to Einstein's theory of general relativity, *the body of the star remained suspended in the center of a depression, like a pair of children resting inside a cloth hammock*. Metaphors are bridges we can use to walk toward knowledge, but some get you there better than others. Happily, you can always find someone who has already said what you wanted to say in a better way. And that is a relief.

I am writing this now, but sixteen years ago around this time of the year, I was raising my hand one time, two times, many times. At a certain point, the teacher tried to act color blind toward my colorful questions. But I kept asking why. Why is that formula defining the motion of the universe? Who wrote that? How can you calculate a distance in outer space if there's no comprehensible tool to measure it? Why does light always choose the shortest way? The teacher said, *You must believe*. Coming from a Catholic school, that sounded strangely familiar. My



questions continued as weeks went by, and at a certain point, probably as a form of revenge, the teacher said that with so many questions I sounded like a quantum physicist. I again asked what that was. Tasting sweet, innocent revenge, he laughed and said I should look up the double-slit experiment. I was going to say *what* again, but he had already turned around to continue drawing a portrait of the universe in white chalk.

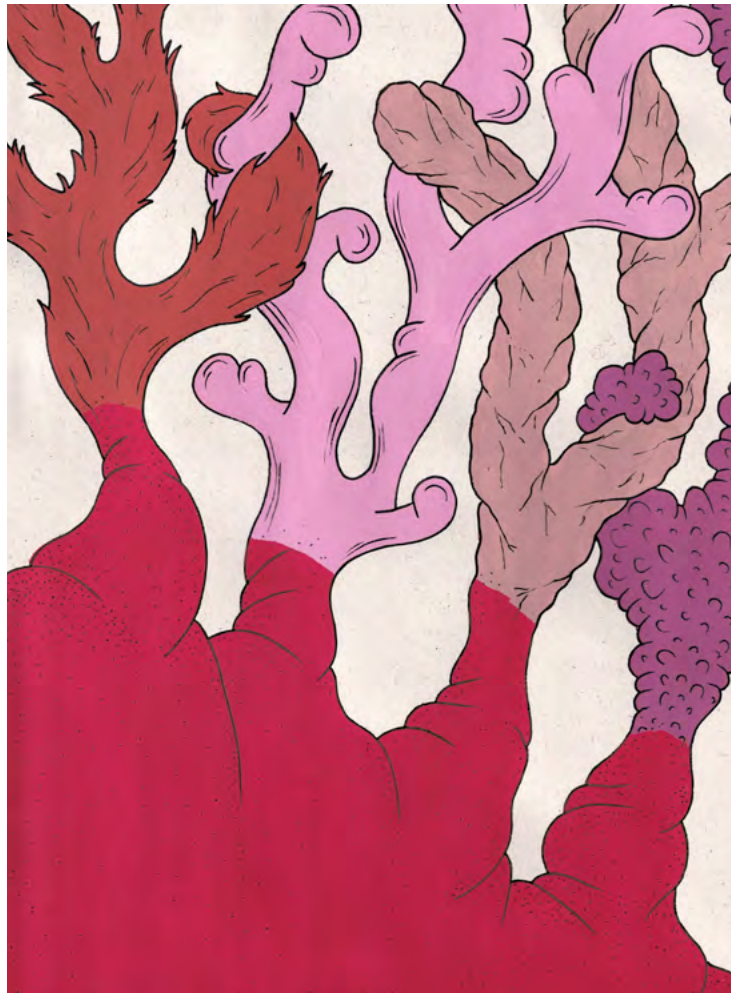
In my teenage room there was a lot of sadness, along with the imperceptible smell of a software called hormones that had taken control over my life. Sadness and a view of the Hudson River which, at sixteen, I could not appreciate, being constantly hungry and heartbroken. Sadness and my many gym clothes, thrown on top of a cheap mass-market print of *Crime and Punishment* on my desk, which I was reading just to say I had read it. That and the door constantly closed against my family. Although that door was sealed in its frame, my room had a giant time and space portal—my first laptop, sitting on my desk like a sphinx that solved some questions and opened up many more, a place where I jumped from one hyperlink to another in the search of a knowledge that proved itself playful and infinite. I typed *double-slit experiment* into the empty mouth of that golem we have created and named Google. And I read until the Hudson shined at sunset like the screen I was reading on, maybe aware of how knowledge had changed me forever.

The double-slit experiment was thought of by Thomas Young in 1801 to study how light behaved. Later, the experiment was repeated with electrons instead of light. The results were unexpected. When no one tried to observe which slit an electron passed through, the electrons formed an interference pattern, behaving like waves. But the moment scientists measured their path, electrons behaved like particles. This phenomenon suggested that it was the act of observation which seemed to shape reality. As the light faded outside, my brain tried to understand. I did not fully grasp all the details, but what became clear to me is that particles behave differently when they are observed. The very act of looking helps define what is real. My rational mind did not have enough physics to make sense of the evening's reading, but strangely enough, my body did. My body could comprehend, fleshy, red and pumping, with unworldly intelligence stored in my hair, my bones, my organs. I did not know physics, yet something remained in me, like the melody of a song that sounds familiar but the lyrics of which you can't quite finish.

Knowledge is an elusive puzzle: the pieces that when put together allow us to understand are hidden not only in different spaces, but also at different moments in time. It wasn't until some unimportant day, only made important by my first reading of *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, when that strange feeling of knowing through the body became solid and I could hold it in thought. Woolf wrote: *But let me be unseen. I am green as a*



*yew tree in the shade of the hedge. My hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk. [...] Now something pink passes the eyehole. Now an eye-beam is slid through the chink. Its beam strikes me. I am a boy in a grey flannel suit. She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered. Like two dendrites of neurons finally touching each other in the celebratory fireworks of a eureka, a thought formed heavy as a rock and grounded me to the moment. In an instant I could fully understand what I had read, that eternal evening of hyperlinks and boredom when I was sixteen. Of course particles behave differently when looked at, and the gaze is the glue that trapped their wings into only one way of being. I could be anything in the world, but when looked at, I was only one thing—a thing I could not even define myself. That was all I have ever experienced, being my own self the embroidery of billions of particles. I was just a macro-scale representation of the tiny, crucial behavior of billions of particles.*



The reason why I understood and did not understand physics had the same root: at age thirteen I was rushed into the hospital because of a deteriorating anorexia that was threatening my life. I couldn't go to school for a year; the year when you learn the basic grounds for scientific knowledge. While my classmates looked at the chalkboard, I looked out of the window on the sixth floor of the children's hospital in Granada. I was too young to



be sent to a psychiatric unit. I shared the floor with a beautiful autistic three year old boy who ran up and down the hallway all day, and with another girl, one year younger than me, whose anorexia was even more life threatening, a girl connected to a feeding tube that poked out of her nose as if she were a very sad cyborg. That's why, when I connected Woolf's quote to the double slit experiment, I understood it with body intelligence. I was also splitting in two. I behaved differently when people looked at me, out of the belief that if I changed, they wouldn't hurt me. Of course I understood particles. But particles could change behaviors and keep both identities intact. Particles could be two different things at once. I couldn't. I had only one body and I was destroying it.

In another even more famous quantum physics thought experiment, known as Schrödinger's cat, there's a cat inside a box, with a vial of poison and a particle that can either activate the poison or not. Until you open the box, you do not know if the cat is dead or alive: it is the act of looking which defines the state of matter. I felt like I was the cat in Schrödinger's box, but that I also was the particle, the poison and the cardboard box itself, all at the same time. In my case, love and professional help dared to open the box, and luckily enough there I was, alive.

It took many years to explore, in my art, what had happened to me. Much is still silent and unexplored, too dangerous to look at. But many aspects and hypotheses about myself, this disease, and the dictatorship that controls bodies and identities are now part of my practice. I talk about this so I do not perpetuate shame through my silence. It did not only take a long time to revisit this experience because of how painful it was, but also because I did not have the tools to express what had happened. One tool did not serve. Writing helped but lacked the visual aspect that is crucial in eating disorders and any other deformations of perception. Sculpting could serve, but it didn't allow me to expand through time, a factor needed to tell what happened. Film was the closest to what I needed, but certain things were impossible to represent with my analog body. I needed to create something like me that was not me. Something like a living ghost of myself, a space where I was and wasn't. Real cats weren't material I was willing to use. So how to explain? How do you describe a hallucination?

It was not until I saw the first 3D render appear on my screen that I understood I had found my medium. I could be a sculpture alive on my computer screen, able to perform and say everything I was not yet brave enough to say. A body that turned, bent, shrank and then returned to normal without pain. A body that could do things impossible for any other body. A body made of matter, and also immaterial. An avatar. Avatars allow me to be myself or to be other: myself or my mother, myself or a liquid, a flying bird, a rock on the side of the road, a light shining through a window. I can deform my body without pain. I can choose who I am. I can defy what others decided I was without asking

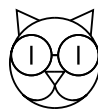


for my opinion. In the intangibility of being, I become solid, resilient. I learn who I was by becoming others. And thanks to avatars I discovered that it is not that I am, but that I are: dust of existence settling on the surfaces of many things, at sunset, floating painlessly, knowing that I am all my fragments.

In my heretic, ongoing research about quantum physics, I recently found out about virtual particles. Virtual particles are the echo of Schrödinger's cat in the box: entities that exist only as active possibility. They are neither real nor unreal, but the murmur between both states. They share with avatars a mode of being. They exist at the threshold, presences that do not claim reality, yet still alter it. Avatars have changed my life forever, allowing me to approach pain at a distance, to hide and reveal simultaneously, to be seen in disguise. Avatars allow me to face risk with a mask, so risk will not recognize me later. I am a thief of knowledge, walking back and forth between the storm and the shelter protected by my costume. And so, I am safe and I am in danger, because knowledge is dangerous: you can't unknow. This is what art is for me: the loving threat of being changed forever. And so, I wear my avatar suit, my immaterial skin, and disappear into the virtual and the potential. I walk into the box and move carefully around the poison, resolved once and every time to take the cat out. Alive.

## BIO

Mayte Gómez Molina is a writer, researcher and new-media artist. Her work explores how literature expands with the help of hybridization and contemporary technology. She currently teaches at the Institute of Art, Gender and Nature HGK Basel FHNW.



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