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## Method

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## METHOD

# Decolonizing International Research Groups: Prototyping a Digital Audio Repository from South to North

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This article reflects on what it means to create a digital humanities (DH) project in the "Global South," while it ponders some lessons it can offer to DH practitioners across the world, particularly from English-speaking academia. As a case study it considers the Digital Audio Repository for Latin American Sound Art and Poetry an initiative coordinated by PoéticaSonora, a research group formed by faculty members and students from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM, Mexico City) and Concordia University (Montreal). The prototyping process has brought out some reflections on the correlation between access and participation through information and communication technologies (here termed "knowledge democratization"), in order to expound PoéticaSonora's theoretical-political positioning, drawing not only from decolonial thinkers and their critics but also from feminist, new materialist, and border studies on technology, art, and society. Then it discusses how the coloniality of knowledge pervades the international distribution of labour in the digital world and academic milieus, particularly through what Leanne Simpson calls "cognitive extractivism." After proposing some strategies to avoid an extractivist workflow while designing a DH project, it finishes by offering three insightful lessons learned from the PoéticaSonora prototype: online access does not equal universal access; well-intended digital projects are not beneficial per se for the target community; and we must bring back to discussion the political dimension of digital labor and the social practices around it.

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**Keywords:** cognitive extractivism; digital repositories; knowledge democratization; literary audio; prototyping; research groups

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Cet article se concentre sur la signification de la création d'un projet d'humanités numériques (HN) dans les « pays du Sud », tout en réfléchissant à des leçons qu'un tel projet peut offrir aux universitaires de HN du monde, en particulier à ceux du milieu académique anglophone. Comme étude de cas,

cet article considère le Digital Audio Repository for Latin American Sound Art and Poetry, qui est une initiative coordonnée par PoéticaSonora, un groupe de recherche consistant en des membres de faculté et d'étudiants de l'Université nationale autonome du Mexique (UNAM, Mexico) et de l'Université Concordia (Montréal). Le processus de prototypage a produit des réflexions sur la corrélation entre l'accès et la participation à travers les informations et technologies de communication (appelé ici « la démocratisation du savoir »), dans le but d'exposer le positionnement théorique et politique de PoéticaSonora, s'inspirant non seulement des intellectuels décoloniaux et de leurs critiques, mais aussi des études féministes, de nouveaux matérialistes et des transfrontalières sur la technologie, sur l'art et sur la société. Nous discutons ensuite des façons dont la colonialité du savoir se répand dans la distribution internationale de travail dans le monde numérique et dans les milieux académiques, notamment à travers le processus que Leanne Simpson appelle « extractivisme cognitif ». Après avoir proposé des stratégies d'évitement d'un flux de travail extractiviste dans la conception d'un projet de HN, nous finissons cet article en fournissant trois leçons perspicaces tirées du prototypage de PoéticaSonora : l'accès en ligne ne signifie pas un accès universel ; des projets bien intentionnés ne sont pas bénéfiques, en soi, pour la communauté ciblée ; et il faut revenir à la discussion des aspects politiques du travail numérique et des pratiques sociales qui les concernent.

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**Mots-clés:** extractivisme cognitif; dépôts numériques; démocratisation du savoir; audio littéraire; prototypage; groupes de recherche'

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## Introduction

During the last few decades, Digital Humanities (DH) projects have become a viable strategy to secure much-needed funding for research in arts and humanities, in a moment when important bastions of scholarly life, such as tenure or disciplinarity, are being radically altered due to the advance of neoliberal policies in the world. Despite being offered as a paradigm shift in the current intellectual discursive regime (Quamen 2012, 8), until very recently DH has been mostly practiced in North American and European academia, and not in the southern hemisphere, contradicting any claim of universality based on the idea that the reach of networked digital technology is global. Quite often, projects about a place, aspect or culture in what is known as the Global South are developed by a university or cultural institution from the Global North. These projects explicitly evidence the infrastructural differences

among various regions in the world, and they risk deepening existing gaps between developing and developed countries, reflecting the current “geopolitics of knowledge” (Miskolci 2014)—that is, the tacit distinction between knowledge generated by the Global North and South. It seems as if information and cultural products from non-Western nations and communities acquire value only when a Western or Westernized university, and its money, take part in a project that makes them visible.

This paper reflects on what it means to prototype a DH project as a collaboration between researchers from a developing country and a developed one, Mexico and Canada, offering some lessons about international collaborative research to DH practitioners, particularly in English-speaking academia. As a case study, it considers PoéticaSonora (<http://poeticasonora.mx>), a research group formed by students and faculty members from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (or UNAM) in Mexico City and Concordia University in Montreal, in order to develop a digital audio repository for Latin American sound art and sound poetry. Its main objective is to operate as “an articulating node among the many Mexican initiatives [...] that put an emphasis on the study, production, archiving, or distribution of practices related to the voice, as employed in poetic and sound creative works” (PoéticaSonora 2016). Among the many debates in DH to which PoéticaSonora’s experience can contribute, this paper will focus on the correlation between access and participation through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), a phenomenon referred to as “knowledge democratization.” It then outlines PoéticaSonora’s theoretical, ethical, and political positioning, as well as the methodological process carried out by this international and inter-institutional research group.

### **PoéticaSonora: the project**

Several Mexican venues and institutions, either state-run or private, have been responsible for facilitating the performance or distribution of what in PoéticaSonora has been referred to as “voice poetics.” In Mexico City, this dissemination has mostly been through festivals, museums, and cultural institutions like Poesía en Voz Alta, Ex-Teresa Arte Actual, Carrillo Gil Art Museum, and Laboratorio Arte Alameda, most of which already participate or are in the process of collaborating with PoéticaSonora.

However, the audio material they have managed to preserve is atomized into several different collections, sometimes inaccessible to the average user, rendering their study difficult. The intention of making them discoverable is tightly bound to the need for disseminating them: these recordings need both a means of discoverability and dissemination or otherwise, they will disappear from Mexico's cultural memory once their technical formats become obsolete.

PoéticaSonora seeks to respond to that need by providing access to a database management system including every recording's full metadata (using a data schema based on Dublin Core and MODS) and a front-end providing specific search and analysis tools. Given that UNAM's main campus is located in Mexico City, along with most of the PoéticaSonora team, the prototype's initial sample of 369 audio files mostly comes from institutions and collectors in this city. We seek to alleviate this centralist bias, troubling in a country where most federal institutions are still located in the national capital, through the ongoing participation of invited curators and provincial institutions in the project, like UNAM's Morelia campus. The Beta version is expected to gather collections from other countries in Latin America as well.

The PoéticaSonora prototype (hereafter PSP; see <https://poeticasonora.me/searchhome>) aims to contribute to the dissemination of Mexico's audio heritage recorded and produced since 1960, the year when *Voz Viva de México*, the first literary audio collection in the country, was founded as part of a preservation campaign by UNAM (González Aktories 2017). The PSP also helps conceptualize listening as a form of legibility, providing methodological and pedagogical tools to analyze sound recordings. Pieces included in the initial sample have been commonly classified under different categories and genres, such as literary audio, sound poetry, sound art, hip hop, and spoken word, among other practices combining sound and word. The span of event types ranges from poetry readings—which have received much recent attention in English speaking countries (Camlot 2012; Clement and McLaughling 2015; Mustazza 2015; MacArthur 2016)—to poetry slams and performances where voice poetics play an essential role in the creative process (**Table 1**). In the context of this project, “voice poetics” does not solely refer to the human voice but to any imaginable way to convene an authorial and aural presence through the use of new

**Table 1:** Some institutions, artists, and private collectors who contributed to the prototype's initial sample of 369 audio files. The undergraduates who did fieldwork, archived, and/or editorialized these recordings were Juan Jimeno, Andrea Cabrera, Sara Villanueva, Alonzo Caudillo, Jorge Pacheco, and Ivonne Pineda, coordinated by Ana Cecilia Medina and Miriam Torres. These collections are available in the PSP temporary site, <https://poeticasonora.me/searchhome>.

Contributor	Collection Name	Event type
Fonoteca Nacional/Radio Educación	Poetas en abril 2003	Radio show
Laboratorio Arte Alameda	(Ready) Media	Audio collection
Centro de Cultura Digital	RojoeSlams 2015	Poetry slam series
UNAM/Eduardo Ortiz	Voz viva de México	Audio collection
Rojo Córdoba	eSLAMex vol. 1	Album
Edmeé García, <i>a.k.a.</i> "Diosa Loca"	Frágil	Album
Los Kikín Fonsecas y el Gringo Castro	Tour Negativo and others	Concert
Salvajes de Ciudad AKA	La tierra prometida	Concert
César Cortés Vega	Piezas sueltas	Audio collection

and old technologies—including “real” voices modified through digital or analog media, as well as the “voices” of machines themselves (Dolar 2006; González Aktories 2017; Rivas 2015, 63).

The PSP inner workflow is focused on strengthening the reading and writing abilities of participating undergraduate students by applying their knowledge on art and literary criticism to the process of *editorializing* sound recordings, that is, contextualizing or updating such recordings' referential networks during its remediation and subsequent integration into digital media via web sites, databases, and so on. The task of editorialization seeks to reduce what Bruno Bachimont calls the “fossé d'intelligibilité” (intelligibility gap) caused by the temporal and epistemic distance (or “commensurability plan”) between the audiovisual document's space-time axis and the current one (Bachimont 2017; Treleani and Mussou 2012; Treleani 2014). At an organizational level, PoéticaSonora gives priority to *editorializing* over *curating* because the latter implies aesthetic or other selective criteria aimed at limiting the number of chosen pieces—a typical strategy in canon formation. The common objective for PoéticaSonora students is not to discriminate between different works, but to provide as much contextual information and access to as

many audio files as possible. However, the dangers of self-reference and saturation are mitigated by inviting external curators who select specific works, genres, and trends for the PSP. Each invited curator, a specialist in her own field, is accompanied throughout the process by an undergraduate who assists her in editorializing the collection (**Table 2**). We expect invited curators to offer complementary, even conflicting perspectives about what is worth preserving and disseminating in the world of sound art and literary audio.

### **Access and participation: cognitive extractivism and international research projects**

This section focuses on a topic from the perspective of a digital project built from south to north, which can significantly benefit ongoing DH debates. It is assumed that one key advantage of DH, not only for academic communities but society in general, is the promise of a free source of knowledge, readily available online regardless of the user's academic degree, profession, or education level. It is an idea shared by several authors, which could be conceptualized as the premise of knowledge democratization. Abby Smith Rumsey, for example, says the main leverage of what she calls translational humanities "is to expand the reach of humanities expertise not only on campus but far beyond to the public and private sectors" (2013). For Andrea Hunter, DH practitioners are part of an academic community in a process of committing to higher levels of social engagement: "By focusing on access and

**Table 2:** Confirmed invited curators as of December 2018 and undergraduates in charge of each project. All these series are currently in the process of being editorialized and uploaded to the PSP.

<b>Curator Name</b>	<b>Genre/Topic</b>	<b>Undergraduate Name</b>
Bárbara Lázara	Sound Art	Muriel Herrera
Suzanna Molina, <i>a.k.a. "Obelia Preta"</i>	Women, hip-hop, and spoken word in the US-Mexico border	Adriana Dávila
Cynthia Franco	Women writers in Mexico City's poetry slam scene	Isabel Alcántara
Erika López	Vocal art, experimentation, and radio art in Mexico	Ivonne Pineda

participation as central tenets of their work, it frees digital humanists from any critiques of technological determinism, and positions digital humanists within a larger community of social scientists, scientists, journalists and public intellectuals who are seeking to make their professions more inclusive" (2015, 421). Similar claims have been posited from the field of Open Access (OA), where the focus is on reducing restrictions to accessing knowledge through the use of OA licenses. For Peter Suber, "shifting from ink on paper to digital text suddenly allows us to make perfect copies of our work. Shifting from isolated computers to a globe-spanning network of connected computers suddenly allows us to share perfect copies of our work with a worldwide audience at essentially no cost" (2012, 1).

The problem with these arguments is that they take for granted that ICT access is universal.<sup>1</sup> As a Latin American country such as Mexico can show, this assumption must be thoroughly reconsidered. ICT penetration in Mexico has grown considerably in the last few years, but it is still far from reaching the entire population. According to annual surveys conducted by statistics bureau INEGI, in 2013 only 35.8% of Mexican households had a computer at home and 30.7% had internet access (INEGI 2014, 11). By 2016, these numbers jumped to 47% and 45.6% respectively (INEGI 2017, 1–2). Although we notice a stable growth in the use of these technologies, if compared to Global North countries it is still very low. For example, the average percentage for ICT usage at households in OECD countries was 71.6% in 2011 alone (INEGI 2014, 12–15).

It is important to remember that the place where technology is utilized also determines the user's interaction with it. It is not the same to access the internet at home as to use a borrowed or rented computer. Evoking Golding and Murdock's discussion about access hierarchies, Hunter writes, "access to the Internet through a

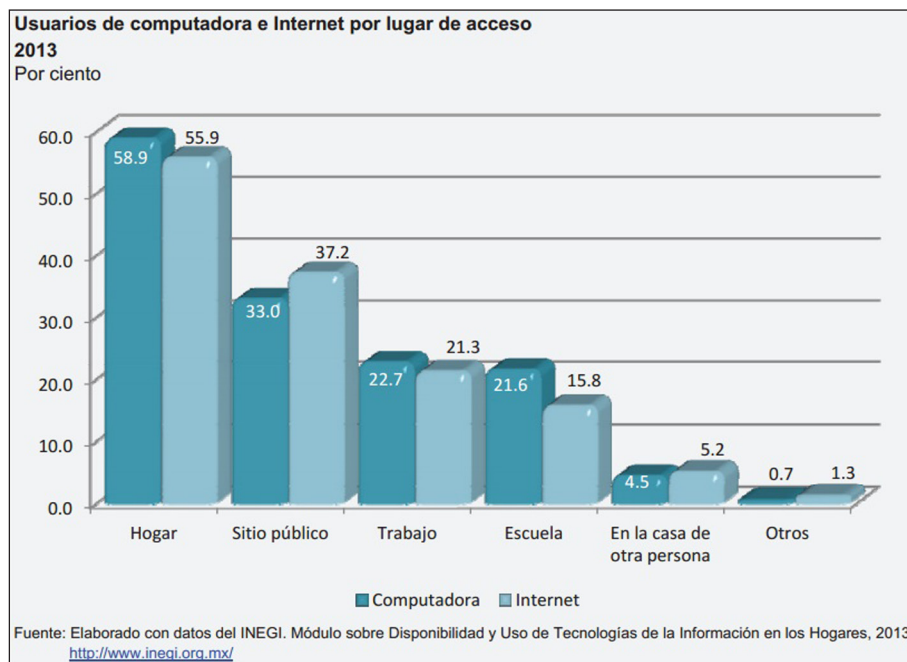
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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, of course, that there are no DH projects being done that recognize this divide. Examples of this awareness are Global Outlook: Digital Humanities, a special interest group from the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) whose purpose is precisely to tackle connectivity gap problems among DH practitioners across the world. Another is #UnitedFronteras, that seeks to palliate the symbolic effects of geopolitical borders on local communities by offering them a map and database of cultural projects with a digital component in their regions, initially taking the US-Mexico border as a case study.



library is a very different, less privileged form of access than a connection at home or work” (2015, 418). INEGI’s survey (2014) shows that public spaces were the second most common place of internet access in Mexico, even above working places and schools (**Figure 1**). Unlike North America, the most common public places are not libraries, but so-called *cafés internet* (even when, ironically, coffee is not always sold there), private venues meant for renting computers, telephone lines, and video game consoles at fixed rates. Among these varied access differences, the computer literacy needed for making use of any digital tool is not a condition given by technology *per se*, but a social process based on previous knowledge and socioeconomic privileges enabling or hindering learning conditions.

The fact that access to a website, an OA article, or a digital repository seems free is due to the existence of infrastructure, platforms, and standards for file storage and transmission. As Jonathan Sterne reminds us, “An MP3 costs almost nothing to make



**Figure 1:** Percentage of computer and internet users in Mexico by place of access, 2013. Based on INEGI’s *Módulo sobre disponibilidad y uso de tecnologías de la información en los hogares, 2013* (INEGI 2014, 22).

and reproduce—once someone has invested in a computer, software, a relatively reliable supply of electricity, and some kind of internet connection (because of these costs, we cannot say that it is truly free even when it is not directly purchased)” (2012, 26).

Even having the necessary infrastructure spread around a country, nothing ensures that ready internet access correlates with a direct increase in the social impact and reach of digital tools (Galperín and Viçens 2016, 38–39). For example, one of the programmers of Omeka, a content management system developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University (widely used for creating and developing cultural heritage digital collections),

Disagreed that simply making information and primary sources available, or enabling more people to create historical records is democratizing. Instead, this person argued that what was necessary for a democracy is a group of people rallying around information, using it for political or social means. Democracy is active, rather than passive, and requires the formation of community (Hunter 2015, 416).

Another Omeka developer claimed that “any agency they [DH tools and resources] afford is done within a safe, uncontested medium that does not challenge power structures in a substantive way” (Hunter 2015, 417). Thus, for a DH project to be relevant, even if only within a limited field or area of study, it must also address questions around that are central for its discipline or study area, and that may begin to be answered through the use of tools provided by such project.

The discourse of knowledge democratization conceals material conditions deeply rooted in ICTs and their differentiated access by gender, race, and social class. Learning to use a digital product or service (and, even less frequently, learning something relevant about a topic or subject through it) implies having adequate material possibilities, enough “social time” (Valenzuela 2009, 21) and knowledge for making use of them, even if content is only temporarily accessed, as in internet being rented by the hour, a much more common transaction in the Global South than

in the North. Like the case of Google's "click democracy" shows—which according to Barbara Cassin (2007) is neither a democracy nor is it actually just based on clicks—uncritically labeling an algorithm or a programming function as democratic is dangerous since, just as with any cultural production, it has its own implicit and explicit ideological, political, and aesthetic biases.

Given the degree of ICT penetration in Mexico nowadays, who may PoéticaSonora actually serve at all? It is vital to be clear and honest towards the community a DH project seeks to benefit, as well as to implement effective activation, dissemination, and follow-up strategies. Clearly, even though users from outside an academic milieu are greatly welcomed, based on our fieldwork experience it appears that most PoéticaSonora users will be writers, artists, critics, professors, and liberal arts students. The prototype had to be functional enough for them to access it from practically any computer connected to the internet, without the need to install any additional program or plugin. We have often taken care not to widen connectivity gaps among different user sectors in Mexico further. One of the main pitfalls of knowledge democratization is neglecting the existing inequalities between developing and developed nations, and between poor and rich citizens within them. Thinking a project is available for everyone just because it is online runs the risk of inadvertently privileging a certain user sector—those with more digital literacy, the social and economic capital. It can also potentially affect the area or region studied, either directly or indirectly, as infrastructure differences sometimes open some "areas of opportunity," in the crassest capitalistic sense (say, cheaper labour force or raw materials, less strict employment regulations, and so on), that can be exploited, inadvertently or not, even within scholarly projects.

Lisa Nakamura's study on the essentialization of Navajo women as naturally gifted chip manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s is a great example of how flexible labour, either local or outsourced, is exploited in digital culture (2014, 919). She also offers fruitful connections between US gender studies in technology and the early history of *maquilas*, or assembling factories, in Mexico and other developing countries (Iglesias Prieto 1997; Lugo 2008). Drawing from Tiziana Terranova and Donna Haraway, Nakamura understands that "really looking at digital media, not

only seeing its images but seeing into it, into the histories of its platforms, both machinic and human, is absolutely necessary for us to understand how digital labour is configured today" (2014, 920). These dynamics are also present in scholarly life, as when a Global North institution or university funds research on Global South topics or materials, while most of the project is developed from the institution's, rather than the subject's, perspective. Under this "*maquila*-like" model, knowledge stemming from Global South communities is treated as raw material that must be turned into a suitable commodity (via articles, book chapters, and digital projects) for an academic market in which, according to Bolivian theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "ideas run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into tributaries in major waves of thought. But just as in the global market for material goods, ideas leave the country converted into raw material, which becomes regurgitated and jumbled in the final product. Thus, a canon is formed for a new field of social scientific discourse, postcolonial thinking" (2012, 104).

In the context of PoéticaSonora's workflow, where faculty members and students from Mexican and Canadian universities interact, how do we avoid practices that reinforce cognitive extractivism, understood as the inequitable circulation of knowledge produced in different parts of the world? This question has made us consider not only end-users into the workflow, but also administrators, moderators and data-entry users, who must add, use, and modify information in the PSP from a very early phase in the project. In turn, it has resulted in a reflection on the participation of each university in this international and inter-institutional collaboration, as well as of the north-south flux of goods and knowledge in academia.

The main differences between Mexican and Canadian universities regarding flexible labour can be seen in the positions offered to students in the context of a research project. Most UNAM students participate in PoéticaSonora through the *Servicio Social* program, a temporary, professionalizing activity similar to an internship (*Servicio Social* could be roughly translated as "social community work") that is mandatory for undergraduates to get their degree in any program of a Mexican university (UNAM 2017). This normally entails a period of 6 months (or 180 hours) working on an area akin to their program or specialty. Most *Servicio Social* positions

are unpaid, and exceptionally few of them offer anything close to a competitive salary since it is considered a sort of test or preparatory experience, rather than a professional position as such. Due to our low operating budget, it is impossible for PoéticaSonora to economically compensate students at this moment, and the fact that neither involved graduates nor professors get any extra funding for the project does little to make this consideration less complex. Only until very recently has one student, Miriam Torres, been assigned a teaching assistant position directly related to the project. But UNAM's School of Philosophy and Letters (where most PoéticaSonora members study or work) seldom offers undergraduates this type of support.

The situation in Canadian universities is slightly different, as they tend to offer students more positions and more flexible funding for specific research projects than their Mexican counterparts. With the financial support of Hexagram (a provincial network involving six Québécois universities, dedicated to promoting research-creation in arts, technology, and digital culture), PoéticaSonora was able to integrate David Lum to the project as a research assistant who would closely work with me and Concordia professor Ricardo Dal Farra in the design and development of a data schema and a simple front-end for the repository. While finishing Concordia's graduate diploma in computer science, Lum undertook the work paid on a rate previously settled between the university and TRAC, the relevant student labour union—a standard practice encouraged by the Hexagram application process. Even though Lum's knowledge and expertise are clearly indispensable for the project as a whole, so are the fieldwork and archival tasks performed by the unpaid UNAM undergraduates, whose labour was essential for gathering the initial sample with which the Concordia team worked. It can be argued that giving students a *Servicio Social* position in an innovative DH project is already compensation enough, but these benefits fall mostly under the realm of symbolic rather than economic capital (Bourdieu 1993: 74–76). Neither does Lum's compensation reflect his knowledge or expertise; instead, it was determined by his last degree achieved.

Notions of use value and exchange value come to mind, showing why discussing digital labour in an international scholarly context is absolutely necessary. My argument is not that the labour of Mexican students is being alienated and exploited

by a Canadian university, which would be an unfair caricature of the project. I am rather pinpointing that diverging scholarly and labour policies do make a difference when trying to find a fair, equitable balance for Global North universities to collaborate with their Global South counterparts. Being conscious of this tacit, symbolic form of extractivism implies questioning the notion of knowledge democratization not only by contrasting the material and infrastructural conditions of developing and developed countries but also by revising the pervading cultural homogenization that, despite many good intentions, still predominates in current DH debates. It is also a matter of being careful not to widen the already existing connectivity gap between the Global North and South and revisiting why the exhausting task of classifying and editorializing sound recordings is considered less important in the scale of digital labour than designing and implementing a digital platform to manage them.

Cognitive extractivism is a very concrete example of the *colonialidad del saber*, or coloniality of knowledge (cf. Wynter 2003, 260). It is also the clearest manifestation of coloniality<sup>2</sup> in the PSP out of the five known types, the others being of power, freedom, gender, and (well) being. As with many other milestones of the modernity/coloniality system, the origins of this phenomenon date back to the discovery of America, as Edgardo Lander wrote in a watershed essay: “With

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<sup>2</sup> Building up on Latin American decolonial authors (Dussel 1993; Escobar 2003), it is important to distinguish between colonialism and coloniality. Modern colonialism is an imperialistic foreign policy strategy, exercised by European nation-states from the late 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and by American ones since the 18<sup>th</sup> century on. Coloniality, on the other hand, is an internalized form of such colonialism, capable of perpetuating itself even after the fall of a political regime that could enforce it. What we observe nowadays are neocolonial interactions, either explicit or not, between an ex-metropolis and its ex-colonies (like France in relation to Quebec and Haiti), or with a new colonial force (like the United States in relation to South America in general). Something that seems clear when comparing English-speaking postcolonial and Latin American decolonial studies is that colonialism was developed in several phases, every time with a different *ethos* and *telos*—colonies like enormous factories or planting zones (Spain in Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo, England and the Netherlands in the Caribbean, France in Saint Domingue); colonies as extensions of European kingdoms (Brazil, the settler colonies); as livestock haciendas (Spain in Cuba), and so on (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2003, 134–138; Garraway 2005, 240–244; Bringas Nostti 2008; Ibarra Cuesta 2012, 65–140). Experiences of colonialism in different places will entail diverging expressions of coloniality, albeit sharing some similar traits. This must be taken into consideration when analyzing neocolonial relations as those established by Mexico with the United States and Canada.

the advent of colonialism in the American continent begins not only the colonial organization of the world but—simultaneously—the colonial constitution of knowledges [*sic*], languages, memory, and imagery” (1993, 7). Being conscious of this form of colonality implies questioning concepts like knowledge democratization by contrasting them not only to the material and infrastructural conditions of other countries, but also by revising the pervading anglocentrism and cultural homogenization that, despite many good intentions, still predominates in the actual DH debates. Richard Miskolci makes a similar claim from his field: “Queer Theory has left intact a geopolitics of knowledge that preserves and updates old colonial practices” (2014, 13), denouncing the persistence of “a powerful political, cultural and scientific hegemony which highlights and privileges that which is created in the United States and Europe, relegating Southern works to ethnographic status or sources of case studies” (2014, 21).

In the face of such considerations, it is necessary to avoid reproducing the north-south flux of the international division of digital labour *and* academic research, both infused with gender, class, and race biases, during this advanced phase of white patriarchal capitalism, termed “the informatics of domination” by Haraway (1991, 170ff). Other than “a space for collecting data, making ethnographic incursions or applying (northern) theories to particular cases” (Miskolci 2014, 13), the Global South has been portrayed as ideal for prime material extraction or assemblage using cheap labour force (Grosfoguel 2016; Nakamura 2014). Under these circumstances, for a real paradigmatic change to happen, Miskolci argues, “scholars from the North should begin to recognize that their way of producing and circulating knowledge sustains international hierarchies and inequalities, evident in the almost complete absence of dialogue with their colleagues in that part of the world understood to be the Global South” (2014, 29).

The complaint about using goods and knowledge from colonized regions without giving anything back to them (a common topic in post-colonial approaches to anthropology) has also been raised by indigenous peoples in the Global North, most notably the Idle No More movement in Canada. It has been well established that extracting minerals, plants and other resources was fundamental for the creation

of the current modernity/coloniality system, as well as for the illicit enrichment of colonial European nations (Grosfoguel 2016, 126–131). Nishnaabeg writer and activist Leanne Simpson has noted how extractivism is also manifest within the geopolitics of knowledge through what she calls “cognitive extractivism”: “The canoe, the kayak, any technology that we had that was useful was extracted and assimilated into the culture of the settlers without regard for the people and the knowledge that created it” (Klein and Simpson 2016, 133). This concern for extractivist practices is reflected in Simpson’s work, engaged with keeping individual and social agency within an occupied territory (Simpson 2011, 11–29), or with generating narratives for a tradition of one’s own to explain a world submerged in all the mentioned manifestations of coloniality (Simpson 2013). Under her spotlight, cognitive extractivism stands out as one of many cooptation strategies exercised in the Global North to make otherness look like sameness, erasing in the process any individual and collective identity mark that may diverge from Western-centrist standards (that is, white, Christian, heterosexual, and masculine).

In view of an anglocentric, socioculturally homogeneous discursive regime, and the risk of reproducing extractivist models in scholarship, which lessons can a DH project offer when it is mainly conceived and carried on from the Global South? It is crucial to understand that well-intended projects are not necessarily beneficial to the target community if ethical guidelines or similar tools are not implemented. Making a subject matter discernible while being unaware of its implications on real people is an irresponsible act contributing to the status quo in the geopolitics of knowledge—in fact, Rivera Cusicanqui proposes that we rather talk about a *political economy* of knowledge (2012, 102)—silently legitimating the international distribution of digital labour in the academic world.

### **The origins and motivations of Concordia University’s involvement with PoéticaSonora**

There are two main reasons why Concordia University became involved in this project; one is bio-bibliographic, the other subjective. The seed of this project is surely to be found in the courses on sound, literature, and intermediality offered for over 20 years by Susana González Aktories, first in UNAM’s National School of



Music, where she founded a research group on music and literature, and later in the College of Modern Letters, located at the School of Philosophy and Letters. Nearly every PoéticaSonora participant has taken such courses or has been supervised by her while writing their theses (in Mexico's public educational system, depositing a thesis is usually mandatory for graduation in Liberal Arts, even at the undergraduate level). My first approach to sound studies and what would later be called "literary audio" was through one of these courses, for which I wrote an early version of an essay on Kerouac's jazz recordings that eventually became part of *Shuffle: poesía sonora* (Meza 2011, 21–43). When I began my Ph.D. in Humanities at Concordia, I was undecided about making a digital version of this book (normalizing information to build a database and adding essential audiovisual material) or rather a large-scale repository for literary audio and sound art, a task I would not be able to manage alone. I asked González Aktories for advice, who had continued mentoring me after graduating from UNAM. At that moment (2015) she was co-organizing a groundbreaking event, *Plataformas de la imaginación: Escenarios de la literatura electrónica en México*, along with María Andrea Giovine, Élika Ortega, Roberto Cruz Arzábal, Cynthia García Leyva, and Ana Cecilia Medina—most of them former students of hers with whom she had also previously founded the Laboratorio de Literaturas Extendidas y Otras Materialidades (LLEOM). When I approached her, González Aktories was committed to dedicating once again her full attention to a twofold topic that has fascinated her for a long time and has driven her most remarkable academic writings: the aural dimension of the word and the materiality of the voice. She invited me and García Leyva as founding graduate student members of PoéticaSonora, and Medina as an undergraduate member, each of us contributing to the project's two main operating axes: activation (organizing performances, exhibitions, and conferences on sound, voice, and legibility) and archiving, mainly focused on building the PSP workflow.

As for the subjective motivations behind this project, in a nutshell, I can say that my participation from a North American university is due to an uncritical submission to coloniality of knowledge. When I first met González Aktories I was doing my BA in English at UNAM, the only program in the country focused solely on Anglophone literature. Studying foreign cultures, immersed in their original language while living

in the largest Spanish-speaking metropolis of the world, far from any direct, everyday interaction with English-speaking communities, I suffered from a kind of cultural alienation that I did not perceive as particularly oppressive but instead felt like a privilege. At UNAM's College of Modern Letters, it has never been mandatory that we should go to a country where the language we studied was spoken. However, many alumni did study abroad, both while studying and after graduating, like Raúl Ariza Barile, who eventually earned a Ph.D. in Old English literature at the University of Texas in Austin, or Ernesto Priego, yet another former student of González Aktories' and founding editor in the United Kingdom of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*. In my case, I have attended several universities in the United States and Canada during my MA (as an exchange student) and PhD (as a full-time student), continuously immersed in an Anglophone academic environment that continuously yet tacitly pushed me towards Latin American studies, even if my professional career in Mexico was already built around English, as I have long been an ESL teacher, literature professor, and translator. This has resulted in curious, sometimes seemingly oxymoroninc situations, like finding out one of my first graduate seminars in a Canadian Anglophone university was exclusively offered in Spanish (both classes and readings), along with classmates coming from every place in Latin America where diasporic movements have happened—Cuba, Colombia, Chile, Honduras, and of course Mexico.

Montreal may offer ideal environments for sound studies due to the number of artists and researchers interested in the field—a reason why I came here to study—but it does not mean by far that North American neoliberal models of education provide peaceful, idyllic places for studying developing regions. The MA in Hispanic Studies, the program where this seminar was offered, was discontinued shortly after I took it, following other significant changes in Concordia's Department of Classics, Modern Languages, and Linguistics that affected teaching and research on area studies in general—except for cases where private donations are frequent, like the growing School of Irish Studies. Nowadays, the only options at Concordia for graduate research on Latin America are the Independent Studies program and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in Humanities. The situation is paradoxical: we are offered study

spaces that seem free of disciplinary pigeonholing, yet there is not strong research and student community that would facilitate the kind of innovative work expected from us. Symbolic resources must be continually sought elsewhere, a reason why I ended up not only collaborating with PoéticaSonora but also participating in a research internship with Eduardo Restrepo on decolonial studies at Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia.

So, the answer to why the collaboration with Concordia was undertaken (or needed) may be that in principle it was not necessary at all, but once the connection with LLEOM and PoéticaSonora was established it had to be critically engaged to avoid the mentioned pitfalls surrounding cultural interaction in academic milieus, both English and Spanish-speaking. Given that compliance to international standards for ICTs like ISO is so widespread in universities across the world, the fact that the PSP is created between Canada and Mexico is merely contingent and does not determine its reason of existence. The prototype might as well have been designed and developed exclusively by UNAM professors and students, but the question remains whether it would have any impact in contemporary DH debates *outside* Latin America. Indeed, without the participation of Canadian institutions like Concordia and Hexagram we would not have access to much-needed funding which, despite logistic and administrative support from UNAM, is still largely missing in Mexico. Since the project's language of study is mainly Spanish (although not limited to it, for it also includes pieces in English, Spanglish, and Mexican indigenous languages such as Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Tojolabal), it is very likely that its impact in Anglophone academia would have been minimal, particularly if compared with PennSound or UbuWeb, which have greatly inspired PoéticaSonora and have shown us the potential of digital audio repositories.

Integrating a North American university into the project's workflow offered the possibility of essaying new participatory dynamics, seeking to avoid an uncritical cooptation to the political economy of knowledge, and proposing alternatives to extractivist workflows. The aim is to build a locus of enunciation that includes the self— "The self is the One who is not dominated" (Haraway 1991, 177)—within terms that are not their own, out of their comfort zone. For Haraway, a common

achievement of feminist theorists Chela Sandoval and Katie King “is learning how to craft a poetic/political unity without relying on appropriation, incorporation and taxonomic identification” (1991, 157). This unity by affinity, rather than by identification—a concept carrying a profound colonial heritage (Fuss 1995, 141)—raises questions resonating with PoéticaSonora’s own path, such as, “What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective—and, ironically, socialist-feminist?” (Haraway 1991, 157). Building a politics/poetics by affinities can be carried out within English speaking academia (and in fact it is), but it might as well come from a compound locus, consisting of different places and temporalities.

By prototyping PoéticaSonora a critical, aesthetic, and political statement is being made. Not only will its implementation make discernible a series of multidisciplinary artistic works in audio format since the 1960s, but also wishes to put those practices in a duly horizontal dialogue with those archived by PennSound and UbuWeb. Of course, a decolonial approach to scholarly research groups (or any other topic, for that matter) does not mean forfeiting every knowledge produced in the context of modernity/coloniality, but rather means understanding the importance of and integrating studies in/from/for the Global South (Miskolci 2014), including what they tell us about the self-assured universality present in some scientific works produced in the Global North.

The PSP workflow during the fieldwork and archival research phase is a good example of how to revert the north-south flux in the academic editorial market noticed by Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, 104). Instead of devising a scheme in Canada to implement in Mexico, the database design was largely modelled on the available recordings donated by participating institutions, private collectors, and invited curators, as well as on experiences documented in two different fieldwork trips I conducted in Mexico City (summer 2016 and fall 2017). This inductive, heuristic approach intends to address the needs of artist and student communities involved in the repository’s development (who are also potential target audiences), rather than solely focusing on the technical-conceptual part of the process, keeping in mind how databases are examples of “the translation of the world into a problem of coding”

(Haraway 1991, 164). The existing gap between the needs of target audiences and the technical requirements to meet such needs is bridged by the fieldwork activities of *Servicio Social* undergraduate students—visiting archives, assisting in interviews, and editorializing audio recordings, always coordinated by a professor or graduate student.

This dynamics is clearly exemplified in the different *relatorías* or reports that we have prepared for every consulted archive and collection, among them Fonoteca Nacional (González Aktories et al. 2017), Ex-Teresa Arte Actual (Medina and Jimeno 2017), Casa del Lago (Caudillo 2017), and Laboratorio Arte Alameda (Cabrera López 2017). PoéticaSonora team members have written these *relatorías* as a means to disseminate our findings during the fieldwork and archival research phase, as well as to help participating institutions evaluate new methods to better classify and preserve such material. In turn, the experiences of undergraduates while exploring these archives and collections have served to find and correct bugs, refine classification criteria and add or remove fields according to the needs they find. These suggestions sometimes have had profound implications. For example, we added an external URL field after feedback from several students pointed that way, a suggestion that allowed us to solve some interoperability problems, as it allows to relate the resource to other unique identifiers, like ORCID, database permalinks, and so on.

The role played by undergraduates is vital both for the PSP and for their development as art or literary critics, a necessary ability for editorialization. It also prepares them, albeit informally, as incoming DH practitioners, showing them how to cope with tools and resources not widely available in the Mexican educational system, despite efforts from several government administrations to bring ICT to public schools. The fact that PoéticaSonora does not directly receive funding other than that already allocated to their members' programs or departments does little to acknowledge the irreplaceable labour made by *Servicio Social* students. It is clear that, in the big picture, the increasing precarity of academic labour permeates this whole story, but we would not want the benefits of this project for undergraduates to be exclusively in terms of symbolic capital, even if some authors consider accumulation of this type of capital to be one of the most noticeable benefits for Mexican low-income populations (Mariscal and Martínez 2016, 268).

Regarding PoéticaSonora's positioning towards knowledge democratization, we believe it is important to target the study area as well as the intended users with honesty and modesty. Certainly, ICTs offer modes of distributing knowledge that was unthinkable just a few decades earlier. However, digital literacy is a process heavily burdened by infrastructural differences between the Global North and South, whereas some research in English speaking academia takes findings in a few developed countries as an argument for universality. A good way to test the reach and breadth of an assumption based on infrastructural conditions is to consider similar case studies in areas different from our own (the more contrasting the example, the better). This will hopefully avoid most over-generalizations and will prove a great test for the argument's groundings. Another thing we do at PoéticaSonora to avoid the *maquila*-like model, as has been said, is sketching the database schema out of findings made during fieldwork in Mexico City, instead of planning everything beforehand and extracting the "necessary" information. This way we ensure that the repository is covering most of the potential users' needs and that we offer necessary tools and background for them to gather relevant information.

### **Conclusions: towards a Beta version**

This article has speculated on the international distribution of digital labour in the context of prototyping an international DH research project. To understand the repository's *raison d'être*, it was necessary to establish its target audience, even if the PSP mostly focuses on inner workflow rather than end-user interaction. Although it is expected that end-users will have a similar profile to that of PoéticaSonora members (usually affiliated to a university or cultural institution, with a minimum digital literacy), this focus on data entry rather than graphic user interface makes it difficult to evaluate a concern raised by one reviewer, "[outlining] how user preferences will be determined, and how these will drive interface design." Currently, these preferences are limited to the moderator and administrator profiles, who are for the most part *Servicio Social* undergraduate students performing editorialization tasks. The only choice they can make so far is switching between the moderator panel, a default interface with limited read/write functions, and the administrator panel (if

granted credentials) in which they can edit any piece of information available on the database, whether created by them or not. These two different panels are so meticulously developed that their search bars (one for every important field: author, group, composition, audio track, and series) are more powerful than those available for non-registered users, an issue that will be fixed in a refactoring towards the Beta version.

The same reviewer asked how the recordings should “be made available for the broadest possible utilization, and the most equitable.” It has been vital for the project to resolve whether only the recordings’ metadata will be publicly available or the dissemination format files as well, and in such case how it will be consulted (via streaming or downloading). These considerations are fundamental not only due to the aforementioned connectivity gaps but also to the copyright and bureaucratic obstacles faced by the PoéticaSonora team during fieldwork and archival research periods.

During the prototyping phase, we did not intend to answer how end-users might access information. Rather, we sought to determine how undergraduate students definitely, coming mostly from modern language and literature programs, could improve their criticism skills working on the project and benefit from technical abilities that, until recently, have not been common in Mexican classrooms. The educational aspect continually proves to be fundamental for the project, and for this reason, we have prepared didactic material (such as user guides and tutorials) to help students reduce the learning curve while working on the PSP.

This paper has considered how some current DH debates can benefit from fieldwork carried out by PoéticaSonora. Assumptions on access and participation concerning digital projects in North America were reviewed and contrasted with the ICT penetration rate in Mexico. In order to avoid the conceptual pitfalls of knowledge democratization, I suggest that considering case studies from (sometimes radically) different regions or countries can serve to neutralize most over-generalizations. This led us to consider how to characterize PoéticaSonora’s target audience in the most honest, realistic possible way, and to understand how creating this repository is an aesthetic, even political statement, not a passive act of preserving and cataloging.

I also established the project's position towards the geopolitics or political economy of knowledge and paid attention to discussions on cognitive extractivism in the academic milieu. To avoid this conundrum, fieldwork in Mexico City has greatly determined the database design in Montreal and not the other way around, ensuring a more significant impact among target users. On a theoretical-methodological level, there are three things to learn about PoéticaSonora's prototyping process: online access does not equal universal access (not even in developed nations); ethical guidelines must be implemented to ensure target communities benefit from a digital project, and the political dimension of digital labour and its social practices must be brought back to discussion.

### Competing Interests

I am the coordinator of the PoéticaSonora prototyping research team, and Susana González Aktories has been my mentor since my undergraduate years at UNAM.

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