

Experimental Electronic Literature from the Souths. A Political Contribution to Critical and Creative Digital Humanities.

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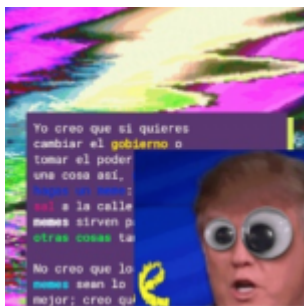
December 22, 2020

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01-03-2021

<https://doi.org/10.7273/zd5g-zk30>

This essay was peer-reviewed.



Included in the Gathering: Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities

Claudia Kozak evaluates the potential of experimental e-lit to build decolonial critical paths within global digital humanities. Framing her perspective in the Epistemologies of the South (Sousa Santos) and decolonial thinking (Mignolo), she draws attention to politics of knowledge and analyses issues such as linguistic hegemonies, e-lit imaginaries and genealogies emerging from the Souths and unexpected mixtures between

experimentalism and third-generation e-lit in Latin America.

This essay aims to evaluate the potential of experimental e-lit to build decolonial critical paths within global digital humanities. In the introduction of the “Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities” gathering, Alex Saum-Pascual and Scott Rettberg state that the notion of creative digital humanities they work with—that goes hand in hand with critical digital humanities—not only considers e-lit as a creative field of digital humanities, but also “redeploy(s) creative practice critically to address the increasing instrumentalization of the Digital Humanities” (2). In synch with their statement, but stressing the notion of critical and creative digital humanities from a perspective framed by the Epistemologies of the South (Sousa Santos) and decolonial thinking (Mignolo), I propose entangled conceptualizations and possible lines of analysis to give shape to what I would like to call “decolonial e-lit/dh”. On the one hand, this may be an option to debate the usual ways of understanding e-lit global history, theory, critique and practice. On the other hand, it may also contest digital humanities considered primarily in terms of a set of global tools for dealing with cultural entities in the field of humanities. The latter comprises an instrumental bias which relies on an instrumental approach to technology as allegedly neutral, with few or none relation to broader socio-technical dimensions. ¹ Despite that a merely instrumental approach to digital humanities has already been discussed by many authors (among others, Berry 2012, Fioromonte 2012, Liu 2012), it still prevails.

Decolonizing e-lit/dh

The emergence and consolidation of a discipline/field of knowledge/practice labelled as digital humanities is, in theory, something that the e-lit community can see in relation to its own interests and concerns. Given that literature has always been part of the humanities, digital literature might/should naturally be part of such a thing as DH. In practice, though, e-lit and DH have been speaking different languages for a long time, with sporadic encounters here and there. Even though DH more recent conferences and publications may include segments devoted to e-lit, for many people both things still seem to not quite fit. The reason is bonded to the DH instrumental birthmark as humanities computing, so close to the ideology of innovation equated with the ideology of technological progress as neutral, at odds with e-lit's own experimental birthmark, which in great measure—probably not always—has also become a critical, non-conformist, way to be part of digital cultures. In general, in its more usual developments, DH have not contested mainstream/hegemonic digital culture but rather adapted to it. I addressed some of these issues, related to the ideology of novelty vs. critical experimental e-lit in a previous essay (2020), not referring to digital humanities as a discipline. Here, I would like to keep in mind the intertwined aspects that shape mainstream digital culture—the uncritical acceptance of an unambiguous equivalence between technological modernization, novelty and progress; the notion of technology merely based on instrumental criteria correlative to an allegedly neutrality of data and information; the correlation between algorithmic life and techno-vigilance; the weakening of social memory due to overinformation; the concealment of digital materiality—in order to assess how alternative discourses and practices within DH are undermining the idea of neutrality of data and databases from the perspective of decolonial thinking, including decolonial data activism (Milan and Treré 2019), and how these alternative discourses match the denaturalization of mainstream/hegemonic digital culture that experimental e-lit has already developed for a long time.

In a way, the process I try to assess is bidirectional. From one side, decolonial e-lit criticism and practice try to decolonize e-lit itself by proposing different points of view other than the canonical narratives on e-lit history, theory and critique, while they also try to decolonize usual instrumental approaches in the wider field of DH, contributing with a necessary dose of cultural and political criticism. From the other side, decolonial data activism, for instance, decolonizes the assumption of data and databases neutrality within the wider field of DH but also gives a strong framework to critically deploying archiving and distant reading projects within the e-lit community. What I am saying is not only that a decolonial perspective has begun to emerge within both fields, but also that specific decolonial approaches grown in each side may intervene in the other.

But why still speak of e-lit and digital humanities as occupying two different sides? Despite the aforementioned birthmarks that shaped separate but at some point, parallel paths followed by e-lit and DH, we can also identify moments, even in the early stages, when the two things weren't so distant. For instance, Teo Lutz' *Stochastic Text* emerged in the same context than Max Bense's information aesthetics, which alongside a reflection upon the encounters between the arts and computers in a creative way intended to be a framework for a mathematical method of measuring "the amount and quality of information in aesthetic objects (...). Information aesthetics investigated the numerical

value of ‘the aesthetic object’ itself.” (Killitsch 67). That is, while Bense institutionally and personally promoted creative work in digital arts–literature included– he engaged in a statistical analysis of works of arts as data, an approach that, also applied to other fields in the humanities, has much in common with the early humanities computing and even with nowadays DH. Nonetheless, until recent years e-lit and digital humanities have grown apart. An influential author such as David Berry identified in 2012–in addition to a “first-wave Digital Humanities [that]involved the building of infrastructure in the studying of humanities texts through digital repositories, text markup and so forth” (“Introduction: Understanding the Digital Humanities” 4)–, the emergence of a “second-wave” DH that “looks at ‘born-digital’ materials, such as electronic literature (e-lit), interactive fiction (IF), web-based artefacts and so forth” (4). Still, the separation between DH and e-lit to some extent remains due to the way both fields have consolidated with their own institutional support in the form of associations, conferences and university curricula.

I assume that the gathering this essay is written for seeks to be a contribution to rethink a new language that might allow both fields to engage in a conversation, rather than in separate soliloquies. My standpoint is that this new language would benefit if identified by the name and concept of “decolonial e-lit/dh” (both field names in lower case letters, as contravening major crystallized discipline names).

In Thea Pitman and Claire Taylor’s sharp article (2017) on the relationship between Digital Humanities and Modern Languages in an Anglophone academic context, the authors also call for a common language to begin the kind of conversation I propose here. For that purpose, and adapting the call for critical digital humanities, in the way of a “third-wave Digital Humanities that is as critical of the digital as it is of the cultural” (“Where’s the ML in DH?” 4), they coin the name “critical DHML” (2), where Digital Humanities and Modern Language studies are put together in a braid. Being both Hispanists born and working in the UK, they could have focused, as they say, “on a dialogue with other DH practitioners working in Spanish-language contexts” (2) but in this article they explicitly chose not to do it, because their objective was to open up a debate within an Anglophone academic context they both take part in. Also, because despite the partial valuable efforts of Anglophone DH institutions to include “DH initiatives in other languages and contexts”– such as the *DHQ* initiative to publish bilingual dossiers about DH in languages other than English, like the already published dossiers in Spanish, Portuguese or French–² they admit that a lot more should be done beyond inclusiveness “hopefully eschewing the construction of any sense of centre/periphery or ‘one true DH’.” (2). In fact, as Walter Mignolo asserts,

Inclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right. In a world governed by the colonial matrix of power, he who includes and she who is welcomed to be included stand in codified power relations. The locus of enunciation from which inclusion is established is always a locus holding the control of knowledge and the power of decision across gender and racial lines, across political orientations and economic regulations. (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* xv)

Epistemologies of the South and decolonial thinking

Decolonial e-lit/dh, as I propose, should do more than including languages other than English, alongside with English translations. It should imply decolonizing both e-lit and digital humanities from the perspective of the Souths, whether they are located in the geographically South or in the North, being South and North—as conceptualized by Sousa Santos (2016)— frequently literal but mainly metaphoric.

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has developed in the last decades a strong theoretical and practical endeavor based on the notion of “epistemologies of the South”:

This is the definition I give of ‘epistemologies of the South’: a crucial epistemological transformation is required in order to reinvent social emancipation on a global scale. These evoke plural forms of emancipation not simply based on a Western understanding of the world.

The global South is not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of its populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimising such suffering. It is, therefore, an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism and islamophobia. (“Epistemologies of the South and the future” 18-19)

Accepting this metaphoric nuance of the notions “South” and “North” is relevant in order to identify not only Souths in the North but also Norths in the South. The latter refers, for instance, to the few once colonial Southern countries that reached similar economic development as the Global North, namely Australia and New Zealand,³ but also to the fact that “within the geographic South, there have always been ‘little Europes’, little local elites who took benefit from capitalist and colonial dominion and who have continued exercising control over subordinated classes and groups, since national independencies up to the present.” (Sousa Santos and Meneses, “Introducción” 10-11, my translation). I will resume the implications of this when referring later to political/linguistic hegemonies within Latin American e-lit, given the fact that only recently the issue has begun to be acknowledged, and may lead to a necessary debate to make visible the way indigenous people are dealing with the digital turn in their own languages and worldviews.

The concept of “Epistemologies of the South” implies then a decentered perspective, which even appropriates the usual—common/pejorative—sense of the notion of South to reinvent it in a political emancipated way. Only noticing a colloquial expression in North-American English such as saying that “something goes South” implying that it goes wrong, we can grasp in a very graphic way how this kind of negative worldview in regards to South permeates everyday life in (North) Western societies, and how language, far from being a neutral technology, reproduces power relationships. From the point of view of this common sense, “Southern” lives are even understood as lives not worthy to be

lived. In Agamben's terminology they are seen as a "bare life" (Agamben 1998). Although Agamben's very influential argument applies to the whole Modern Western societies, North included, his discussion on biopolitics deepens if we intersect it with the epistemologies of the South, because we give visibility to the fact that biopolitics also is entangled with "epistemicide", "the destruction of the knowledge and cultures of (...) populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature." (Sousa Santos, "Epistemologies of the South and the future" 18).

Sousa Santos' proposal in relation to sociology is to engage, first, in a *sociology of absences*, that is to say, a sociology that captures the reality of what has been made invisible and absent, followed by a *sociology of emergences* in order to "amplify symbolically what is there as an alternative, as a different way of understanding and transforming society." (22). For him, the ultimate goal of the epistemology of the South is to enable intercultural translations that open up the possibility of different worldviews and knowledges. In a similar vein, when speaking about a "border thinking" and a "decolonial option", Walter Mignolo observes, by quoting Anibal Quijano, that for pursuing a decolonial option it is necessary, first, a decolonial epistemology to be followed by intercultural communication, an exchange of experiences and meanings as a ground for another rationality (Quijano in Mignolo "La opción de-colonial" 253).

Similarly, we could engage in *creative work and criticism of absence*, *creative work and criticism of emergences* and in *intercultural translations* in order to build decolonial e-lit/dh. I will address this in the next section, in particular in relation to e-lit, which is my specific field of research. Meanwhile, a bit more should be said concerning the recognition of geopolitical/economic/linguistic hegemonies in knowledge production and other more specific options such as decolonial database activism within digital humanities.

Italian scholar Domenico Fioromonte, active in the field of DH from a decolonial perspective, has been publishing for more than a decade now several essays concerning geopolitics of knowledge in DH, a field organized "in a substantially Anglophone-driven economic and technological context" ("Digital Humanities and the Geopolitics of Knowledge" 1). For instance, in "Towards a Cultural Critique of the Digital Humanities" he mapped and analyzed the significative prevalence of Anglo-American scholars in DH journals, books and organizations articulating his assessment with

a general reflection on the cultural, political and linguistic bias of digital standards, protocols and interfaces. These reflections suggest that DH is not only a discipline and an academic discourse dominated materially by an Anglo-American élite and intellectually by a mono-cultural view, but also that it lacks a theoretical model for reflecting critically on its own instruments. (59)

In regard to politics of knowledge, Fioromonte draws attention to the huge material and symbolic advantage that Anglo-American DH scholars benefit from, usually unnoticed even by those who underline the absence of a critical approach to digital humanities ("¿Por qué la digitalización es un problema político?" 27). It is not really his goal—nor it is mine—to ask Anglo-American scholars to resign their cultural capital but to make visible

the situation “evaluating it for itself and perhaps suggesting that a different model is possible” (“Towards a Cultural Critique” 61). Hoping that this will not be seen in any way as an attempt to victimize myself—I’ve already commented that there are also Norths in the South; there are also Southern quasi-Norths: as a scholar I’ve benefited myself from material and symbolic advantages comparing with many other Southern people—, I would add that making visible the situation goes beyond the obvious. It is important to acknowledge this because, for those who do not belong to Anglophone contexts of knowledge production, it comprises multiple layers within scholarly daily based activities. Among others, we can consider the following:

1. The necessity of writing and publishing in a non-native language in order to participate in the “global conversation”, even though when doing so we lose linguistic and cultural nuances. We came to accept English as the *lingua franca* of the present but, *frankly*, how much are we resigning? The worst scenario would be to do it for the sake of international rankings upon indexed journals, something that has unfortunately been internalized in a colonial and dependent way in non-Anglophone academy around the world. This goes hand in hand with the necessity of writing and publishing in one’s own language in order to also participate in the local/regional conversation, which we should find as important and appealing as the global one.
2. The necessity of being updated in relation to both global Anglophone and local/regional bibliography. I assume that Modern Languages scholars are also updated in at least two languages, but this is not always the case for the rest of Anglophone scholars in e-lit/dh. It is not only that this situation implies to double the workload, but that it implies epistemic dependency. In Walter Mignolo’s ironic words:

As we know it: the First World has knowledge; the Third World has culture; Native Americans have wisdom; Anglo Americans have science. The need for political and epistemic delinking comes here to the fore, as do decolonizing knowledge and decolonial knowledges as necessary steps to imagining and building democratic, just, and non-imperial/colonial societies. (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 118)

3. Another entangled layer is the question of access to global bibliography. Even though digital culture has opened this access in ways that were unimaginable before the mid-nineties, when the Internet began to reach vast areas of the planet, access is always related to the economy. Access to proprietary academic content, even when it is published online, is not a given in many universities in the “global” South. I’ve found that when, and if, universities pay for services of databases access, the access is anyway quite limited. In my own research experience frustration appears each time I am stopped by a signal that says something like “you have not access to this content, please check options of access...”, where these options usually are to purchase the content—for several reasons, not an option—or to log in by institutional access. Latin America has engaged in a very active policy of open access journals, but this is not necessarily the most usual way of publishing in the Global North. I think that academic institutions should always honored their commitment to open knowledge by open-access publishing *everywhere*.⁴

As mentioned before, in order to analyze the geopolitics of knowledge production within DH, Fioromonte outlines “the political and linguistic bias of digital standards, protocols and interfaces” (Fioromonte, “Towards” 59) which are at the core of DH methodologies. He considers, for instance, the “cultural and epistemic bias implied in the markup languages as well as in the solutions proposed by TEI” (66). As the author states in another essay,

There is a complete entanglement between technological choices (*code politics*), politics representation (*codes of politics*) and knowledge structure and management (*ontology and epistemology of code*). Even refusing a genealogical interpretation, it happens to be clear the bond between Anglophone linguistic hegemony and means of representation. And this bond specially concerns to Digital Humanities (“Lingue, codice, rappresentanza” 119, my translation)

It is worth mentioning in this regard the call “for a de-Westernization of critical data studies, in view of promoting a reparation to the cognitive injustice that fails to recognize non-mainstream ways of knowing the world through data” (Milan and Treré “Big Data from the South(s)” 319). In their introductory essay for a special journal issue that explores “Big Data from the South”, Stefania Milan and Emiliano Treré acknowledge the valuable work done by many researchers over the past few years counterbalancing the “hyperbolic narratives of the ‘big data revolution’” (320), by interrogating on the cultural, social and political meaning of datafication. However, they also draw attention to the fact that “these analyses often take as frame of reference the liberal democracies of the West, with their sociocultural substrate and long tradition of representative institutions, rule of law, and citizen involvement in public affairs—and their self-representation as wealthy, advanced democracies.” (320). The authors situate the “Big Data from the South” research agenda as an epistemological, ontological, and ethical program, to be deployed through five conceptual operations: going beyond data universalism; understanding the South as a plural entity (without idealizing it); engaging a decolonial approach; bringing agency to the core of the analysis; and unleashing novel imaginaries of datafication emerging from the Souths (324).

In my opinion, the last of these conceptual operations may need more discussion in order to not understand the reinvention of new imaginaries of datafication as a simple substitution, without questioning the idea of life itself understood mainly as data. In any case, the authors propose this to avoid a sort of paralysis provoked by the overwhelming actual datafication that pervades everyday life in an important part of the planet. Aiming to eschew a frequent “sense of ineluctability [that] pervades contemporary reactions to datafication (...) where the normalization of data exploitation and surveillance forecloses our possibilities to even imagine possible alternatives” (328), they propose to look at “a myriad of non-mainstream ways of imagining/thinking/feeling data [that] emerges in the fringes, subtending to the creation of alternative data practices (...) a plurality of uncharted ways of actively (*re*)imagining processes of data production, processing, and appropriation (...).” (328)

In the final essay of this special issue coordinated by Milan and Treré, María Soledad Segura and Silvio Waisbord assess the rest of the contributions of the same issue, and stress strengths and limitations of an approach still in progress. They even discuss “the Global South as the site of counter-epistemic and alternative practices” (“Between Data Capitalism and Data Citizenship” 412), preventing us against generalization. On the one hand, they acknowledge that “Data activism is one of the most remarkable and promising forms of digital citizenship. Just like hacktivism, stactivism, and information politics, data activism is a form of digital collective action” (413). On the other hand, they argue that,

Not all forms of data activism are grounded in a de(post)colonial rationality that challenges Western forms of knowledge (...) Data activism in Latin America citizenship is inspired by progressive legal frameworks as well as political principles grounded in Western traditions as well as regional traditions of mobilization and knowledge production (...) A specific regional alternative practice and counter-epistemic theory could be developed in the future when Latin American indigenous, rural, and popular sectors also have broader Internet access. (417-418)

While the special issue on data activism I have been referring to is mainly focused on *social data activism* and *data rights activism* (Segura and Waisbord 412), in what follows I will focus on *artistic digital activism* and, in a more general sense, on *decolonial e-lit from the Souths*. Notwithstanding Segura and Waisbord’s warning—worthy to keep in mind in order to not essentialize decolonial thinking—counter-epistemic theories and correlative decolonial practices are still possible in the in-betweens where intercultural translations arise. For sure, the impact of social data activism and data rights activism can usually be assessed in more direct ways than the one of artistic practices. This essay is not the place where to discuss in depth the way arts and society are bonded. However, even though the relationship between them implies different mediations, artistic practices contribute to the modification of cognitive and sensorial ways of comprehending reality.

Experimental E-Lit as Creative and Critical Digital Humanities from the Souths

a. E-lit Imaginaries and Genealogies Emerging from the Souths

The kind of *artistic digital activism* and *decolonial e-lit from the Souths* I am thinking of can be well-represented by two works included in the *ELO Collection 3*. About one of them, *The 27th/EI 27* by Eugenio Tisselli, I have already written a couple of times (“Latin American Electronic Literature: When, Where and Why”, 2017 and “Literatura expandida en el dominio digital”, 2017), so I will not expand. The work, in fact, has received attention from several critics. Among others, Ana Dot (“Arte y traducción en la era digital: estudio de EI 27 || The 27th, de Eugenio Tisselli.”, 2020) and Verónica Gómez (“Lenguas migrantes y desvíos críticos en The 27th // El 27th de Eugenio Tiselli.”, 2017). Later on, in this essay, I will refer anyway to other pieces by Tisselli. The other piece in the *ELO Collection 3* to which I would like to draw attention here is قلب by Ramsey Nasser.

Again, South should not be understood as a geographical term. Nasser is a computer scientist, game designer, and educator based in Brooklyn, who studied computer sciences in Beirut and design and technology in New York. Nasser's author's statement in the *ELO Collection 3* says: "My piece *قلب: لغة برمجة* is a conceptual programming language exploring the role of human culture in computer programming. Code is written entirely in Arabic, challenging the all-English programming landscape we find ourselves in and highlighting the cultural biases of computer science." This conceptual programming language as artwork actually works, despite the numerous challenges the author had to surpass each time the tools he was using broke down, because their impossibility to recognize non-Latin text. He completed three pieces: "Hello World", "Fibonacci" and "Conway's Game of Life", whose titles are related to the history of computer science and mathematics. In addition, the conceptual gesture has a double aesthetic counterpart in *قلب*. First, the graphic interface shows the Arabic programming text in a way that could not be shown, for example, in English, due to the possibility offered by a language as Arabic where certain letters are joined with the letters that follow, being possible to strengthen the length of the joint. This allowed the artist/programmer to build a visual appealing alignment between the lines of the code. Secondly, the programming also generates a small animated visual fragment of the code, whose shape has been remediated by Nasser in order to build tiles following "the Arabic rich tradition of calligraphy and poetry attached to the text of their language." (ANIMAL's feature Artist's Notebook). As he explains: "I wanted to celebrate this and other algorithms by building large scale tile calligraphy pieces out of them – applying the traditions of the Arabs to the traditional texts of computer science. Regarding the code as poetry and conforming strictly to the Square Kufic style" (ANIMAL's feature Artist's Notebook).

قلب, meaning heart, is the first word of the complete title "but is actually a recursive acronym for *قلب: لغة برمجة* pronounced 'alb: lughat barmajeh' meaning Heart: A Programming Language." (ANIMAL's feature Artist's Notebook). Being "alb" both the first word of the title and the acronym, it constantly refers to the whole title inside the title (*alb: lughat barmajeh*). In a way, in the heart of the title: a programming language which is a heart itself, where its own beats respond to a specific way of conceiving the world, only partially Western. Not only in the Global North but in Latin America as well, it is usual to identify visual patterns that bond e-lit to Western avant-gardes and other Western experimental traditions in visual poetry. *قلب*, for a change, suggests other imaginaries and genealogies for understanding the multiple possible backgrounds from which e-lit arises, besides more canonical narratives about this practice. At the same time, as the author acknowledges, "Arabic programming languages with the honest goal of bringing coding to a non-Latin culture have been attempted in the past, but have failed without exception. What makes my piece *قلب* different is that its primary purpose was to illustrate how impossible coding in anything but English has become." (Animal's feature Artist's Notebook). The piece puts on the fore the *absences* –what has been denied or is still not possible– for it exhibits the limitations inherent, by its own means, to the whole digital culture, whenever we try to involve in intercultural translations surpassing monoculturalism and monolingualism. Nevertheless, it also puts on the fore the *emergences*, since the mere existence of this piece creatively contributes to open up alternative paths for cultivating estranged ways of living the digital culture we live by.

The tensions between absence and emergence are in fact inherent to decolonial e-lit/dh. It is clear that any attempt to create and experience some sort of decolonization within digital culture—which inevitably bears the mark of its coming into being as a Global North endeavor—implies that both the visibility of absences and the emergence of different narratives of the digital are at some point fragile albeit necessary.

In regard to e-lit global history, for instance, I think it could be productive to resume the reflection at the exact point where Anna Nacher left it in her recent essay “Gardening E-literature”. In her essay she states that

Soon we might need to undertake a significant attempt to re-weave e-literature's histories and genealogies, especially those pertaining to well-trodden paths of the avant-garde as framed within still dominant geographical and cultural perspectives. Semi-peripheral avant-gardes (even if often extremely interesting due to their hybrid qualities, where the universalist and universalizing assumptions get infused with local ingredients) rarely make it to the official art histories—and when they do, too often they get relegated to the cabinets of exotic curiosities.

We could begin a conversation in order to make visible how experimental literature in the past gave way to e-lit in different parts of the Souths, or in semi-peripheral places as the ones referred to by Nacher, sometimes without necessarily passing through any North as a first step. As we know, experimental poetry from the sixties is intertwined with the uprising of e-lit. For instance, I have always had the impression that Latin American experimental poetry and East European experimental poetry in the sixties had a lot in common. Nacher comments about how the then-Yugoslavian New Tendencies series of exhibitions and the related *BIT International* journal, re-discovered by Croatian curator Darko Fritz, “significantly contributed to re-writing the history of media art”. In fact, a few years ago, I came across *BIT International* magazine—a bulletin launched by the Contemporary Art Gallery of Zagreb as part of the new orientation adopted by the New Tendencies exhibitions in relation to informational aesthetics (Fritz, “Vladimir Bonačić: Computer-Generated Works Made within Zagreb's New Tendencies Network (1961-1973)”, 176-177). The first issue, launched in 1968, was edited by Max Bense and Abraham Moles under the title of *The Theory of Information and the New Aesthetics*. I was doing at the moment some research on Vilém Flusser—who was born in Prague, but lived in Brazil for thirty years—. Flusser’s approach to electronic poetry, for example in his book *A escrita. _Há futuro para _a escrita?*—originally published in German in 1989— was influenced by the information aesthetic mainly in the way Abraham Moles developed it (a variant of Max Bense’s, which I mentioned before in this essay). The book is dedicated to “To Abraham Moles, inventor and researcher on post-writing” (5, my translation). Furthermore, Nacher also mentions that “*Nova Tendencija* 3 in 1965 presented Waldemar Cordeiro's Semantic Concrete Art.” As Fritz explains, the New Tendencies “movement was truly international, both transgressing Cold War blocs and including South American and, later, Asian artists” (175). Not only Flusser but other people involved with the scene of Latin American experimental art and poetry in the sixties were aware of Cordeiro’s experimentation in computer art. In fact, even though he is seen more as a visual artist

than a poet, in 1968 Waldemar Cordeiro and the physicist Giorgio Moscati made the piece *BEABÁ* with an IBM / 360 computer, based on a six-letter word generator (Moscati, 1986).

I will give yet another example of the bonds between “semi-peripheral avant-gardes” in Latin America and East Europe, as a way of rewriting e-lit global history. If we check the catalog of the *Expo/Internacional de Novísima Poesía/69*, curated in Buenos Aires and soon after—with a slight modified title and less works—in La Plata (Argentina) by experimental poet and visual artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo, we find that artists from the global North—USA, France, Germany, among others—shared space with artists from Latin America, the then-Czechoslovakia or Japan. The artists from Czechoslovakia that exhibited their work were Josef Honys, Jaroslav Malina and Jiry Valoch. The exhibition also included the book *Experimentální poezie*, edited by Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerová (Odeon, 1967), the catalog *Ladislav Novák: Poesía Alquímica*, plus different issues of the experimental magazines *Dialog* and *Sesity* (*Expo/Internacional de Novísima Poesía/69* 11-16). According to Katarzyna Cytlak the exhibited catalog by Novák was probably the same of the exhibition entitled *Ladislav Novák: Alchymáže z roku 1967*, launched in April 1968 in a gallery of Havlíčkův Brod, a city 100km away from Prague (“Redes marginales en los años sesenta y setenta” 73).

These transversal contacts between semi-peripheries were more or less frequent within Vigo’s artistic milieu. In fact, Cytlak’s essay—which I luckily found when I was in the final writing steps of this essay—poses that one of her essay’s goals is to “highlight the importance of these exchanges in the process of constructing a horizontal vision of modern art that escapes the Western narrations on cultural creation inscribed in the model of center/periphery.” (73). Besides the *Expo/Internacional*, she also documents other conversations between marginal artistic networks, namely between Vigo and East European artists. For instance, the ones that emerge from the catalog of the first Mail Art exhibition in Argentina, curated by Vigo and Horacio Zabala—the name of the exhibition was *Última exposición internacional de arte correo/75’*, even though it was not the last one (última) but the first one; the name was suggested by Vigo who, despite being co-curator of this exhibition, was reticent to integrating mail art in art institution (Kozak, “Correo”, 2012). According to Cytlak, East European artists who exhibited mail art in the exhibition were J. H. Kocman, Ján Steklík, Jiří Valoch (Czechoslovakia); István Haász, Endre Tót (Hungary); Henryk Bzdok, Bogdan Kisielewski, Marek Konieczny, Andrzej Partum (Poland); Bogdanka Poznanović and Mirosljub Todorović (Yugoslavia), besides the exiled Chilean poet Guillermo Deisler who lived in Bulgaria (74-75).

I’ve written in other occasions on Vigo’s prominence in relation to the bridges we can build between experimental poetry in the sixties and e-lit. A more complete argumentation can be read in my essay “¿Nueva, novísima o novedosa? De la novísima poesía según Edgardo Antonio Vigo a la poesía experimental digital” (2019). Even though he never created e-lit, several aspects of his work tend to it, and he also was the editor of the journal *Diagonal Cero* that published in its issue number 20 (1966) the series of *IBM* poems by Omar Gancedo (Kozak, “Electronic Literature Experimentalism beyond the Great Divide”).

b. On Languages

Another aspect worthy to consider in relation to decolonial e-lit is related to linguistic hegemonies. I have already commented the piece. قلب by Ramsey Nasser. Turning to Latin America, many e-lit works exhibit different kinds of linguistic awareness in relation to English as *lingua franca* or by involving in politics of translation and multilingualism. I have written before about quite distinctive politics of languages that “embrace the mistake” as a decolonial gesture, for instance, in pieces by Eugenio Tisselli (“Out of bounds. Searching Deviated Literature in Audiovisual Electronic Environments”; “Literatura expandida en el dominio digital.”). Here, in regards to linguistic hegemonies, I think it is time to draw attention also to the North in the South.

Most Latin American e-lit is written either in Spanish or Portuguese, the hegemonic languages derived from 15th Century colonization. In the last decade though, several works in indigenous languages have begun to make themselves visible. Tisselli himself has promoted digital communitarian memories working alongside communities in Sierra Mixe (Oaxaca, Mexico), through the use of *OjoVoz*, an open source mobile/web platform he developed. The website that documents this project, named in Ayuujk *Ja moojk jë wyeen* (*The eyes of the milpa*), is trilingual—Spanish, Ayuujk and English. It is significant enough that when accessing the work online, an emergent Google translator window identifies this indigenous language as Hungarian...

Ayuujk is the vernacular name of the so called Mixe language (in Spanish and English, for instance). *The eyes of the milpa* involved bilingual people who are part of these Mixe communities and speak Ayuujk and Spanish. It also involved people, as Tisselli for instance, who do not fluently speak the Mixe language. In what follows, I pick up other two projects, that Leonardo Flores, Rodolfo Mata and I have selected the recently launched *Antología Lit(e)Lat v.1* (<http://antologia.litelat.net/>), and are entirely developed by indigenous bilingual speakers. Both projects are documented in the website of the *Red de activismo digital en lenguas indígenas*, part of the Global Voices organization. In fact, Tisselli’s project *Los ojos de la milpa* had an important weight in the triggering of digital activism in indigenous language movements that has spread in Latin America since 2014.

One of these projects, a series of poems in Zapoteco written by Rodrigo Pérez Ramírez, could be loosely considered as second-generation e-lit, since it is basically inspired in Western avant-gardes. These poems are usually referred by his author as *#DadaísmoZapotecano*, a section of a larger project called Zapoteco 3.0, sort of platform—sometimes even a nickname— from where Pérez Ramírez deploys activities such as training workshops for indigenous digital activists, or the implementation of free software in the Zapoteco language spoken in the area of Miahuatlán. Some of the poems’ titles, for instance, are “ᄆbák šéʔL šíʔl ᄆ-šíʔL” (in Spanish “Borrego alas de mariposa”) or “Kè-ní ré tá díʔztè?” (“Baila el zapoteco”). *#DadaísmoZapotecano*, initiated in 2015, intends to be an alternative to folklorist and past-fixed ways of seen indigenous artwork, by mixing divergent traditions such as dadaism, Nicanor Parra’s *antipoesía*, digital poetry, traditional Western versification patterns and indigenous activism related to contemporary indigenous worldviews within a digital world. Pérez Ramírez aspiration is mainly to reach Zapoteco speakers, to write Zapotecan literature in Zapoteco within a Zapotecan

cosmovision, something we can infer from the semantic fields of the poems, when translated into Spanish. For Pérez Ramírez sometimes translates his poems into Spanish in literal versions, keeping only the meaning of the words in order to give Spanish speakers an idea of their content. For instance, the two poems I mention here were published online in Zapoteco language, alongside with the author's bilingual own explanations and comments—one of the poems with a Spanish translation as well— in *Tierra Adentro*, a magazine that is part of a public cultural program managed by Mexican State.

We might think that the resultant poems in #DadaísmoZapotecano are barely digital, though, since Pérez Ramírez replaced Tzara's hat containing words pulled out from a newspaper for a spreadsheet and applied a random function afterwards. But this impression of a barely digital procedure is only due to the naturalization of what a digital spreadsheet means, all its mathematic functions included. In the end, the procedure is not so different than other experimental poetry made by pulling out random phrases out of the Internet, by searching specific words or phrases, and then manually composing a poem.⁵ To compose his poems, Pérez Ramírez created a database of Zapoteco words in an Open Office Calc spreadsheet, encompassing specific semantic fields in each case. Then he selected the random function included and, with the resultant words, he manually composed the poems adopting Western versification patterns. He also added ASCII code to give a sort of digital visual appearance to the poems and phonetic symbols to give them the appearance of the logograms of the ancient Zapoteco writing. These two interventions also produce a sort of synesthetic effect. According to a comment on his own work, that accompanies one of the poems, "#DadaismoZapotecano invites the reader to listen in Zapoteco through the eyes and to see it through the ears" ("ᄁbák šé?L (Borrego alas de mariposa)", my translation).

The mixing of dadaism and traditional versification patterns such as sonnets might be seen a bit disturbing from the point of view of Western poetic traditions. Interviewed by Brenda Camacho (Glitch#4), Pérez Ramírez himself comments on how Tzara's endeavor implied and emancipatory aspiration of making a poet of every single person and how, on the contrary, traditional Western versification requires learning and expertise. Why including it then? I really do not have a conclusive answer. Maybe mixing everything is a way of leveling out all sorts of hegemonies. Maybe not.

The second indigenous e-lit project I want to briefly describe in this context is clearly part of third-generation e-lit: @Quechuamemes by Marisol Mena Antezana. The author was born in Pampallacta (Peru) and has a degree as educator in primary school, with specialization in Bilingual Intercultural Education. The project consists of memes in Quechua, sometimes with Spanish translations, posted in Facebook and Twitter: <https://www.facebook.com/Quechuamemes/>; #Quechuamemes and #memesenquechua, that are also related to other hashtags such as #activismoquechua and #promoviendoquechua. Mena Antezana's *Quechuamemes* are proposed as linguistic activism within digital culture. In fact, there are many initiatives that involve memes in different indigenous languages such as Kaqchikel (spoken in central Guatemala), Mixtec (spoken in Mexico), Mapudungun (spoken in Chile and Argentina), etcetera. We would

probably need to close read them and to follow up the way they spread to tell more concerning how they connect with each community and whether they take part in decolonizing hegemonic mainstream culture, dominated by Spanish or not. To what extent these memes in subaltern languages have chances to decolonize mainstream digital culture is something I could not say at the moment.

3. On waves, layers, generations and experimentation. A provisional conclusion.

In a recent essay, which serves as a “riposte” to the aforementioned essay by Anna Nacher, Kathi Inman Berens wonders what decolonizing e-lit could mean and how it could be done, having in mind that “Diversity and inclusion are crucial. But they are not the same thing as decolonizing”, for symbolic decolonial work of activists “is followed up with structural change” (“Decolonize’ E-Literature? On Weeding the E-lit Garden”). I hope my argumentation on inclusion earlier in this essay has been solid enough. Inman Berens’ argument is entangled with the third-generation e-lit debate and the arguable/possible decolonial option that including most of it could really encompass.

My standpoint is that only in a loose sense we could speak of a decolonial option when considering third-generation e-lit *at bulk*, since much of it does not succeed in questioning mainstream digital culture from within or, worse, does not care at all about doing such a thing. And this should be central to any decolonial option in regard to digital culture, even when it is part of indigenous linguistic activism that could be seen inherently decolonial. That is the reason why I cannot say more, for the moment, on the meme’s projects in indigenous languages I described before. But not all first- and second-generation e-lit succeeded in this kind of questioning either. I do subscribe the idea that experimentalism gives an advantage to second-generation e-lit—which is still in good shape and finding new poetic forms— in terms of a move on commenting mainstream digital culture from an estranged perspective. When looking for these new forms, second-generation e-lit sometimes even merges in unexpected ways with broader publics, avoiding the sense of “walled garden” Nacher and Inman Berens refer to.

As an example of a kind of “decolonial” mixture between experimentalism and third-generation e-lit, I lead my attention to *Broken English*, an online initiative, identified itself as a free access digital publishing endeavor, founded in 2016 in Mexico by David Martinez, Pierre Herrera and Canek Zapata. In a recent essay on “postweb” literature, Alex Saum-Pascual briefly comments on how, within third-generation e-lit, this project “maintains a hyperawareness of the capitalist commodification and datafication of human experience on the Web, but relates to it in a sort of ironic, shoulder-shrug-meh, as it oscillates between defiance and conformism.” (“Is Third Generation Literature Postweb Literature? And Why Should We Care?” 3). I am not sure whether the “shoulder-shrug-meh” succeeds, in a general basis, in making defiance still an option. Anyway, I would like to expand on this because I do think that in this particular case conformism does not overrule defiance.

As I said, the name of this digital publishing initiative is *Broken English*. Their oldest bot—un bot mamalón, @brokenenglishsi— explained the name in its first Twitter post: “sí, así, en inglés, una editorial en español” (“yes, this way, in English, a publisher in Spanish”).

The ironic tone, also a bit festive, resounds in the motto of *Broken English*: “la única editorial punto lol” (the one and only publishing house dot lol”). We can easily associate the name with the type of politics of languages I referred to before: an online publishing initiative in Spanish that chooses to name itself not in “proper” but in broken English. This kind of self-reflection and estrangement from mainstream digital culture also includes the edition of a series of poetry books and the remediation in the homepage of the Latin American inverted map taken from *net.art latino database*, a well-known pioneer net.art piece by Brian Mackern in which the Uruguayan net.artist remediated the previously well-known drawing *América invertida* (1943)—showing the map of South America upside down— by the painter Joaquin Torres García, so conceptually related to the notion of epistemologies of the South. But all this is interwoven with the purest language and raw material that shape nowadays digital culture, since memes and bots have a truly main role in *Broken English*. In an interview with Alizabeth Mercado, they explain that *Broken English* is “a post-digital culture center, publisher, website, *shitpost reposer*, *memes generator*, house of poetry and textual arts (...) We are dedicated to making textual artifacts. In other words, we do not feel committed to a definition, neither for the project nor within the literary / artistic genres that we pass by.” (“Broken English, artefactos textuales”, my translation, the words I mark in italics are in English in the original).



Fig. 1 “Re-version” of Brian Mackern’s “mapa invertido” for his `[n|e|t|a|r|t|_|l|a|t|i|n|o| |d|a|t|a|b|a|s|e|]` (1996) by cz (CaneK Zapata), 2019 (<http://brokenenglish.lol/>)

If we pay attention to the website visual interface, we get the same impression of fusion between experimentalism and mainstream digital culture. A fusion that enables *Broken English* to be something more than a reproductive “commodity” while nevertheless participating of a new generational sensibility. The website home shows a sort of nineties interface—black screen, white courier new font— but a hint that that’s not all is shown both in the brilliant green twinkling letters which serve as hyperlinks and in the disruptive green reflection that regularly crosses the screen. When clicking in many of the links, an explosion of colors, fonts, comic-like aesthetics and collages interferes.

Broken English has recently launched a digital piece called “Apuntes para una poética del meme” (“Notes towards a meme’s poetic”) by Chilean poet Jonnathan Opazo—who is also behind *Cumatron* (<https://cumatron.win/>), an experimental bot/refrigerator that releases a unique book of poetry in PDF, even with a unique designed cover, each time someone access the site. In his intermedial essay/poem on meme’s poetics, Opazo remixes and

sabotages texts on poetry and language by Peruvian poet Mario Montalbetti, adapting them to speak about memes instead of poetry, and building a frantic, ironic and/or openly funny self-reflective hypermedia experience, that wonders and make us wonder about the poetic scope of this popular “genre”. The intermedial quality of this colorful essay/poem—constantly intervened by memes attributed in the credits to “cz” and “ata”— goes hand in hand with its adscription to contemporary experimental appropriationism (Goldsmith 2011) that deviates mainstream digital culture and its instrumental bias. References feed of popular culture—many kittens and cartoons, of course— and modern/contemporary thought at the same time —from Hegel and Marx to the Deleuzian body without organs—, from global politics to meta-memes. In regard to the possible decolonial move we can read not only in Opazo’s essay/poem but at large in *Broken English*, I return to the mediated ways in which all symbolic artifacts intervene in social transformation. In words and images of this piece—previously words on poetry by Montalbetti:

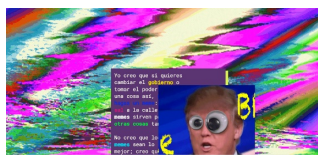


Fig. 2 Excerpt from
 “Apuntes para una
 poética del meme”. 2019.
 Broken english,
<http://apuntesparaunapoetica.brokenenglish.lol/>

Yo creo que si quieres cambiar el gobierno
 O tomar el poder o una cosa así, no
 hagas un meme: sal
 a la calle. Los memes
 sirven para otras cosas
 también

All the “Southern” e-lit projects commented in this essay seem to be committed to finding decolonial critical paths within global digital humanities and global digital culture. Whether they anchor their potential decolonialism in experimental procedures, in linguistic struggles or in the mixture of second and third-generation e-lit “genres” they all are trying to change the conversation. And so am I.

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Cite this Essay:

Kozak, Claudia. "Experimental Electronic Literature from the Souths. A Political Contribution to Critical and Creative Digital Humanities.", *Electronic Book Review*, January 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7273/zd5g-zk30>.

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This essay was peer-reviewed.