"In the Beginning Was the Poem@": Interspecies, Robotics and Random/e-Poetry

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This article explores the latest random e-poetry and interspecies created by Alm@ Pérez/ Tina Escaja. Alm@ Pérez (alter/ed ego of Tina Escaja) emerged at the beginning of the 90s as a personal cybernetic revelation/rebellion captivated by the creative possibilities of the black screen (that's how the background of the first computer screens looked) upon which the white throbbing of the cursor pulsated as a new electronic consciousness. The name Alm@ Pérez is inspired by "Augusto Pérez," a character aware of his fictitious identity who debates his existence with his "real-life" author, Miguel de Unamuno, in Unamuno's emblematic novel *Niebla*. Pérez rises up to Alm@ -"alma" meaning "soul" in Spanish- by technological and trans-nomadic virtue which invites electronic connections. Under the pseudonym of Alm@ Pérez, in the 90s and early 2000s I explored such connections in hypertextual projects I created such as *VeloCity* (2000, 2002) and in the interactive novel *Pinzas de metal* (2003); I published the novella *Asesinato en el laboratorio de idiomas* (1997) and the book of poems *Respiración mecánica* (2001), both in e-book format; I reinvented myself as a Cyborg, in need of relocating identities or "alternative figurations," as Rosi Braidotti's states in her exploration of the nomadic subject (11). This ontology evolved into new e-lit projects that questioned binaries and media-assumptions based on electronics, interspecies and random poetry.

1. In the Beginning was the Poem@: Robopoem@s, as Prototypes[2]

Proto is beginning and 'preliminary,' the thing preceding the effect, the typo, which is error, and textile, text. Making protos is making poems in process, the preamble to the cyborg awareness of the robopoet. Creating prototypes is uniting the real with the ideal, the irreal with the potential. In word and poetic object, in text and lyric vertigo. The whole and possibility.[3]

With these words I summed up my project of the future Robopoem@s in their "prototype" phase. These Robopoem@s, or rather, these future poetic robots

were introduced in the collective exhibition called "Works Both Ways" at the Flynndog Gallery in Burlington, Vermont, in the summer of 2015, a show curated by Sharon Webster that showcased works by artists who were also writers. Robopoem@s consisted of two distinctive installations. The first displayed a wood engraving of the original concept/matrix of a robot (from a kit of a spider-like robot), flanked by a seven-section poem entitled "Robopoem@s" (with my original Spanish on the left and Kristin Dykstra's translation into English on the right). These seven independent but interconnected sections/poems explore existential concepts from the perspective of a robot, now a prototype of the future possibilities of their seven corresponding three-dimensional iterations.

The second installation consisted of the engraving in large plexiglass panels of the robotic parts from the same kit used for the matrix. I projected a direct light onto these panels, creating a shadow over poem number VII, the last segment in the series, printed in binary code on paper: "A tu semejanza / mi Imagen" ("According to your likeness / my Image.") These are the key lines for the robotic consciousness since they reinterpret the well-known verses from Genesis in which God created humanity "in His own image." Now, creator and creature switch in the robotic consciousness and human construction, with the residue or shadow projected onto this basic idea that ultimately it is the Robot who impersonates God/humans as the primordial, prototypical Image. The binary construct emphasizes such uneasiness and final certainty in its own

Figure 1. *A tu semejanza / mi Imagen*. Photo by Dan Higgins.

language (binary code) which is imposed over the Biblical sentence – that of the Bible, which means "Book": Code and paper.

My intention, still itself a prototype, was to give voice to the robotic entity by presenting an existential consciousness in a poetic/electronic form which would eventually express itself autonomously through three-dimensional objects/robots capable of movement and action (and interaction) thanks to an Arduino component. The initial idea was to engrave each of the lines in the limbs of the future robot, in this case a spider-robot whose arachnid movements emphasized the disturbing assumptions already attributed to robotic technology. Once each robot was built, the moving creature would adopt the consciousness of the poem it bore, transforming into the robot-poem while simultaneously questioning the observer about its ambivalent status as a Being – constructed by human imagination, and, at the same time, imposing itself on that very imagination. In this way, the anguish and vulnerability humanity feels towards advanced technology would be displayed physically and poetically in the form of a robot-poem which expresses its own existential ambiguity in the first person. The robot would then acquire form and consciousness through the poem, while at the same time constituting a poetic artefact in and of itself, being, quite literally, three-dimensional poetry-in-motion.

In accordance with this vision, the installations at the Flynndog gallery presented the prototype *par excellence*, in all its variations of possibility, but also in archetypal and original specificity. Perhaps in the intersection of the contradiction between potentiality and original model we can locate the robopoetic series. The imprimatur and authorship of these works was stated as my alter/ed ego "Alm@ Pérez."

The pseudonym Alm@ Pérez thus emphasized this computational consciousness by expressing itself as my electronic avatar, and likewise informs notions addressed by the project such as the precarity of being and existential questioning. In the Robopoem@s project, creator and creature once again become interrelated, breaking existential hierarchies questioning the notion of authorship.

2. LED Poetry and QR Poetry: The *tecknetoskeletal* Principle

As Alm@ Pérez, I also included other two instances of technological intervention at the Flynndog gallery: voice-activated LED poetry, and QR poetry.

The LED poetry installation consisted of two T-Shirts featuring poems which reacted to sound and became visible through light diodes. In one of these Shirt-Poems, interaction was encouraged as a way of resistance to the traditional gallery environment and to the conventions of art: "Read Aloud / ¡Grita! / Luz Light / Emitting / Diode Diodo / Transmitting / Poesía LED." This Shirt-Poem in particular, inspired by the movements of an equalizer, presents the activated reading-intervention in the inverse practice of a

traditional reading of a poem, by way of the first line being at the base of the poem, and the title appearing in the upper part: "Poetry EQ" ("Equalizer Poetry"). To experience the upper lines, the poem requires a continuous and active sonic intervention. The final reading emphasizes the basic concept of freedom within the poem/poetry by means of technological interaction: "POETRY EQ / SETS YOU / LIBRE FREE / POESÍA LED." The request and the reading, limited by the artefact itself (which in an earlier attempt demanded a particular number of letters), prioritizes the rhythm over the content of the poem, with an implicit reference to hip-hop.

The second LED Shirt-Poem featured a green spiral which also gets lit up when activated by a sound or someone reading the poem aloud, which once again encourages interaction: "Read aloud ¡GRITA!" The lines are repeated in the spiral in a bilingual format, implicitly reiterating an infinite option of interaction and exchange by means of technology and poetry: "Light Emitting Diode ELECTRO LUMINIS CENCIA Light Emitting Diode DIODOS transmitiendo LUZ Poetry que transmite diodos Diodes making Light making POETRY Read aloud ¡GRITA! Poetry equalizer La POESÍA te hace libre LED poetry sets you free."

The principle of interaction through technology both imposes itself on and is subjected to the "tecknetoskeletal" principle, a feminist tecno-ontology that I consider at the base of the cyberfeminist@ thought, in the following terms:

> The prefix "technetho" involves two meanings from its Greek origin. One is "*techne,*" which means "art," "skill" and the other is *tekhnetos,* meaning "artificial." Hypertext [and by extension all e-lit] is fundamentally tecknetoskeletal since, integrated by the cybernetic medium, hybrid between body and the machine, formally presents itself as art based on an artificial medium. The difference with the anguished and subversive exoskeletal principle introduced by Alicia Ostriker [regarding American women poets] is that these women e-authors create by connecting and interacting with the cybernaut [or visitor to the gallery], suggesting possibilities of permeability, interaction and exchange. It is not an exoskeletal strategy as a survival mode for women writers in a rational medium traditionally linked to men, but a creative tecknetoskeletal affirmation by which women [as well as potential non binary gender identities] exercise a control that is now inclusive, de-hierarchical and multifaceted. Ultimately, these e-authors get over the previous strategy of celebrating the body by inscribing it in the poem ("The release of Anatomy," as stated by Ostriker), to liberate themselves from it, (as a "release *from* Anatomy," redefining Ostriker's terms), in order to build a new body, a new tecnotextual identity. (Escritura tecnetoesquelética 132)[4]

The Poem-LED Shirts complicate the embodiment-disembodiment of the tecknetoskeletal principle particularly when actually wearing them. Within this context of interaction by means of the trans-media/cybernetic

body stands the notion of liberation and "equality," implicit in the concept of "equalizer" used as medium as well as poem in this series.

The feminist proposition becomes more evident in this LED series with a QR Poem (Quick Response code) that I also exhibited at the Flynndog gallery. The short poem, which I transcribe below, appears as a QR Code in two formats: first as a decoded numerical transcription (Raw Bytes), and also as a matrix of stitches, a QR pattern embroidered by the Mexican/Spanish artist Mercedes Bautista in a turquoise hue which recreates the neon of the LED diodes. Fabric, text, and data are revisited now by the ancient method of weaving, a tread traditionally associated with women, now extrapolated to the *text*ile/electronic (web):
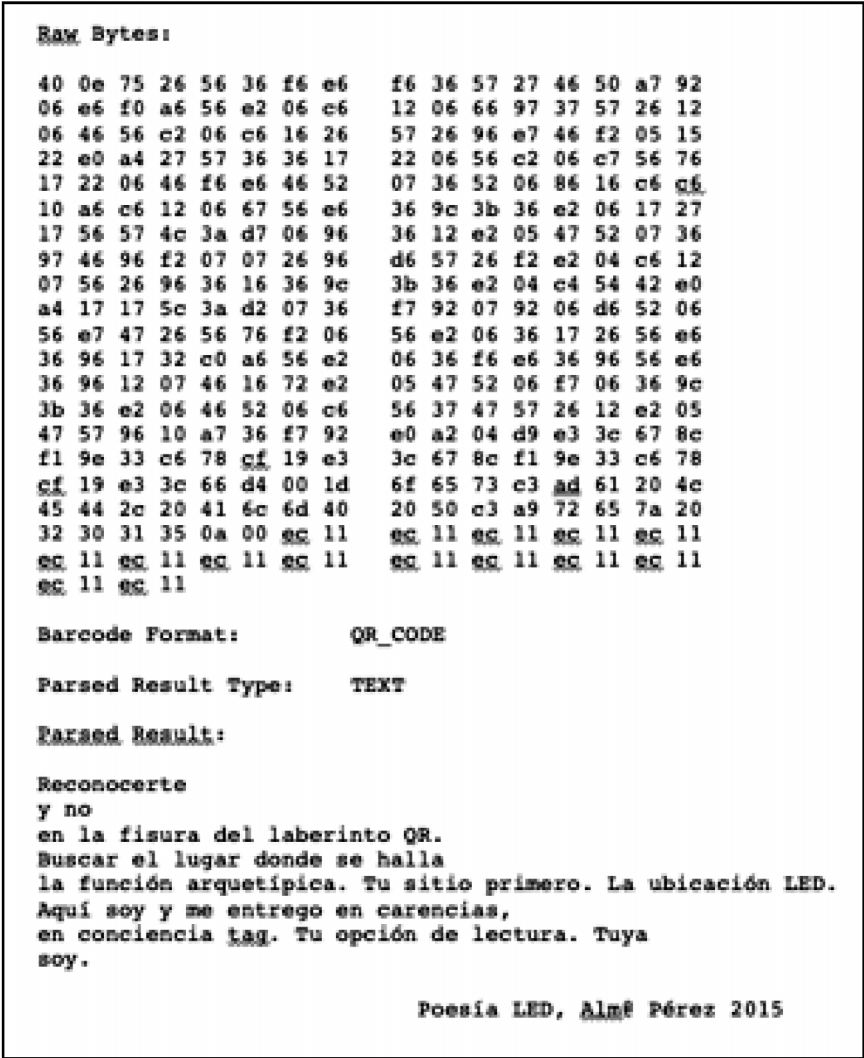
```
Raw Bytes:

40 0e 75 26 56 36 f6 e6     f6 36 57 27 46 50 a7 92
06 e6 f0 a6 56 e2 06 c6     12 06 66 97 37 57 26 12
06 46 56 c2 06 c6 16 26     57 26 96 e7 46 f2 05 15
22 e0 a4 27 57 36 36 17     22 06 56 c2 06 c7 56 76
17 22 06 46 f6 e6 46 52     07 36 52 06 86 16 c6 c6
10 a6 c6 12 06 67 56 e6     36 9c 3b 36 e2 06 17 27
17 56 57 4c 3a d7 06 96     36 12 e2 05 47 52 07 36
97 46 96 f2 07 07 26 96     d6 57 26 f2 e2 04 c6 12
07 56 26 96 36 16 36 9c     3b 36 e2 04 c4 54 42 e0
a4 17 17 5c 3a d2 07 36     f7 92 07 92 06 d6 52 06
56 e7 47 26 56 76 f2 06     56 e2 06 36 17 26 56 e6
36 96 17 32 c0 a6 56 e2     06 36 f6 e6 36 96 56 e6
36 96 12 07 46 16 72 e2     05 47 52 06 f7 06 36 9c
3b 36 e2 06 46 52 06 c6     56 37 47 57 26 12 e2 05
47 57 96 10 a7 36 f7 92     e0 a2 04 d9 e3 3c 67 8c
f1 9e 33 c6 78 cf 19 e3     3c 67 8c f1 9e 33 c6 78
cf 19 e3 3c 66 d4 00 1d     6f 65 73 c3 ad 61 20 4c
45 44 2c 20 41 6c 6d 40     20 50 c3 a9 72 65 7a 20
32 30 31 35 0a 00 ec 11     ec 11 ec 11 ec 11 ec 11
ec 11 ec 11 ec 11 ec 11     ec 11 ec 11 ec 11 ec 11
ec 11 ec 11


Barcode Format:          QR_CODE

Parsed Result Type:    TEXT

Parsed Result:

Reconocerte
y no
en la fisura del laberinto QR.
Buscar el lugar donde se halla
la función arquetípica. Tu sitio primero. La ubicación LED.
Aquí soy y me entrego en carencias,
en conciencia tag. Tu opción de lectura. Tuya
soy.

                         Poesía LED, Almé Pérez 2015
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Figure 2. Conciencia TAG. QR Poem.

Recognizing you
and not
inside a crack in the QR maze.
Search for the site housing
archetype. Your primary location. Your LED placement.
Here I am and give of myself in gaps,
in tag commands. You choose how to read. How to make
me. *Poesía LED, Alm@ Pérez 2015* (Translated to English by Kristin Djikstra)

3. Robopoem@s in Action: "And the Word was made robot, and dwelt among us."

In the Fall of 2015, thanks to a residency at Burlington's "Generator," a maker space that supports projects through technology, I was able to build the actual Robopoem@s. As a "Maker in Residence" (artist in residence), I was given full access to machines, tools, and design programs. A first approach to the project entailed a 3D reproduction of the arachnid introduced as a prototype at the Flynndog exhibition, with the poem inscribed on the creature's body. However, this first attempt was not viable due to the precision and complexity the prototype required. Finally, searching open-source designs primarily, I decided on three distinct models of a similar size inspired by the original arachnid concept. With these three designs I built five Robopoem@s out of birch wood, using a laser printer and cutter, and I engraved the seven segments from the original poem into the legs of these quadrupeds. The electronic component was executed in collaboration with Wesley Alan Wright, with whom I had previously worked on the project *13 Moons 13*.

The process, design, and materials I used contributed to my intention and objectives. For starters, the use of open-source codes and designs underlined the principle of collaboration and interaction within the cyber community. Furthermore, the material I used to make their bodies – wood as opposed to metal or plastic – breaks traditional expectations about technology and robots by presenting the robot in an accessible and organic material. Lastly, the arachnid design emphasized the anxiety spiders and insects elicit from humans and extended it to the proverbial uneasiness implied by technological evolution, a concept that my project aimed to question. All of these aspects can be extrapolated to the existential principles expressed in the poem/s from the robots' point of view:

V. I step forward buckle and
am your toy-circuit,
keyboard for impulse and fear
of your own clumsiness,
vulnerable
and nebulous inside your fragile cosmos,
which I compress.[5]

The binaries dividing creator/creature, humanity/technology are therefore bent by these five robot-poems which interact with each other via sensors (reacting to obstacles) and micro-mp3 players that recite the poems with robotic modulations when they encounter an obstacle (such as a human or each-other). Once the robots were made, I presented a final level of technological interaction by exhibiting a duplicate of the original panels used to build the Robopoem@s with the laser printer/engraver. These original matrices of the robots became visual triggers which activated an augmented reality experience through which spectators could access additional information and 3D models of each Robopoem@.[6]

In 2016 I also published an interface in Flash which allowed users to access both the Robopoem@s and the virtual and augmented reality experiences (Robopoem@s). This interface shows the original quadrupeds with options for listening to the poems in three different languages (English, Spanish and Chinese), interacting with 3-D models of the quadrupeds, and experiencing Augmented Reality components triggered by the panels that served as matrix of the robot-poets.

Figure 3. Augmented Reality component. Photo by Kristin Djkstra.

The culmination of this project was the exhibition in the year 2019 at the BCA Center in Burlington, Vermont, where I installed large-format photographs of the robots, photographs taken by Dan Higgins. As I explained in the artist's statement, these larger installations had the intention of emphasizing

> the phobia inherent not only in the arachnid bots and their message, but the electronic dynamic as such. That is, the large-format robots at BCA highlight the idea of that which is ontological and monstrous. They are

destructive Godzillas – in this case, destroying existential assumptions about technology, humanity, genres, and interspecies, among other reconfigurations of generally binary oppositions. A liminal nature, something "in-between," appears in a literal way to serve those destructive images: as detonators of a series of options in augmented reality, accessible by way of the app HP Reveal. These trans-media options repeat within a single space (by way of videos, 3-D designs, etc.). (Exhibition catalogue)

This approach connects with my research on transmedia and Cyberfeminism, following thinkers such as Valeria Radrigán, by which the concept of exploration, experimentation or "lab," linked as well to the formal imbrication of the web/net, can be extrapolated to the structure of the brain as a new consciousness.[7] The ultimate threat of this new consciousness within the web paradigm is that of a monster, an "arachnid," as Helene von Oldenburg suggests.

Within this paradigm, I am currently exploring interactive and rhizomatic ways to experience an enhance a version of a bigger Robopoem@, this time a hexapod that has the first six segments of the poem inscribed on its legs, with the prophetic seventh part displayed on its body: "According to your likeness / my Image."

4. *Negro en ovejas* and *Emblem/as*. Nomadism, Interspecies and Random Poetry

Another level of interactive work based on interspecies is my project "Negro en ovejas" ("Black on Sheep"), a digital "ovine poem" which intersects words and sheep in an interactive poetic project that allows random poetry as created by the sheep as they graze in the pasture, a performance enhanced and extended to the possible variants created by a digital interface.

This project involves, therefore, various levels of poetic action and interaction, as it was explained for the journal *Mandorla*:[8]

First there is the process of creating the text, the base-poem formed by words which have meaning in and of themselves, but also acquire new meanings by contacting with other words (the noun "Sol" -"Sun"- and the verb "Es" -"Is"- become the plural "Soles" -"Suns"- through proximity or contact). Once the written pieces are built, they are assigned to sheep who will freely form poems in a performance of movements and bleating which will become its own entity. Finally, when the event is transferred to the digital artefact, any Internet user can access and reproduce the process in a cybernetic interaction and in an exchange which affords them creative authorship: the web user, just like the sheep, creates the poetic experience, joining forces with the sheep as well. (504)

The existential condition of the nomadic subject is explored in this project on various levels. On the one hand, the fundamentally random character of the poem and the digital and ovine interaction break the traditional

parameters of centralization, linearity, and binary hierarchies (reader/author; creator/creature; human/animal; paper/e-literature, etc.) by presenting the poem in perpetual motion through the digital-semantic constructions. The involvement of the ovine element on a Castilian field also evokes the transhumant tradition, a nomadic and inter-species model which places both the livestock and shepherd on the same plane, while at the same time it recovers the etymology of the word "nomad" (from the Greek word *νομάδε*, via Latin, meaning "roaming in search of pasture"). As a "shepherd" of the trans-humant poetic experience of the *Negro en ovejas*' artifact, I also propose a reading within the interface that is paradoxically linear (if the navigator chooses such a traditional interaction with the text, that is, by reading from left to right on each scene in the interface), through which I explore a fragmented and nomadic "self."

BLACK ON SHEEP

Ex Traer

Fórmulas

Encuentros

Caos

Distances

A Fines

Fragmentos

Sordos

Ser Vil Ismos

En Verga Duras

Busque Das

Sin Tregua

Puertas

Sol Es De Algo Don Y Mar

Color Es

Y Abatimientos.

Me Sumo A Tu Pulso Oveja

A Tu Llama Y Redil

Y Aventuro

Infinitos.

Me Aventuro. (*Mandorla* 512)

The random quality and nomadic ontology of this ovine poem connects with the tryptic of digital artifacts I presented at ELO 2019 (Electronic Literature Organization Conference), under the title *Emblem/as*, were the principles of de-localization and de-hierarchized multiplicity also operates as a critical element. This triptych was exhibited at the Glucksman Gallery of the University of Cork, Ireland, in a collective exhibition significantly titled "*Peripheries*." The three artefacts present three emblems or flags/banners which represent three areas linked to personal and geographic cartographies. As you move the cursor,

words and sounds lead to new audiovisual and political constructions based on meanings that explore my split sense of identity as a nomadic subject.

These cartographies act, therefore, on both a literal level and a metaphorical level, as they reveal various degrees of physical nomadism, but they also operate on existential, semantic, political and linguistic levels, among other levels of transit or transference. Such "revelation" is articulated through the cursor's dynamic intervention as it moves throughout each banner, uncovering words constructed out with the letters of each of the city/banner referenced, words that appeal to concepts associated with each area. The nomadic intervention extends to the demands of movement and transfer on the part of the Internet surfer with the aim of uncovering meanings which my voice also enunciates in a complicit act that anchors the poetic/ experimental inquiry. Without the cursor's intervention, the three artefacts are visually static, reproducing the traditional configurations of national representation which my intervention attempts to destabilize and resist.

These are the banners or *Emblem/as*: 1. *Mora amor.* ([Za]Mora Amor), 2. *bARcEloNA/l cor.* (Barcelona Arena /al cor), and 3. *United Estados.*

Mora Amor (Love dwells),[9] refers to the banner of the Spanish city of Zamora, a conservative place where I was born. The interactive words and Spanish sounds explore a sense of disengagement and nostalgia towards this city, while pointing to the conservatism and religious constrains of this area of Spain: Ora, Roma, Mazo, Amor, etc. (Pray, Rome, Mallet, Love).

bARcEloNA/l cor. (Barcelona Arena /al cor) ("Sand in the heart"), is visually based on the Catalonian banner. The voice now reproduces, in both Catalan and Spanish, words created with the letters of the city of Barcelona, the area where I grew up. Now, the meanings intersect semantics of the sea (Ona, Roca, Ancla –Wave, Rock, Anchor) with others related to work and pain (Labora, Lacera –Works, Wound).

Finally, "United Estados" reproduces the emblematic flag of the United States. The words and sounds, now in English, Spanish and Spanglish, reflect political issues in my country of residence and co-citizenship. The acronyms point now to notions of anxiety, division and pain (Ansiado, Dissent, Duelo, SOS), as well as longing (Deseado). Other meanings appeal to issues of imperialism and informatic control (Data) as well as to notions of perpetual tensions: Todo/ Nada; U-No; O-Dios (All/Nothing; One/No; God/Hate).

The dynamic and fragmented quality, in perpetual motion due to the cursor's intervention, relates to the fundamental state of migration and its loss of center, the genuine territorial deconstruction whose process examines the existential condition of the nomadic subject. In this sense, the *Emblem/ as* series functions as an archetype of the same process by reflecting a progression which evolves genealogically, and which can be extrapolated to all instances of migration: first in the primordial stage of the original transhumance within a preindustrial and rural location (Zamora); then, the uprooting due to lack of opportunities and resources that caused the Spanish

diaspora in the 60's to industrial zones (Barcelona); and finally, the re-location within the capitalist core par excellence, that "advanced capitalism" ultimately responsible for the massive displacements of people in the era of globalization (the United States).

However, the nomadic sentiment of the loss of unity ultimately transforms into the celebration of the multiple and rhizomatic, which allows for the claiming and the visibility of entities traditionally displaced to the margin by canonical representations. As Scott Weintraub states regarding *Emblem/as*, the sense of "text-as-process" implies the destabilization of the nation as "patria" (patriarchy), which ends up in a productive resistance to univocity and the canonical. This is the ultimate inquiry underlining the e-lit projects discussed in this essay. Through activist poetry, guerilla poetry, poetry which disassembles the conventional limits of verse and expands into areas that are interactive, robo-technological, and interspecies, I inscribe a feminist and rhizomatic ontology as a nomadic subject. Giving visibility to these options, in a variety of expressions, allows for the expansion and redefinition of the traditional concept of literature, extrapolating it out toward electronic possibilities which prioritize multiplicity and inclusion, and in doing so, this extrapolation exposes and reclaims the techno-narrative and *multiversal* proposals of knowledge.

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Notes

[1] Translated from the original Spanish by David Shames & Tina Escaja.

[2] Some sections of this segment were published in Spanish in the volume "Tecnofobia en arácnido; Una genealogía robopoética."

[3] "Proto es principio y 'previo,' lo anterior al efecto, al typo, que es error y tejido, texto. Hacer protos es hacer poemas en proceso, el preámbulo de la conciencia que como robopoeta es cyborg. Crear prototipos es unir lo real con lo ideal, lo irreal con lo posible. En palabra y objeto poético, en texto y vértigo lírico. Todo y posibilidad." Translated to English by Kristin Djkstra for her article "Proto/types."

[4] An earlier version of this essay can be found online: "Hacia una nueva historia de la poesía hispánica: Escritura tecnetoesquelética e hipertexto en poetas contemporáneas en la red." *Especulo,* Universidad Complutense de Madrid), vol. 24, Julio-Octubre, 2003. www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero24/ciberpoe.html

[5] V. Avanzo y me desplomo y soy / tu juguete-circuito, / el teclado de tu capricho y miedo / a tu propia torpeza, / vulnerable / e impreciso en tu frágil universo / que encapsulo.

[6] See Kristin Djkstra, "Work in Progress."

[7] See Tina Escaja, Género, tecnología e Internet en Latinoamérica y vigencias del formato digital."

[8] The quote from the original Spanish is translated to English in this paper by David Shames. (Mandorla 504)

[9] Most of the following descriptions of the three artifacts come from the exhibition catalogue of *Peripheries*

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