

HUGO GARCÍA MANRÍQUEZ

Hugo García Manríquez's *Anti-Humboldt* (Litmus/Editorial Aldus, 2015) is a bilingual engagement with NAFTA, specifically the texts (in both English and Spanish) of the agreement itself. Though ostensibly an erasure project, Garcia Manríquez subtitles his work "A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement/*Una Lectura del Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte*," emphasizing how a conceptual methodology can become a critical hermeneutics, in this case across languages and discourses of capitalist law. Indeed, as he puts it in the English version of his author's notes: "Instead of writing 'like a poet' I am attempting to read like one: creating hollows, pauses, holes, limbos." Erasure thus doesn't only bring to light heretofore hidden resonances within master texts but can also draw attention to those voices, bodies, and histories erased (by being codified into commodities or mere labor-power) from consideration in NAFTA/TLC [TLC= *El Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte*] and its neoliberal project. "Limbo: temporality of a suspended language. Limbs: dislocation of an amputated language." Reading this work in two languages, across the fraught borders of nation, law, and language, problematizes what Manríquez argues is "the codification of its own legibility," undergirded by the political economy that presupposes any such text. *Anti-Humboldt* disassembles and reassembles the codified sense of neoliberal discourse, revealing a poetics and a politics in its interventions.

David Buuck: This is an erasure work, engaging however not a canonical work of literature but a historical document of neoliberal imperialism (which of course as your work demonstrates, partakes in many literary tropes). How did you make your choices, not only given the loaded content (and twenty years of "hindsight") but also the differences between the English and Spanish versions?

Hugo García Manríquez: Usually when I admit I didn't have a plan before working with the document, people become suspicious; this reaction has to do with the fact that a segment of North American poetry has become too dependent on a certain idea of "process," by which they mean, mostly, mathematics. Of course, I understand this need for process, historically, as a reaction to facile *lyricism*, etc. But there is a generation who grew up only on this diet, so they tend to expect poetry with a more or less evident mathematical logic. My "process," if there was one, was to allow my experience growing up in a working class family, and my bi-national belongings, to lead the way working with the NAFTA document.

My idea working on *A-H* was to respond to what seemed fixed politically, and formally, in contemporary Mexican literature, where formal innovation is rare. There is a context for this: despite the rampant poverty of the majority of the population, Mexico has one of the largest systems of cultural and literary grants in Latin America (some say, to secure political allegiances from artists); so there are grants for “young promises,” grants for “established promises.” In this context, “succeeding” means playing that game and limiting to what is formally “acceptable”.

For this project I knew I needed to think about politics and poetics, in a historically significant text, and then apply pressure, question it. I felt it was necessary to assume myself as a historical subject, creating a kind of method of my own that would be informed by the historic events that have marked me—the Zapatista uprising, witnessing the ongoing effects of economic violence that has turned Mexico into a permanent state of undeclared war, war against indigenous groups, against information... In a way, I made use of precisely those elements you are supposed to conceal in order to become a “Mexican writer.” Seeing yourself as a historical subject (figuring out what that might even be) is sometimes all you need in order to work. All of this is of course not a project in, say, the Jackson Mac Low sense, but is one just as valid. In a way we don’t know what process is, and that is exciting.

DB: I found it fascinating how you were able to reveal the way in which not only commodities are commonly understood, but also humans, animals and “nature”—as not only items of trade but also formalized categories of and for law, leading to what you call “the stabilization of the flux of contingency translated into the lexica of the market.” Could you talk a bit about the title of the book & the historical connection you make between Alexander von Humboldt & NAFTA/TLC in regards to this shift from the contingent natural world into the calcified legalize of neoliberalism?

HGM: If you think about it, 18th century thinkers and the industrial revolution were marching hand in hand straight into our present world of environmental disaster and neo-colonial rule, always shaping it, always justifying a particular form of reason. Adorno said something along those lines. In a way, mine is not a terribly new story, but I am hoping the particular angle and the immediate bi-national element of my project will add a new piece to the puzzle of historical continuities.

In the case of my work, I feel I should probably quote other people, like the Peruvian critic, Jose-Ignacio Padilla, who wrote of *A-H*, “If Alexander von

Humboldt represented science, natural history, exploration, taxonomy—that is, the organization of knowledge—*Anti-Humboldt* represents the poetic disorganization of knowledge, a critique of the theory of language-in-capitalism.” I could not say it better.

DB: You also mention in your author’s notes the unsettling recurrence of the phrase “Harmonized System,” which is a financial term used to classify objects into units of exchange, across borders, systems, species. From both page 15s, for example: “Harmonized system means the harmonized commodity” / “Sistema Armonizado significa el Sistema Armonizado”. The phrase has an uncanny resonance in a work of poetry, given its musical meanings, though it seems that what you aim for here is to create dissonance within the document, to undo the homogenization of difference that financial agreements such as NAFTA/TLC require in order to square the world with the market, via language and law. Does this make your intervention something more akin to anti-translation?

HGM: This is a great question, especially if you practice translation. If capital seeks to predetermine everything, my point was to precisely short-circuit that pre-determined language—which to a great extent prevents our cultures from beginning to understand each other. The language of NAFTA is obsessed with establishing what meaning means. And this, of course, has everything to do with what we attempt to do in poetry: What is meaning, and what are the historical and cultural conditions under which it is produced?

DB: You’ve also translated US poets into Spanish, from William Carlos Williams to George Oppen to Charles Bernstein. Could you talk a bit about how bringing US poetry into the Mexican context(s) ‘works’, and/or how your engagement with the US avant-garde tradition (as poet, translator, scholar) affects your own poetics and poetry?

HGM: I translate what I like, and what I think opens ideas about form. More and more, I see translation as a pedagogical intervention that can offer ideas in a rather conservative literary environment. I translate works that insist (and remind us): *the form is open*.

For the most part, I find the theories of translation interesting, though increasingly incomprehensible; for me, sometimes it comes down to a practical matter: *You are either putting works into circulation, or you are not*. When it comes to translations, Mexico depends almost exclusively on what is a fundamentally colonial literary relationship with Spain. Spain floods the Latin American market

with books, which include usually stiff (and incredibly expensive) translations. For me, the key is to never depend on someone else to make available in our language what we want to read.

As for my own poetics, I am sure the influence is there, but I try not to think about it; it can be paralyzing.

DB: When NAFTA/TLC went into effect on Jan 1, 1994, it was seen in the US—at least by those on the left—as the full and final capitulation of Clintonism to neoliberalism and the final death blow to any kind of protectionism for US labor (however outdated that idea may have already become post-Reagan). For those of us on the more radical and internationalist left it also of course marked the first strike of the Zapatistas against both US imperialism and Mexican collaboration, as well as in many ways the first mass experiment in a new form of collective revolutionary struggle. Twenty years later, it's hard to recall how massive these developments would be, even as they have in other ways become embedded in historical amnesia or outright cynicism about the prospects for any kind of anti-capitalist revolution 'from below'. From the Mexican perspective, how is NAFTA now remembered and understood?

HGM: I remember having this argument with a colleague based in Mexico City; she argued that NAFTA had not impacted Mexico whatsoever... In a way, in Mexico your take on NAFTA is absolutely informed by your class position; most writers belong to the upper echelons and spend their time traveling from one international Book Fair to the next (with public funds); for them projects like *A-H* are, I imagine, perplexing. And even when you take the time to explain and talk about financial violence, surplus populations or Neo-colonialism, they dismiss all this as 'talking points' learned in the 'American academy'...

But I think that it is now clear that NAFTA opened the possibility of the radical financial violence we see today (and increasingly in the US, domestically), the total militarization of everyday life, and the disappearance of the notion of the social. And this was one of my main concerns working with *A-H*, to bring the idea of the social to the front, with an eye on formal possibilities.

DB: I sent you the previous questions last year, before the election. How do you feel about *Anti-Humboldt* today?

HGM: Today it's no secret that the US is doing domestically what it has done internationally; so it has reached a relative synchronicity with the rest of the globe. And this doesn't originate only from self-inflicted financial violence, but

also from the responses against it. The ongoing discussions and responses to militarized police, state-sponsored violence or massive cuts to basic social services—especially health and education, for example—resonate strongly with debates that have taken place in the Global South. All of this is interesting to the point that it can be promising.

Hugo García Manríquez lives in Oakland. He is the author of several books and chapbooks published in Mexico and the US. His most recent is the bilingual book, *Anti-Humboldt: A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement*. His work as translator includes William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*; his translation of George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* is forthcoming.