Introduction

In and Out of Digital Humanities

Nations, Networks, and Practices in Latinx America

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Since his intervention with *Café Internet del Tercer Mundo* (2000), an installation that was part of the 7th Havana Art Biennial, Cuban artist Abel Barroso has created many wooden versions of technological artifacts, including personal computers, cellphones, and even pinball machines. Barroso's *tecnología de palo* (literally, stick technology) provides an ironic comment on the meanings of the technological imagination in a place like Cuba, where the digital divide is more pronounced than in many other Latin American societies—with cellphone penetration below 30 percent (GSMA 2016). In Cuba, there is a dramatic contrast between those few with access to the technological means provided by the government and the vast majority lacking access to the internet or even the basic means for a functioning communication device—an altogether rarer event in the rest of the region, where the rate of penetration of the cellphone network tends to be relatively high, even by worldwide standards (Cuen 2010). Barroso's art speaks volumes about the way the digital divide materializes in societies where the gap between modernity and periphery is openly patent, as is the case in many locations around the western hemisphere. Yet, just as those from other peripheral regions, Latin American users have been characterized frequently as passive consumers of new technologies

(Medina and da Costa 2014). Barroso's wooden computers question the role of technological innovation within the geopolitics of knowledge. At the same time, his work highlights the fact that the digital divide is not simply a matter of epistemic limitations but also of economic inequality. A setting may bear the basic technological know-how and even the level of education necessary for its operation, but, without the appropriate economic means or infrastructure, little remains feasible. It is precisely this type of comment on the Latin American and Latinx condition that motivated us to engage research related to the impact of media, technology, and culture on Latin American and Latinx societies.

Technology in Latin America is informed on the basis of exchanges with a multipolar world (the European market; Asian *qǐyè jítuán*, *keiretsus,* and *chaebols*; and even protectionist policies addressing the development of a national and/or regional industry, as in Brazil). Moreover, the variety of circumstances and contexts available throughout the hemisphere dictates the asymmetric nature of its embrace and implementation. It is very hard to speak here of homogeneity and/or even standardization in the description of a relationship with technology, compared to the US, where conditions remain relatively even in comparison to other corners of the world.

Inequality in Latin America accounts for a less homogeneous relation with modernity than is commonly the case in richer countries, where certain online services (such as Twitter, as promoted by a resident of the White House) and products (Apple is substantially more visible in the US than in Latin America, given its premium cost) embodying principal constructs of technology and power attain marked protagonism, as opposed to different ones in Latin America, where research by Swedish giant Ericsson lists WhatsApp, Chrome, YouTube, Facebook, and Gmail among the top five smartphone apps based on monthly active users (Ericsson 2015). In the world of emerging economies, the internet is less regulated than in the US, Europe, Japan, and Korea—SIM cards, for instance, were switchable in Latin America years before they were in the US. Also, witness the popularity of alternative products and services like Kodi and Ubuntu in places all over the southern end of the western hemisphere, attaining levels of attention unheard of in the US. Despite the internet's bent toward breaching borders, there is a qualitative difference between the use of technology on the part of US monolingual nationals, whose communication focuses less on international exchange, and US bi-national/

international individuals—including many Latinxs, obviously—whose usage is almost explicitly in favor of pragmatic transgression when it comes to geopolitical boundaries. In due time, considerations of this nature attained materiality for us, as the opportunity came up to organize and celebrate events that would promote research and scholarship more in line with these concerns, questioning the nature of factors granting greater efficacy to the relationship between technology and culture up and down the continent.

In the fall of 2015, sponsored by three units of our academic institutions, the Center for Latin American and Latino/a Studies at Georgia State University, and the School of Modern Languages and the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts at the Georgia Institute of Technology, we met with a group of scholars in the city of Atlanta. Our object was to celebrate a meeting that would serve to establish a bond among a few of us interested in the study of the implications of culture, media, and technology in the Americas. A good mix of voices, including veterans of the field like Chilean communications expert Angharad Valdivia, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Colombian media scholar Cristina Venegas (UC Santa Barbara); emergent academics, such as Peruvian GA Tech professor Paul Alonso and Spelman College faculty member Anastasia Valecce; and even Cuban digital activist and blogger Orlando Pardo Lazo generated a vibrant conversation about Latin American and Latinx digital culture in the wake of digital humanities. We invited colleagues to think about the links between their critical works in Latin American cyberculture and its potential connections to digital humanities. Instead of focusing our discussion exclusively on DH in the Latin American and Latinx context, participants offered overviews of their investigations and then proposed ways in which their work could relate to digital humanities or challenge its assumptions. Though our research headed in many directions, it was evident that the ultimate results had more in common than in disparity. Morgan Ames, for instance, had superb fieldwork on the impact of affordable laptops (in particular, the OLPC initiative headed by the MIT Media Lab's Nicholas Negroponte) in Paraguay; Anita Chan shared some of her enthralling research on digital culture in Peru, where technology has played a major role in adding efficiency to the economy and lifting many out of poverty; and Ricardo Domínguez wowed us with a performance at Georgia Tech, in which the intricacies of his militant approach through the Electronic Disturbance Theater were rendered

obvious. This book is a collection of essays that were the product of our symposium.

Digital Practices and New Media Studies in Latinx America

Our symposium was in part inspired by the robust corpus of critical works devoted to digital practices in Latin America. During the 1990s, the emergent field of digital practices in Latin America was informed by many tendencies; however, in our view, two prevailed. On the one hand, a technocratic discourse served as a frame for the adoption of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) infrastructure, which in turn led to the development of digital practices linked to e-government, e-commerce, and technology-infused educational efforts (Bonilla and Cliche 2004; Gascó Hernández 2007). On the other hand, a political and aesthetic discourse aligned with critical practices and informed by notions such as cyberculture, e-literature, and hacktivism stimulated a hemispheric dialogue expressed through performance and militancy. On the side of politics, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) stands as one of the pioneering organizations embracing digital technologies to communicate its messages across the world. On the performance side, we have cultural practitioners like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who questioned the commodification of Latinx and Latin American identities on both sides of the border (Gómez Peña 2001), while the Electronic Disturbance Theater enacted virtual sit-ins as a critique of institutional co-optation and violence by the Mexican state (Lane 2003).

By the turn of the century, cellphone technology served clearly as a platform to popularize the use of new technologies, accelerating the transition onto a Web. 2.0 standard (2004). In consequence, the rise of the blogosphere, online video databases, video game platforms, and social media, which increasingly relied on the browser as user interface, attained critical mass. The blogosphere empowered the dissemination of opinions, transforming a variety of individuals into authors, and it facilitated new forms of civic journalism that offered alternative reports of events from perspectives that contrasted with mainstream media. Among its many roles, online video databases served as a new archive of images that allowed for the remixing of popular traditions and memories. In turn, video game platforms evolved in a way such that they allowed increased