The aim of this chapter is to describe and reflect on the Mexican digital humanities (DH) project entitled “Women’s Writings from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries” (“Escritos de Mujeres,” http://www.iisue.unam.mx/escritoras/) conducted at the Research Institute on the University and Education (Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, IISUE) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The project has existed for more than eight years and was developed together with another DH project entitled “Digital Library of Novohispanic Thought” (Biblioteca Digital del Pensamiento Novohispano, BDPN: http://www.bdpn.unam.mx/) of the same university. “Women’s Writings” is the first project in Mexico that has applied digital humanities tools to conduct research on unpublished manuscripts written by women from New Spain. Starting in 2011, we were involved in digital encoding of these unpublished materials and holding seminars and workshops on them.

In this chapter, I wish to present my personal experience with this project as an exercise in autoethnography. I will try to describe my subjective practice and assessment of the digital technology we use, following the approach suggested by Amy E. Earhart to analyze an individual’s personal experience within her cultural context, engaging with the subjectivity of self-reflection (Earhart, “Digital Humanities Futures,” 9).

I am a historian specializing in women’s history and gender in sixteenth-century Hispanic America. I come from a semirural region in Mexico, and did not learn how to use the computer until I began studying at the university. Learning DH tools implied a great challenge for me, as I had a background in the humanities. The “Women’s Writings” project, in which I participated as a scholarship student for eight years, pushed me to acquire those tools. My reflections come from my individual experience rather than a collective engagement.
The work started in 2009. It has been coordinated since then by Clara Inés Ramírez, a researcher at IISUE-UNAM. The project was initially conceived by graduate students in history from the School of Philosophy and Literature, all from a feminist background. A number of students, scholarship holders, and other scholars have joined us over the years. Our initial goal was to research and publish previously unpublished writings by women writers from New Spain in order to build up a collection of women's historical sources and begin constructing a historiography that can make women visible in Latin American history and reinstate them in their rightful position.

Around the year 2011, we began to foray into digital humanities through collaboration with a DH project entitled “Digital Library of Novohispanic Thought” (Biblioteca Digital del Pensamiento Novohispano/BDPN), coordinated by Ernesto Priani Saisó, a pioneer of DH at UNAM. We learned to use XML to encode some documents we had prepared through paleographic and editorial processing. We used the BdPn semantic markup, an adaptation of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) lite version that encodes both structural and content-related elements. We worked alongside programmers in practical seminars to create our own tags and labels for texts written by women. Besides those already created, such as name, person, and place, we introduced new tags such as

Body: (parts and diseases) term type body
Emotions: states of the mind and soul (virtues, sins, temptations) term type emotion

As we incorporated more texts written by women, we became interested in encoding authors’ self-references in order to analyze the rhetoric of femininity and allusions to the authors’ own writings. For this, we created two new labels to mark up the paragraphs: AutoRef and WriteRef. This markup work developed in collaboration with a National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) project “Body, Writing, and Gender: Markups for Digital Text Analysis,” coordinated by Ernesto Priani Saisó, and the Support Program for Research and Technological Innovation Projects (PAPIIT) project “Educación, Escritura y Género en la Nueva España” at IISUE, coordinated by Clara Inés Ramírez González.

Our goal was to analyze gender differences: for instance, how the body is represented in texts written by women and by men, and encode the differences through appropriate markup. For this purpose, in order to mark up references to the body in previously digitalized texts, we used TEI lite standard labels.1

Speaking subjectively, I think, to be honest, that we adopted XML-TEI for markup and publication without even questioning where it came from, unaware of other options, and without reflecting on the fact that TEI implied a new textual hierarchization (Schmidt, “Role of Markup,” 125–46).

I recall, for instance, that we had manuscripts in the Indigenous language Nahuatl, and although we felt that it would be interesting and challenging to apply
TEI markup to them, our limited markup knowledge and resources led us to select
texts more amenable to the DH tools that we already knew how to use. For me, this
created a first hierarchization between texts in Spanish and texts in non-Western
languages. As Paolo Monella observes, “technological colonization” is not “the result
of hostile planning against non-Western cultures” (Monella, “Scritture dimenticate,
scrittura colonizzate,” 11; my translation). However, in this case, practical issues, as
well as our choice of TEI with its English phonetics and spelling, led us to a new
categorization of the texts where the implicit priority was compatibility with Anglo-
phone technology rather than the historical and cultural context of the Indigenous
manuscripts. Another problem was that our limited knowledge of digital technol
ogy translated into a lack of access to possible alternative solutions to our episte
mological concerns, as we relied on programmers who, in their turn, depended on
mainstream or “standard” technologies.

Learning how to use XML-TEI, and then encoding the texts, involved an intensive
investment of time and energy for someone not trained in digital technology.
In principle, such a situation made us reliant on the programmers. Although inter-
disciplinarity of DH proved to be a positive experience, from my point of view it
was the programmer who ultimately decided which categories would be used or
created to encode a text—and which would not. Ultimately, our level of comput
ing literacy and limited involvement in text encoding did not allow us to work
autonomously—for example, to create our own categories or explore other tech
ical solutions.

Human resources were limited, and although new students joined the project
as volunteers and scholarship holders, there was not always a continuity among the
participants. More time had to be invested in training the newcomers, which, in
the end, made it difficult to make progress. Compared to other digital archives of
women’s writings, such as the “Women Writers Project” at Northeastern University
(https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/), whose platform contains a collection of 375
texts each with its own markup categories, we have managed to mark up only six
documents. This gap in output is owing to the fact that our texts are the result of
a time-consuming process of research and editing, carried out by a small group of
people. Unlike the texts of the “Women Writers Project,” ours chiefly originated in
manuscripts, not printed editions. The typical workflow thus included several extra
and arduous steps: searching the material archives, locating the resources, prepar
ing the transcriptions (which always involve some paleographic work), and editing
the documents for eventual print publication.

All this work was done through collaboration among different teams. Some
people were responsible for searching the archives, others for paleographic work,
while another group worked on the edition, besides encoding the documents in
XML. Although we have managed to construct a database of more than 130 man
uscripts written by women through our research in different archives, we lack the
resources to complete the encoding.
Faced with this gigantic task, it becomes difficult for us to learn new markup technologies that could both expand and reflect our own research interests. I know at my own cost how difficult it is to move the project forward when one is not always receiving remuneration, while at the same time studying for one’s MA and PhD, and also working as a faculty member teaching history to undergraduates at the School of Philosophy and Literature (FFyL-UNAM).

If we wish to adopt a nonhierarchical approach to the creation and use of digital encoding technologies to meet our own research needs and also cater to the Mexican cultural context, we need a level of practical knowledge of digital technologies difficult to achieve in a short time. How can we appropriate DH technologies in a critical and noncolonial way when the digital gap is so wide and the resources so limited?

I might mention here an experience that had a strong impact on me while I was doing archival work in a church in Oaxaca state in Southern Mexico. The manuscripts were in such a bad state that when I turned one of the pages, it vanished into thin air. Given the condition of archives in Latin America, and particularly of manuscripts written by women, our primary concern should be to rescue and preserve them. I believe similar DH projects involving women’s writings in Latin America are moving in this same direction. An example from Chile is the project entitled “Retrieving an Archive at Risk: The Legacy of Saint Therese of the Andes” (“Rescate de un Archivo en riesgo: El legado de Santa Teresa de Los Andes”), coordinated by Alexandrine de La Taille-Trétinville and funded by the Research Support Fund (Fondo de Apoyo a la Investigación, FAI) of the University of the Andes (Universidad de los Andes) (La Taille-Tretinville, “El amor esponsal”).

Creating digital archives and designing adequate document retrieval tools should be a priority of digital humanities in Latin America. This would imply learning new technologies for text encoding, although in the current national context this activity might remain marginal, especially given the condition of much of the material. Our own project is moving in this direction, which is why it is currently entitled “Women’s Writings: Manuscript Recovery” (“Escritos de mujeres: Rescate documental”).

My personal assessment of the possibilities in Mexico of developing digital markup technologies and archival solutions for women’s manuscripts is not too optimistic. Technologies evolve more quickly than our ability to acquire them, creating a series of obstacles to developing tools appropriate to each local linguistic and cultural context. From my perspective, multinational digital corporations are becoming instruments to perpetuate cognitive and epistemological neocolonialisms. Mexico is not a strong player in the global communication system. My country may therefore remain a “mere consumer of tools, contents and infrastructures designed in and imposed by the North” (Fiormonte, “¿Por qué las Humanidades Digitales necesitan al Sur?” 19). Yet Mexico is in a relatively privileged position, economically intertwined with the United States and culturally connected to the Global...
South. It is thus necessary, here, to build spaces for debate and critical reflection on how (and from where) we are to enter the field of digital humanities, and what we actually need to draw from it.

Notes

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1. Some of these research results may be found in Priani Saisó, Ramírez, and Llanos, “Marcas de género sobre el cuerpo.”

2. Nahuatl is a language spoken by various Indigenous groups in Mexico. It was the lingua franca of the Mexican (Aztec) Empire, and is currently the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico with more than 1.5 million speakers.

3. My last collaboration with the “Women’s Writings” project as a scholarship holder, before starting my postdoctorate, was working to create a database that could support the project in selecting manuscripts and books to process and carrying out paleographic work, editing, digital markup, and publication. This database contains systematic bibliographical and archival information about the manuscripts, books, and various other materials that we have identified, reproduced, and processed paleographically since launching the project in 2009.

The archives we used for the project were: General Archive of the Nation (Archivo General de la Nación), Mexico; General Archive of the Indies, Spain; National Library of Spain; National Historical Archive, Madrid; library of the University of California, San Diego; Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, Austin, Texas; the Archivio Apostolico Vaticano; Alfredo Harp Helú Archives, Luis Castañeda Guzmán Collection, Oaxaca; Historical Archive of the Notary’s Offices, Oaxaca.

4. For general information regarding FAI projects, see https://www.uandes.cl/investigacion/fondo-ayuda-a-la-investigacion/.

5. This is a general concern in discussions about digital humanities and the Global South. For an extensive debate about the relations between Global South and Global North in digital humanities, see del Rio Riande et al., Humanidades Digitales.

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