

A narration of x-o.global: First steps towards the perversion of GPS in the tropical cartographies of Latin American migration

Jerónimo Reyes-Retana 

Abstract

Over the last ten years, the democratization of smartphones has become a vital factor in closing the ties between mobile technologies and migratory flows that entail cultural integration processes. Official reports published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) demonstrate how, for people in a context of mobility, smartphones represent not only an essential navigation tool, but also an almost sacred artifact providing emotional resilience to complete arduous journeys of forced displacement. x-o.global recognizes and addresses this situation by proposing an alternative usage of smartphones and the Global Positioning System (GPS) through a geolocate platform that enables interactive spaces for auditory stimulation. By inserting GPS-sensitive sound maps into sites offering humanitarian support across the Latin American migratory pathways, x-o.global enables interactive experiences connecting virtuality with reality. As a project uprooting from the grounds of socially engaged and cross-platform art-making, x-o.global's framework looks forward to instigating tropicalized processes capable of reprogramming global networks of technological control—such GPS—to overhaul the migratory crisis in The Americas.

“The path cannot be made without points of reference that permit one to traverse topographies and labyrinths unknown. One needs a compass and to know in which direction to walk... direction is discovered only in concrete application, with the material of day-to-day, militant, and solidarity-based praxis.”

Dussel, Enrique, Tesis de Economía Política: Interpretación filosófica. Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2014, 322

In September 2021, a series of shocking photographs began circulating on the internet and social networks. The images capture moments in which a caravan of Haitian migrants—presumably trying to relocate mainly from Chile, Brazil, and Haiti to the US—are stranded on the banks of the Rio Grande River, seconds away from reaching

Texan soil. Based on body language, they seem to be in a physical and mental state of collapse while being persecuted by the United States Border Patrol when trying to cross through an unregulated passage. In more than one image, it is evident how an enraged and armed agent on horseback tries to subdue them aggressively. All this while holding up a rope that resembles more of a threatening whip.

At first glance, the nature of the image evokes the historical brutality and racial biases of a nation-state controlling the relation between body and territory through violent technologies of deterrence. From another perspective, the scene in frame renders what could potentially be an instant of significant achievement for people in a context of mobility who knows in advance that an encounter with a Border Patrol agent, likely, signifies the culmination of a complex and long journey throughout the hostile migratory routes connecting Latin America with the US. According to international law, this moment must entail the beginning of a new episode for those who are seeking for asylum, a new odyssey that starts at detention centers spread through the US-Mexico border. In these facilities, migrants await a jurisdictional answer that—in the best case—will validate them as second-class citizens in the United States of America. Deliberations intentionally weaponize time, taking months or even years, and, for the vast majority, resolutions are not favorable, implying immediate deportation to native countries. In other words, resetting to ground zero, to the very first place that fueled the courageous impulse of searching for an alternate future through an arduous journey of forced displacement. An unknowable crisis for all of us who are systemically visible.

The migratory routes connecting South America with the US-Mexico border entail a displacement of the body across harsh environments of all sorts, full of natural adversities and political abuse. From the inhospitable Atacama and Uyuni deserts in Chile and Bolivia—considered the most arid regions in the world—to the Darién Gap on the Colombia and Panama borderline, an ecosystem that, besides being an impenetrable rainforest, is also plagued by criminal organizations. Then comes moving forward to the city of Tapachula on Mexico's southern border, where institutional brutality and detention conditions are inhumane. Once inside Mexico, *La Bestia*—a freight train that crosses the country—represents an insecure, although effective vehicle for thousands of migrants longing to reach one of the Mexican northern border towns, which, for the most part, are governed by the necropolitical structures fed by the war on drugs waged since 2006. Here, the migrant community finally find shelter in improvised camps that tenaciously endure despite the extreme climate conditions of not just nature, but also of a societal sentiment of xenophobia, prejudice, and stigmatization that continues to grow.

In this complex scenario, smartphones and mobile technologies represent more than an essential tool for navigation. These devices enable affordable and stable long-distance communication. They give online access to supporting communities and portals containing resourceful information, besides acting as reliable documenting devices to register and denounce human rights violations. A series of reports from the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) shows how smartphones represent a vital source from which to pull out emotional strength to keep moving forward throughout the omnipresent and multifaceted fugitive nature of migratory journeys.

x-o.global (<https://x-o.global/>) emerges as a socially engaged project provoked by the urgency to identify and potentialize the positive effects of mobile technologies in migratory flows entailing processes of cultural integration. By implementing geolocative media, x-o.global's online interface uses smartphones and the Global Positioning System (GPS) to enable interactive audible experiences responding to the migratory crisis in The Americas. This form of technology intercepts GPS data to synchronize the movement of the body across terrestrial spatiality with virtual behaviors. The geolocative nature of x-o.global's platform gives the project the capacity to use geographical coordinates as anchor points. These points make possible to insert virtual sound maps into camps, shelters, refuges, and unregulated settlements—places providing humanitarian help to the Latin American migrant community.

x-o.global ponders about the sites previously mentioned as optimal locations since they provide migrants and refugees with atmospheres of temporary relief, where it is possible to think beyond surviving and reaching a final destination. Therefore, it is in these spaces, exclusively, where the x-o.global intervention becomes a viable exercise

to channel thought towards reparatory imaginaries, where a sensory and aesthetic experience can be interpreted as an act of resilience. Likewise, the basis of the project responds to the urgency of addressing the emotional crisis derived from journeys of forced displacement. Such emotional crises are a serious matter outlined in the Practical Manual for Monitoring Immigration Detention (Association for the Prevention of Torture & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014), which indicates that the promotion of culture within migratory confinement spaces is a determining factor to actively minimize the risks associated with issues related to mental health. x-o.global uproots as a response to this necessity, proposing a cross-platform mode of art-making fostering the emergence of collective strategies, looking forward to instigating alternative forms of sensing that help alleviate the emotional distress of moving through the Latin American migratory pathways.

x-o.global's optics constantly look for contingent forms of collaborating with different people and agencies, aiming to explore art-making methodologies grounded in socially engaged processes. This form of producing and thinking art took me to Chile. In early 2022, I was invited to participate in a theory, art, and technology residency that allowed me to spend two months building the foundations of this project through on-site fieldwork in a territory hosting a severe migratory and humanitarian crisis. During my stay there, I navigated the recondite corners of broken and fragmented conflict zones, filled with asymmetrical realities and painful experiences made worse by systemic invisibility.

One episode, in particular, represented a paradigmatic turn for this project. It all happened in "La Mula," a peripheral and unregulated settlement located on the outskirts of Iquique. Due to its proximity to Colchane, a hostile border town connecting the Chilean and Bolivian dessert, Iquique represents the closest urban center for thousands of migrants looking for temporary shelter. Consequently, several improvised camps are mounted in public squares and other spaces around the city. This situation has generated a xenophobic atmosphere fueling violent protests that, on more than one occasion, have resulted in the burning of tents and belongings of the migrant community. The brutality of these events forced them to relocate to "La Mula."

In "La Mula," I met X and Y, a couple in their early twenties with one kid and another just about to be born. All migrated from Venezuela to Chile, hoping to find the means and strength to build a different future. After engaging in meaningful interactions, I asked if I could visit their new home, which was a recurrent topic in our conversation since they had just moved in. They accepted my request with kindness. On the first visit, we all shared personal memories about living life in our own locality. At some point, X started talking nostalgically about how she missed the sound of birds in Maracaibo. She listed at least fifteen different endemic species from her home. All this while reproducing with her voice the songs of each of them.

Days passed until we met again. This time, I had done all the programming required to insert a small-scale sound map within the confines of the camp (see Figure 1), using mp3 files reproducing the singing of endemic birds from Venezuela. I told X about it. She enthusiastically took the smartphone, put the headphones on, and started to roam around, realizing quickly that the movement of her body across space was, at the same time, activating and deactivating the sound of some of the birds she had mentioned days ago. Based on the look on her face, it was compelling seeing that this improvised x-o.global iteration was causing a positive effect. When X was done listening, she shared with us how the sound of birds brought back memories of her childhood, when she would go to the banks of a river with her family to relax and have a good time. She also mentioned being dazed by the almost surreal fact of actually listening to such a familiar and tropical soundscape while immersed in northern Chile's desert and dry lands.

This was a crucial moment for the project. At this point, multiple layers of meaning intrinsic to sounds of local ecological niches started to unveil. First, it was possible to see how nature soundscapes act as an effective trigger to initiate memory processes connected to notions of territoriality, resilience, and wellness. Then, I started thinking about how the soothing ambient sound of the more-than-human world also operates as a critical vehicle to reach audiences with different cosmovisions. When looking through the lens of decolonial thinking, Nature represents a common and fertile ground with enough space to allocate ecologies of knowledge, wherein, according to Catherine E. Walsh, interculturality can bloom as the result of a process that is in continuous insurgence, movement, and

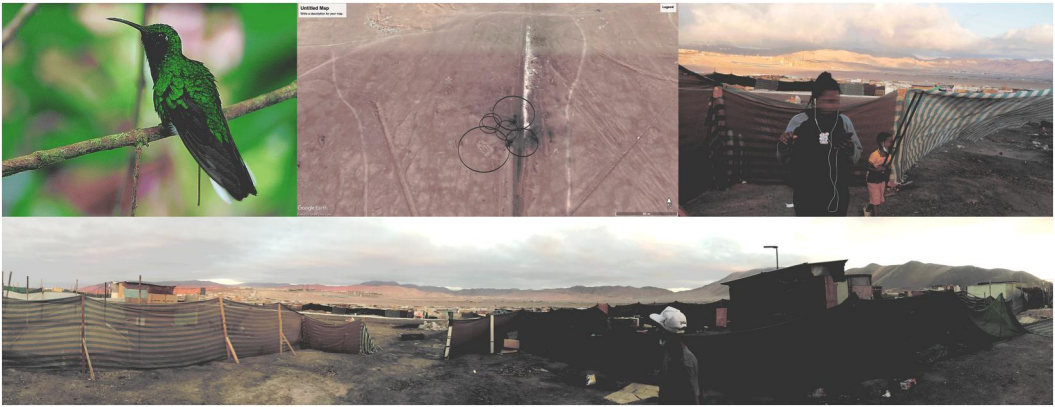


FIGURE 1 *x-o.global's* geolocate intervention in the migrant camp of *La Mula* (Iquique, Chile). Source: Images by Jerónimo Reyes-Retana [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

construction. Looking back, this whole episode was fundamental to re-orienting *x-o.global* towards becoming a platform enabling precognitive auditory experiences that must be inclusive for people of all ages and genders, with different beliefs, traditions, and political ideologies.

The conceptual scaffolding supporting the project remains committed to social justice, far from precognition and deeply immersed in the dense waters of techno-politics. This comes clear when thinking about the geolocate auditory experiences of *x-o.global* as techno-poetic gestures, as site-responsive interventions relying on the means of media art to underline the haste to reprogram the terms of migratory social struggles. This proposition stems from *migrant digitalities* (Ennaji & Bignami, 2019), a notion arising within the migratory context of the city of Fés in Morocco, which seeks to examine the effects of mobile technologies in migratory flows that entail cultural integration processes in northern Africa. The conceptual framework sustaining *x-o.global* revisits and topicalizes *migrant digitalities*, looking forward to opening space for the emergence of renewed perspectives and critical parallelisms connecting the subjectivities of the Latin American migratory crisis to the technological determinists of the West.

As a project that needs to remain in a thorough state of introspection, *x-o.global* recognizes the cultural implications of its mechanisms of distribution and reproduction. The project identifies GPS as a planetary-scale computational grid comprised of a 31-unit satellite constellation orbiting around Earth. A global geopositioning apparatus fully developed by the US navy, that is in total control of the US Department of Defense, and operates under the hegemonic interest of a nation-state that flagrantly avoids its geopolitical responsibility in the inciting of other nations' internal conflicts—a paramount fact when thinking about the Latin American migratory crisis.

Through a non-fixed and cross-platform mode of thinking and producing art, *x-o.global* calls into question the cultural contradictions of a globalized order that promotes technological interconnectivity through holistic networks of control (like GPS) while normalizing humanitarian and affective disconnection. By looking closely into the crevices of this banal globalist techno-kleptocracy, *x-o.global* seeks to find malleable strategies to pervert and bend the inflexible and violent geographical abstractions of neoliberal land tenure. By inserting auditory iterations in humanitarian landmarks spread across Latin American migrant routes, the project outlines how the same platforms that allocate domains of control and oppression, can be hijacked to host sites for reflecting on new ways of thinking/using technology; a move that endorses a systemic reconfiguration in which transterritoriality, collectivity, and citizenship remain at the forefront.

x-o.global responds to the displacement of the body—theoretically and practically—that is why the foundations of the project take the concept of *nomadology* (Deleuze and Guattari) as an impulse to explore the field of possibility. Here, new modes of production materialize, boosting connections that do not intend to reproduce the past or

present, but to open space for new ways of thinking through art and culture about Latin American futurities built upon transversal epistemologies and social justice. As a project still in the formation phase, x-o.global recognizes that there is a long way ahead. Challenges of all sorts will emerge, ranging from solving convoluted technical aspects to shaping sensitive strategies of engagement and implementation. Thus, the project needs to think constantly in effective ways to open communications channels with agents and agencies willing to collaborate, aiming to think and move forward collectively on a hidden pathway that we will only come to light through praxis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

Jerónimo Reyes-Retana  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2222-6671>

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