Picturesque Savagery on Display
Exhibition of Indigenous People, Science and Commerce in Argentina (1898–1904)

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the importance of commercial exhibitions of Indigenous people in the development of anthropological practices in South America between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, it examines the intrinsic links between commercial ventures based on the exhibition of Indigenous people and anthropological practices. These spaces of scientific popularisation allowed the anthropologists to economise the time, economic, material and human resources involved in an excursion to the field in the classic sense. The article then presents and examines the anthropometric, linguistic, photographic and musicological investigations that the German anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1872–1938) conducted between 1898 and 1904 on Selk’nam, Qom and Tehuelche groups exhibited in local and international commercial enterprises. Finally, through Lehmann-Nitsche’s research, I explore of how European anthropologists profited from these commercial ventures for the study of indigenous people, the use of urban spaces for ‘fieldwork’ and their transformation into anthropological ‘laboratories’.

KEYWORDS
fieldwork, indigenous exhibition, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, South American anthropology

Commerce, Pleasure and the Study of Indigenous People

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the great exhibitions of industry and commerce were used as spaces for the promotion of certain products and territories. These were also spaces where circus or popular entertainment entrepreneurs exploited Indigenous peoples. In contrast to the theatrical performances or carnivals of the eighteenth century with individuals disguised as ‘exotic’ characters (Leonhardt 2007), these spectacles combined commercial, scientific and popular entertainment aspects. This provided a respectable educational experience, satisfying the bourgeois demand for the observation of living and ‘real’ Indigenous peoples. Besides the commercial
interests of the promoters of these spectacles, they would become one of the many spaces chosen by anthropologists to avoid the need to travel to distant countries in order to observe these people (Bruckner 2003; Fabian 1990). At the same time, as Benoît de L’Estoile has pointed out in his analysis of the Paris International Colonial Exhibition (1931), these spaces ‘constituted a critical step in the process of disciplinary formation in anthropology’ (L’Estoile 2003: 342).

Particularly in the spectacles that were held in France, Germany and England between 1870 and 1890, the South American indigenous groups were in great ‘demand’. This was due to their classification, along with those from Africa, Australia and Brazil, as relics of human evolution. This condition was the result of the racial hierarchisation introduced in the eighteenth century through the works of naturalists such the French Georges Buffon (1707–1788) and the German Johann Blumenbach (1752–1840) (Doron 2012; Gould 1997; López Beltran 2002). Whether for scientific reasons or for entertainment, neither scholars nor the general public wanted to lose the opportunity to observe their ‘primitive’ contemporaries. Two of the most prominent individuals in the exhibition of Indigenous people were Phineas Barnum (1810–1891) in the United States and Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913) in Europe, particularly Germany.

Barnum began the commercial exploitation of human bodies in 1835. That year he exhibited Joice Heth (1756–1836), a Black slave he promoted as the wet nurse of George Washington (1732–1799) (Barnum 1869). In 1843, he learned of Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838–1883), who measured only sixty-four centimetres tall. After convincing his parents of the commercial potential, Barnum taught Stratton some comedy routines, gave him the artistic name General Tom Thumb and exhibited him in Boston, Philadelphia and New York during 1843 (Bogdan 1994; Davis 2002). A year later, Barnum sailed to Europe and exhibited Stratton for three years. During that time, he visited galleries, museums, zoos, circuses, and sideshow venues. Upon his return, he began to perform his famous ‘freak’ shows (Bogdan 1994; Davis 2002).

In Europe, Barnum established contacts with Carl Hagenbeck, an early innovator in animal and human trafficking ventures. In 1866, Hagenbeck started in his father’s circus company. Soon he became the main provider of exotic fauna in Europe thanks to an extensive network of professional hunters in different parts of the world. At the end of the 1870s, and in the decline of the animal trade, he began to venture into ‘human zoos’. Known in Germany as Völkerschauen, these
shows exhibited ‘exotic’ populations along with wild animals from their natural habitat (Bruckner 2003; Reichardt 2008). Hagenbeck’s first exhibition was in 1874 and featured a group of Sami as ‘protagonists’. The great reception by the public led him to devote himself fully to the new orientation of his anthropological venture (Ballestero 2011).

In the following years Hagenbeck specialised in bringing indigenous groups whom the European viewers never saw before (Hagenbeck 1910). Among these, those from the southern end of South America caused the greatest attraction.¹ This fascination was linked to the false presumption of cannibalism, gigantism and monstrosity of these groups, an image present in the travel chronicles of the fifteenth century that both scientific publications and the press of the late nineteenth century encouraged and promoted.

Exhibited in Paris, Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, Stuttgart, Nuremberg and Zurich, they were studied by French anthropologists, such as Léonce Manouvrier (1850–1927), Paul Topinard (1830–1911), Gabriel Mortillet (1821–1898), Abel Hovelacque (1843–1896), Joseph Deniker (1852–1918), Charles Bordier, Gustav Le Bon (1841–1931), Girad de Rialle and Ernest Th. Hamy (1842–1908), and German ones such as Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) and Otto Bollinger (1843–1909). These anthropologists carried out, primarily, anthropometric and linguistic studies on living Indigenous and autopsies as they died. They also detailed certain methodological precautions when obtaining information about the exhibited Indigenous. For example, Virchow recommended caution when using reports and descriptions by individuals outside the academic world. This condition resulted in information without rigour and scientific criteria (Virchow 1881).

Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, like the aforementioned anthropologists, recognised the structural advantages offered by urban spaces when conducting fieldwork. He was born in Posen in 1872. Between 1890 and 1896 he studied at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin and Munich. At Munich, he obtained his doctorates in philosophy (1894) and medicine (1897). In 1897 he was appointed head of the Anthropology Section of the Museo de La Plata. Over three decades, his research covered craniology, anthropometry, palaeoanthropology, ethnography, linguistics, mythology, musicology and folklore. Along with his research, Lehmann-Nitsche lectured at the universities of Buenos Aires (1902) and La Plata (1906), being the first university professor of anthropology in South America. On April 1, 1930, Lehmann-Nitsche
resigned his position and moved with his family to Berlin, where he was an invited lecturer at the Humboldt University. He died of cancer on April 8, 1938 (Ballestero 2014; Bilbao 2004; Farro 2009).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, anthropological practice was shaped and constrained by the need to possess the object itself. Legitimised as a place of observation, the fairs offered anthropologists immediate, economic and almost unrestricted access to Indigenous people. In this way, Lehmann-Nitsche was able to study representatives of the world’s most ‘primitive’ people in a controlled and geographically close space. The possibility of having this ‘rare’ study object at his disposal was one of the factors that allowed him to insert himself into the international discussions on South American Indigenous people. At the same time, it allowed him to approach the aim of his research agenda: a medium-term residence in Argentina in order to accumulate academic prestige on the basis of publications on anthropological collections and living Indigenous people to which he had practically privileged access. From this, his final aim was to return to Germany and join an anthropological institution.

Lehmann-Nitsche had a large amount of research ‘material’ at his disposal and, through relevant connections with European colleagues, material and theoretical instruments to interpret it. Far from ascribing to a specific anthropological ‘tradition’, Lehmann-Nitsche adapted his methodology to the nature of the study object. Like his French and German colleagues, Lehmann-Nitsche asserted that the physiognomy of South American Indigenous people was evidence of their ‘primitive’ condition, which like their ‘archaic’ intellect was the result of environmental conditions. Lehmann-Nitsche, however, drew attention to racial determination based merely on physiognomic characteristics. In order to overcome this insufficient representation, in his fieldwork in urban spaces Lehmann-Nitsche conducted anthropometric, linguistic, photographic and musicological research.

**The Picturesque Savagery on Display**

On 16 October 1898, the *Segunda Exposición Nacional de la Industria y el Comercio* (Second National Industry and Commerce Exposition) was inaugurated. Like its European and North American counterparts, this was conceived as a stage for political propaganda (Greenhalgh 1988). In an area of fourteen thousand metres, visitors could appreciate a variety of national products, activities for children, different
types of theatrical and musical presentations and finally collections and publications of various scientific institutions. However, the main attraction was two Selk’nam families from Tierra del Fuego\(^2\) (two men, two women and two children) brought by the Governor of Tierra del Fuego, lieutenant colonel Pedro Godoy (1858–1899) (Figure 1). Although this was not the first time that Indigenous people could be seen in Buenos Aires, the local press pointed out that until that moment ‘they have never been exposed, as today, in an appropriate place, where they could satisfy the curiosity of those who wish to know their uses and customs’ (La Prensa 7 November 1898: 3).

That appropriate place was the Women’s Section of the National Exhibition. For a month they were exhibited in their ‘traditional’ houses and surrounded by typical flora and fauna of Tierra del Fuego. Based on the reconstruction of the Fuegian biotope and a selection of elements of their material culture, the organisers of the exhibition tried to offer the experience of observing ‘real’ Indigenous people in their ‘real’ conditions of existence. In this sense, a note in the newspaper *La Nación* stated that the Selk’nam had transported with them all

**Figure 1.** Selk’nam families from Tierra del Fuego. Source: Caras y Careta 1898
the material implements that allowed them to ‘bring to the exhibition all the wild and picturesque life of the extreme part of our territory’ (Anon 11 March 1898: 5).

Far from being a novelty, this was the dominant model of Indigenous exhibition popularised by Hagenbeck from the 1870s onwards. Despite their heterogeneity, his ethnological exhibitions always contained music, dance, flora, fauna and physical demonstrations. The arbitrary selection of material culture elements also served to reinforce the cultural imaginary about the temporal and cultural distance that separated the public from the people on exhibition. The press contributed to reinforce this separation through the publication of observation guides, whose purpose was to prevent the public from missing any details ‘the primitive representatives of humanity who still live in the Argentine territory’ (Anon 7 November 1898: 3).

The Selk’nam exhibition was such a success that the organisers had to build a wire fence to prevent crowding and contain the audience. This fence, however, was opened so that Lehmann-Nitsche could conduct a series of anthropometric and linguistic research.

**Exotic Spectacles in the Capital of Argentina**

Lehmann-Nitsche was overwhelmed by the attraction caused by the exhibition, exposing that ‘the public rushed to see this exotic spectacle in the capital of Argentina, enjoying a living picture that reminded of the prehistoric times’ (1915: 174). The concept of ‘exoticism’ operated as an underlying narrative structure that articulated commercial, scientific and leisure interests. This concept evoked a distant and inaccessible world worthy of observation by both the eye of anthropologists, trained to observe all the details of this world, and the amateur eyes of the public. Like press articles and commercial propaganda, the anthropological studies carried out in the exhibitions reinforced and legitimised the temporal and cultural distance between observer and observed, reinforcing in turn the imaginary of ‘modernity’ and nationhood that the exhibition narratives tried to impose. Likewise, it strengthened the ‘bourgeois respectability’ of the exhibitions (Reichardt 2008: 45).

In their condition of ‘living pictures’ of the past, the exhibited Indigenous people were material evidence of the aphasic and immobile past that the historical sources could not penetrate. However, the timelessness that characterised the Indigenous peoples and made them so
valuable for anthropological studies was also their main anathema. Time, by driving on the evolution of certain populations, condemned others to oblivion. Topinard noted this particularity in his study of eleven Kawashkar exhibited in Paris in 1881. According to Topinard the exhibitions of Indigenous people provided a rare opportunity to observe ‘the last witnesses of an endangered age’ (Topinard 1888: 341).

Similarly, Virchow, who studied the same group in Berlin, remarked that such exhibitions were extremely important because they allowed scholars to observe individuals from the remotest corners of the globe and to compare the different evolutionary degrees of the human race (Virchow 1881: 377). The local Argentine press also accounted for the advantages offered by the Indigenous exhibitions, highlighting the public interest in ‘the inferior beings that still populate part of the Republic . . . but that are slowly disappearing or transforming, due to the growing influence of the civilizing forces’ (Anon 7 November 1898: 3).

In the forementioned context, the exhibitions were a space where to elude the irrefutable precepts of the passage of time. At the same time, they allowed anthropologists to overcome the material and structural difficulties involved in carrying out fieldwork in Tierra del Fuego. In an enclosed and controlled space, Lehmann-Nitsche carried out body measurements, photographs and the collection of drawings with the purpose of ‘hurrying and saving what still exists in order to fix the characters of all of them destined to disappear (in reference to Selk’nam)’ (Lehmann-Nitsche 1898: 123).

The extensive data collection concerning the Selk’nam physical characteristics responded to one of the main demands of late nineteenth century physical anthropology: the establishment of long comparative series of anthropometric data. The physical particularities were conceived as the external manifestation of the human evolutionary process. Thus, the empirical establishment of racial types and hierarchies was only possible through objective data of such particularities. Bodies had to be translated into the neutral and objective language par excellence: numbers.

Lehmann-Nitsche used a wide range of techniques promoted by French and German anthropological schools. This allowed him to complement pre-existing descriptions and data and to join the international debate on ‘primitive’ groups. First, he determined the chromatic characteristics. For males and females, he used the chromatic table promoted by the French physician Paul Broca (1824–1880). For
infants, the one recommended by the Swiss naturalist Paul Sarasin (1856–1929). Following Topinard’s suggestion, Lehmann-Nitsche seated his Selk’nam to measure them. He began with the femur and then combined these measurements with those of the tibia. In this way, supposedly, the risks of error were reduced. At the same time, the length of the lower extremity of the body was obtained, deducting the height from the general measurements. According to Lehmann-Nitsche, the results obtained allowed him to establish a close evolutionary connection between the Selk’nam and the pre-human hominids that were supposed to have inhabited America (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904).

Lehmann-Nitsche believed biological studies had to be complemented with linguistic studies, or others that could penetrate and investigate the psyche of the Indigenous people. For this purpose, and with the objective of carrying out a comparative study of the drawings of ‘the different indigenous tribes among themselves and with the children of the white race’, Lehmann-Nitsche compiled drawings made by the Selk’nam (Lehmann-Nitsche 1907: 220). For Lehmann-Nitsche the intellectual level of the Selk’nam was similar to that observable in other ‘primitive’ groups such as the Aimoré of Brazil or the Palawa of Australia.³

After one month the Selk’nam no longer wanted to be ‘attractive’ to the public of Buenos Aires. The exposition’s organising committee authorised lieutenant colonel Godoy to provide the Selk’nam with sheep and cows for a total value of three hundred pesos for their return journey to Tierra del Fuego. During the days in which he observed the Selk’nam, Lehmann-Nitsche gathered practical experience in observing Indigenous people in urban spaces, which he put into practice a year later.

**Representing the Primitive Customs with Real Elements**

At the beginning of 1899, the Spanish theatre entrepreneur Francisco Pastor (DOB unk.–1920) and the journalist Eduardo Iribarne (1859–1937) proposed to the Uruguayan actor José Podestá (1858–1937) developing a theatrical version of the poem *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* in order to be presented in Spain. The poem, written by the Argentine José Hernández (1834–1886), was a symbolic and paradigmatic portrait of the gauchos and Indigenous people who inhabited the region of the Argentine Pampa around the 1880s. Pastor and
Iribarne wanted to endow the dramatisation with as much realism as possible, suggesting that Podestá complete the theatre troupe with ‘authentic indigenous; dressing them in relative detail, even if the truth was partly falsified to the benefit of aesthetics and the demand for theatricality’ (Podestá 1986: 112).

Theatrical performances were intimately related to the society where they were conceived, so that the identification of the public with certain plays should be sought in their ability to materialise certain historical events or social stereotypes (Coutelet and Moindrot 2015). Their staging implied their reduction to a limited and defined set of material and immaterial elements. The aesthetic innovations in the scenery, the precision of the costumes or the versatility of the actors were part of the artificialities of the theatre in the search of (re)presenting on stage an ‘exotic’ world, in this case the life of Martin Fierro.

According to Pastor, the recruitment of Indigenous people was based on the representation of ‘the plays of the national theater with the greatest propriety and responding to the requirement of veracity in them’ (Anon. 7 Sept. 1899: 4). This veracity was based on presenting to the public the ‘real object’ and not a simple emulation of it. As Podestá pointed out, the Indigenous people would allow him to ‘represent the pictures of primitive customs, not with a simulated element, but with the real one’ (Anon, *La Prensa* 1 Sept. 1899: 5).

For Pastor and Podestá, the success of their theatrical venture depended on satisfying the public’s expectations regarding the observation of the ‘exotic’, that is, real bodies. As we saw in the case of the Selk’nam exhibition, this concept encompassed both the material resources used in the representations and the individuals on stage. In this particular case, the need to represent the ‘exotic’ world of the gauchos and Indigenous people with the ‘real element’ was also linked to the strong criticism of the representation of ‘local’ characters (gauchos and Indigenous people) by foreign actors, a trend that continued until 1890 (Mogliani 2015; Pelletieri 2002; Seibel 2002).

As we will see next, the exhibition of the ‘exotic’ from the country in a foreign context raised a series of problems. First, in contrast to the experiences in Australia or the United States, in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century there was no legal and territorial control over the Indigenous peoples, which did not allow the establishment of the binary distinction ‘us/them’. In the Argentinian case, the extinction of the Indigenous defines the national and cultural identity construction process, so the presence of living Indigenous abroad is a critical political issue. Second, Podestá’s exhibition of the Indigenous
in foreign countries was an attempt against the desired cultural homogeneity, challenging the dominant evolutionist discourse of the epoch in which the former were not considered part of contemporary Argentina, but mere living fossils, anachronistic objects of an extinct past (Ballestero 2014; Levine and Novoa 2012).

The Offended Civilisation of the Country

The imperative of authenticity of Podestá’s theatrical enterprise faced certain difficulties derived from the Argentine nation-building project. Beginning in 1850, it included a series of military campaigns that resulted in the extermination and/or cultural assimilation of a large part of the Indigenous peoples (Botana and Gallo 1997; Halperin Donghi 2005). This limited the places where Podestá could hire real Indigenous people. He chose the National Territory of Formosa, where a large number of Indigenous people were relocated in the proximity of military forts, agricultural colonies, local sugar mills or reductions.

Specific symbolic motives can also be observed in this choice. Some of the spectacles that included the exhibition of Indigenous people had the objective of recreating the territorial annexation processes that the latter suffered.5 When these processes were staged, they were affirmed and objectified before the audience (Blanchard et al. 2004). At that time, Formosa was one of the last indigenous territories to be effectively controlled by the nascent Argentine National State. Such history could be exploited on the theatrical and circus scenarios to satisfy the public interest in the epic narrative promoted by the Argentine National State.

The Indigenous people were not only an indispensable theatrical resource to guarantee the veracity of Podestá’s play but also an economic resource that promised great utility and profit. In this sense, Podestá planned to cover the expenses of hiring Indigenous people and their transportation to Europe from the royalties for exhibiting them at the Exposition Universelle to be held in Paris in 1900. In Formosa, Podestá contacted its governor, Argentine Colonel José María Uriburu (1846–1909). He recommended to Podestá to visit the Ingenio azucarero Formosa, owned by the Italian Pedro Bonaccio (1849–1904) and the German Mauricio Mayer, where he could ‘find the element that he needed’ (Anon 1 September 1899: 5).
This element was a group of Qom, who, accused of participating in the murder of the Spanish explorer Pedro de Ibarreta (1859–1898), were condemned to perform forced labour (Anon 1 September, Podestá 1986). The person who imposed this sentence on them was the ‘Defender of the poor, minors and incapable’, who was the legal guardian of the Qom. Podestá discussed the contract details with him. According to Pastor, the ‘Defender’ was reluctant to sign the contract which forced him to write to the National Minister of Justice, Osvaldo Magnasco (1864–1920). He replied that there were no ‘legal inconveniences’ to sign the contract. Finally, and according to Podestá, twenty-four Qom were ultimately coerced into signing (Podestá 1986).

According to the owners of the sugar mills, once the Qom left for Buenos Aires, they became aware of Podestá’s intentions to exhibit them in Paris. Immediately they sent a series of telegrams to the Buenos Aires press, which gave wide coverage to the dispute. The local bourgeoisie strongly protested against Podestá’s enterprise, describing it as ‘meat and immoral traffic’ and ‘inhuman business’ (Anon. La Nación 15 Sept. 1899: 5). Far from humanitarianism, this protest was against the cultural heterogeneity that Podestá intended to exhibit in Europe and the legal recognition of the Qom as Argentine citizens.

Similar to the discussions that occurred in several countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, conservative Argentine politicians and intellectuals’ sectors presented local and foreign immigration as a danger against the cultural homogeneity that a broad sector of society conceived as a basic condition of a true nationality (Bertoni 2001; Hobsbawm 2012). At the same time, the Argentinian political and intellectual discourse proclaimed the extinction of Indigenous people as a sign of the country’s civilising progress (Levine and Novoa 2012). Exhibiting them in an international contest would mean contradicting that edict and presenting Argentina as a nation in the making.

The dispute over the legitimacy of the Qom contract reached the National Minister of Justice, Osvaldo Magnasco (1864–1920). He decided that upon their arrival in Buenos Aires the Qom should be temporarily housed in the Asilo Correccional de Mujeres de la orden católica de las hermanas del Buen Pastor in order to resolve their legal situation. The local press stated that this decision had ‘erased the offense shamelessly inferred to the civilization of the country’ (El Tribuno 9 March 1899: 3). Lehmann-Nitsche took advantage of this situation to carry out anthropometric studies and photographs (Figure 2).
The presence of the Qom in Buenos Aires allowed Lehmann-Nitsche to overcome the main difficulties of conducting fieldwork in Formosa: availability of economic, structural and human resources and, fundamentally, travel there. Lehmann-Nitsche’s main objective was to complement the anthropometric and photographic studies carried out by the German physician Paul Ehrenreich (1855–1914) on the indigenous groups of southern and central Brazil in 1880. According to the latter, the racial complexity of the South American indigenous groups, defined by both physical and cultural variability, made it imperative for German scholars to cooperate in a collective project (Ehrenreich 1897).

The observation of Indigenous peoples in urban spaces also imposed limitations on the scholars’ objectives. Podestá had elevated the case to the National Supreme Court, which ordered the release

Figure 2. Qom at the Women’s Correctional Facility (1899). Source: Archivo Histórico del Museo de La Plata

‘Je Profitai du Sejour de Cette Troupe a Buenos Aires’

‘I profited from the presence of this company in Buenos Aires’ (trans. by DB)  
Lehmann-Nitsche 1904: 4
of the Qom and their immediate return to Formosa (Anon 15 September 1899). Lehmann-Nitsche regretted this decision as it considerably limited the time to carry out precise and systematic studies. In spite of this, he went ahead because he did not want to deprive the European scholars of ‘faire des observations sur le vif, sur une tribu des plus intéressantes, même inconnue, de l’intérieur de l’Amérique du Sud’ (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904: 4).

Upon arriving at the Asilo del Buen Pastor, Lehmann-Nitsche was confronted with the material and social limitations imposed by the local context. Only women and children were housed in the asylum, so he was unable to collect data on the men in the group. At the same time, being an institution run by a female religious order, he could not take photographs of naked bodies. In addition, there was a lack of specific anthropometric instruments. All these elements considerably restricted the initial objectives proposed by Lehmann-Nitsche, who stated that this was sufficient reason to discard the research. However, he added, the opportunity to study another of the ‘primitive’ Indigenous people of Argentina should not be missed (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904).

Lehmann-Nitsche carried out the same anthropometric studies and used the same instruments as with the Selk’nam. In this way, he was able to compare the data and include it in the construction of an ethnographic cartography based on physical characteristics. At the same time, it allowed him to compare the results with the research on the indigenous groups of the Gran Chaco carried out in France and Germany. Lehmann-Nitsche pointed out that this reflected the need to move beyond the epistemological and methodological limitations of the research programmes promoted in those countries. The latter were conceived and developed on the basis of the existing differences between European individuals and the inhabitants of the colonies they had in Africa and Asia. According to Lehmann-Nitsche, this limited the practical application in other countries (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904).

As with the Selk’nam, he determined the height and chromatic characteristics of their hair, eyes and skin. Following the recommendations of the French physician Léonce Manouvrier (1850–1927), he established the shape of hands and feet (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904). The photographs were based on the recommendations of the German anatomist Gustav Fritsch (1838–1927), the French Adrien de Mortillet (1853–1931) and Edouard Fourdrignier (1842–1907). Lehmann-Nitsche’s aim was to compile an anthropological atlas. This would facilitate the observational process of body proportions and would
serve as complementary visual evidence for the process of racial ascription of the Indigenous people. Finally, he made reproductions of body tattoos, especially those on the face, in order to determine the origin of this custom and its possible use as an element of intergroup differentiation (Lehmann-Nitsche 1904).

At the beginning of March,10 the Qom’s journey to Buenos Aires came to an end and they were embarked back to Formosa. The local press lauded the fact that an end had been put to the ‘ambition for profit which led to the desire to exploit the unfortunate condition of a group of children of the jungles’ (Anon 9 March 1899: 1). Far from celebrating the freedom of the Qom, the press commemorated the suppression of the individuals whose supposed timelessness attempted against the teleological discourse and the promises of progress made by the national State.

**Materialising the Sound’s Otherness**

In 1900, the German philologist Rudolf Lenz (1863–1938) was carrying out a comparative study of Chilean and Argentine folk music. He did not like the quality of the materials, so he asked Lehmann-Nitsche to send him some Argentinian popular and Argentinean folk songs (Lenz 1900). By that time, the anthropological interest in musical expressions had existed for two decades of accumulated research and experience. This was possible thanks to the emergence of mechanical devices that recorded, preserved and repeated sounds indefinitely and at will. The most relevant was the phonograph of the American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison (1847–1931). After the approval of his patent in 1878, scholars soon incorporated Edison’s invention into their research because of its ability to ‘archive’ time and preserve fugitive sound waves11 (Brady 1999; Edison 1878; Kittler 1999).

In 1890, the American zoologist Jesse Fewkes (1850–1930) systematically recorded the music and dialect of a group of Peskotomuhkati living near his residence in Boston. According to him, the phonograph made it possible to save the oral manifestations of the Peskotomuhkati from the passage of time. At the same time, it gave to folkloric studies a true scientific value thanks to the control it enabled scholars to exercise and the elimination of subjective interpretations (Fewkes 1890).

According to the Austrian musicologist Erich von Hornbostel (1877–1935) the phonograph was a medial device that preserved the sound recordings as ‘faithfully’ and ‘objectively’ as possible. At the
same time, it allowed the repetition of experience in a controlled environment, essential conditions of empiricism and scientific objectivity (Hornbostel 1906: 43). The voices and musical pieces recorded were conceived by scholars as a remnant of the past. Such a remnant could be materialised and stored by the phonograph (Kursell 2008).

The success of Fewkes’ research encouraged other scholars to incorporate the phonograph as another instrument in their comparative musicology research. The main debates centred on the origin and evolution of music. Polyphony and harmony were used as witness elements to establish an evolutionary division between human groups. Oral manifestations were conceived as material remains of the past, which contained in themselves a space isolated from the contemporary world (Ballestero 2016; Barz and Cooley 1997).

The number of recordings led to the emergence of repositories to archive them. One of these was the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv founded in 1900 by Carl Stumpf with the collaboration of von Hornbostel and Otto Abraham (Christensen 2002). Lehmann-Nitsche contacted one of the most active collaborators of the Phonogramm-Archiv, the Austrian physician Felix von Luschan (1854–1924). He had great experience in recording Indigenous people, so he recommended Lehmann-Nitsche the purchase of a common gramophone and also gave him a series of technical recommendations at the moment of recording.

Von Luschan’s recommendations responded to one of the objectives of the Phonogramm-Archiv: to secure a network for the provision of phonographic recordings from various parts of the world (Simon 2000; Wegner 2007). At the time when Lehmann-Nitsche contacted von Luschan, the Phonogramm-Archiv had only one sample from the American South: the recordings of Guarani groups from Brazil made in 1902 by the German anthropologist Paul Träger (1867–1933) (Ballestero 2016).

**Recordings in the Museum of La Plata**

In 1905, a Tehuelche group composed of seven individuals made a brief stop in the city of La Plata. The group returned from the United States, where they had been exhibited at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis the previous year. They were exhibited along with Ainus (Japan), Batwa (Democratic Republic of Congo), Kwakiutls and Nootkas (Canada), Seris (Mexico) and Arapahos, Pawnees, and
Ballestero

Wichitas (United States). For this, the American William John McGee (1853–1912), chief of the department of anthropology that organised the anthropological section, formed a large group of collaborators. In the case of the Tehuelches, his agent was the Argentine Vicente Cane. During the exhibition, they demonstrated their horseback riding and boleadora throwing skills and participated in ‘Olympic Games’ (Ballestero 2016).

Lehmann-Nitsche profited from the group’s presence in La Plata to make portraits, anthropometric measurements and a series of recordings. At that time Lehmann-Nitsche was planning an eventual fieldwork to Patagonia, where he wanted to make recordings of the Indigenous people. One of the main difficulties was the transportation of the phonograph cylinders to the field and their exposure to the particular environmental conditions of that area (Lehmann-Nitsche 1908). As with other recordings made up to 1905, the possibility of making the recordings in urban areas excluded the need to organise the transport, use and maintenance of the instruments in the field. The place chosen by Lehmann-Nitsche was the Museum of La Plata.

The recording sessions took place between January 19 and March 2, 1905. Lehmann-Nitsche worked with Colojo, Casimiro and Bonifacio, the three youngest members of the group. These were the only ones who could speak a little Spanish and knew the recording systems (Figure 3). During their exhibition in St. Louis, they participated in Frank Bruner’s studies concerning auditory abilities in ‘primitive’ groups (Ballestero 2016). This facilitated the work of Lehmann-Nitsche, who had no experience in the recording process. Casimiro and Bonifacio recommended to Lehmann-Nitsche several strategies to obtain good quality recordings. At the time of recording the musical bow Casimiro urged the use of a guitar as a sounding board, obtaining a much higher and clearer tone (Figure 4) (Lehmann-Nitsche 1908).

As we can observe, the data gathering involved the participation of diverse social actors, scientific knowledge being the result of a cooperative social practice. When conducting research in the field, scholars depended on the knowledge, strategies and social connections of the informants/collaborators. These invisible technicians, generally omitted from official publications or reports, played an active and often indispensable role in the generation of scientific knowledge (Shapin 1989).

In the recordings, Lehmann-Nitsche followed the technical and methodological indications of Abraham and von Hornbostel. These
were aimed at unifying the gathering and transcription methodology of the sound materials. They allowed that the collected material, independently of the gatherer, the space and the conditions of the gathering process, were consistent with the parameters used in the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (Abraham and Hornbostel 1909). In this way, Lehmann-Nitsche attached a manuscript in which he transcribed the spoken records and the texts of the songs so that ‘the phonograms could be studied and the phoneticians could decide on their degree of scientific success’ (Lehmann-Nitsche 1908: 928).
On June 10, 1905, Lehmann-Nitsche sent von Luschan the boxes containing the fifty-eight phonograph tubes together with hair samples of the Tehuelches as a present. Von Luschan considered the recordings a meritorious contribution to the study of comparative musicology (von Luschan 1905). The recordings were transcribed and studied by the Swiss Erich Fischer (1887–1977). Both his work and that of Lehmann-Nitsche sought to contribute to the comparative music cartography projects promoted from Berlin. These were presented as an alternative to the theories of degenerationism that postulated the passage from the complex singing of civilised societies to rudimentary forms such as indigenous singing (Ballestero 2016).

Figure 4. “Casimiro”. Source: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut
Concluding Remarks

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lehmann-Nitsche conduct anthropological research on South American indigenous groups of great interest to European scholars. These examples show that fieldwork in the classic sense did not imply a spatial displacement on the scholar’s part. Following Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck, I consider that the field was a space of observation and experimentation constituted by a complex interweaving of specific practices, material technologies, discursive technologies and a specialist capable of instrumentalising these elements (Daston and Lunbeck 2011).

In this context, far from being only physical spaces in which observations are produced, the Exposición Nacional, the Asilo Correccional and the Museo de La Plata were a means to apprehend and transform the natural world, imposing their own geographical and temporal coordinates. In other words, they were anthropological laboratories that allowed Lehmann-Nitsche to separate the Indigenous people from their natural, or home environment in order to be observed continuously in a controlled space. This was possible thanks to the observation methodology, the protocols and the instruments Lehmann-Nitsche used, which transformed the Selk’nam, the Qom and the Tehuelche into study objects.

Beyond their heterogeneous character, the three spaces chosen by Lehmann-Nitsche to conduct fieldwork followed a similar pattern in the representation and systematic construction of cultural otherness. Understood as the timelessness of the exhibited individuals, this otherness was closely linked to the fantasy of the discovery of a ‘pure society’, unaffected by the changes imposed by globalisation. The immobility of time denied the historical specificity of the Selk’nam, the Qom and the Tehuelches, turning them into a plural and uniform being: the Indian / the Indians (Bonfil Batalla 1972). In relation to this, la Exposición Nacional, the Asilo and the Museo de La Plata were places where interrelated spaces of temporal variation were artificially ordered.

The aforementioned uniformity was possible thanks to the systematic use of observational methodology, research protocols and instruments. These elements made it possible to translate the individual and specific characteristics of the Selk’nam, the Qom and the Tehuelche into the empirical language par excellence: mathematics. Measurements, statistical calculations or photographs subsumed the individual in the anonymity of the racial category. At the same time, they allowed the transformation of a three-dimensional object, such as the body, to
a two-dimensional support such as paper, facilitating its transport and storage (Barringer and Flyn 1998; Edwards and Hart 2004).

Acting as an extemporaneous totality, the Indigenous people constituted an enunciative locus from which anthropologists, assumed in their modernity, interpreted their own evolution and placed themselves at the pinnacle of it (Fabian 1983). In this sense, the Indigenous people helped to define the limits of otherness and exoticism. People from the Selk’nam, the Qom and the Tehuelche communities represented and materialised the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, between hither and thither, between the past and the future.

Lehmann-Nitsche recognises the economic, structural and temporal advantages offered by urban spaces in order to carry out research on Indigenous people. In doing so, like other scholars who took advantage of this phenomenon, he recognised that the Indigenous people on exhibition were part of the contemporary world and the urban space. However, in the three investigations analysed in this article, Lehmann-Nitsche stressed the need to conduct research in the field itself. In this way, one of the main imperatives that would cross anthropological practice throughout the twentieth century was manifested: to search for the Indigenous people in their original conditions of existence.

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**Notes**

1. The attraction of Western European society towards the observation of American indigenous groups can be dated back to 1493, when the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) introduced the Catholic Kings with six Taino people. For details see Annex I.
2. The males were between eighteen and twenty-two years old, and the females between sixteen and twenty years old. The children were estimated to be about eight years old, one of them, and the other about six months old (Ballestero 2011).
3. The local press also reported the Selk’nam’s ‘scarce’ brain development through the analysis of the morphological constitution of their foreheads. For the press
and the anthropologist being ‘primitive’ was a totally homogeneous condition, which could be assigned to any group that gathered a certain amount of the elements that composed it.

4. Podestá was an innovative expert in the materialisation of ‘exoticism’. In his adaptation of the novel ‘Juan Moreira’, he requires the play’s producers to recruit mestizos for the representation of fights, dances, and scenes on horseback. At the same time, he requires to purchase objects popularly associated with criollo culture such as ponchos, rebenques, and facones.

5. See for example the ‘Wild West Show’ organised by William Cody (1846–1917), also known as ‘Buffalo Bill’ (https://centerofthewest.org/).

6. According to the National Attorney, Sabiniano Kier (1832–1912), the subjection of Indigenous people to the category of ‘minors and incapable’ responded to their lack of ‘any resources of their own, even the awareness of their rights and the language necessary to learn them and claim them’ (Anon, La Prensa 1 Sept. 1899: 5).

7. The Constitution of 1853 declared that all inhabitants of the Argentine territory were equal before the law. However, the conversion of the Indigenous people into Argentine citizens implied their submission to a legal system aimed at suppressing their cultural identity.

8. One journalist stated that those who didn’t know Argentina might think that the country ‘must have nothing but Indigenous people, because if it had other, more cultured products, it would have presented them as other nations do’ (Anon, La Nación 15 Sept. 1899: 4). Another journalist wondered how it was possible to think of exhibiting in Paris ‘the last remains of an aboriginal race, as a national product, in representation of our culture . . . the savages of the Chaco will appear! And Argentina will parade before the thousands of men who come to the tournament as a savage country’ (Anon, La Prensa 30 Aug. 1899: 5).

9. Founded in 1892, it had a capacity for 250 people and was intended for women and minors, generally the children of the inmates themselves.

10. In the southern hemisphere, like their northern counterparts, fairs and great exhibitions were held mostly in the summer months, between December and February.

11. Edison stated that the American James Trumbull (1821–1897) had asked him for a phonograph to ‘preserve the accents of the Onondagas and Tuscaroras, who are dying out. One old man speaks the language fluently and correctly, and he is afraid that he will die ‘the phonograph will preserve the exact pronunciation’ (Anon, Washington Star 1878: 1).

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**ANNEX I**

**South American Indigenous People Transported to Europe (1493–1654)**

Sources: Prepared by the author

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**ANNEX II**

**Contract between Podestá and the Qom**

1. The Defender of the poor, minors and incapable defender of minors of the Territory of Formosa, delivers to José Podestá, so many indigenous (each one with a name put by the contractors) to make them work in the theatrical representations of his acrobatic company in the country and abroad, paying to the males 15 pesos, to the females 8, and 5 to the boy.

2. They may not be forced to work in jobs that are contrary to hygiene and morality, they will be fed and housed hygienically and clothed.

3. They will be returned to the country at the end of two years.

4. The names were: Antonio Bochar, José Castagnino, Carlos Palmarini, Camilo Giménez, José Caroya, Sofía, Aurelia, Zulema, Maipú, Argentina, Anita, Baldomera, Ester, Eva, Amelia, Maria, Marta, Arminda and Carmen.

Source: *La Prensa* 1899.