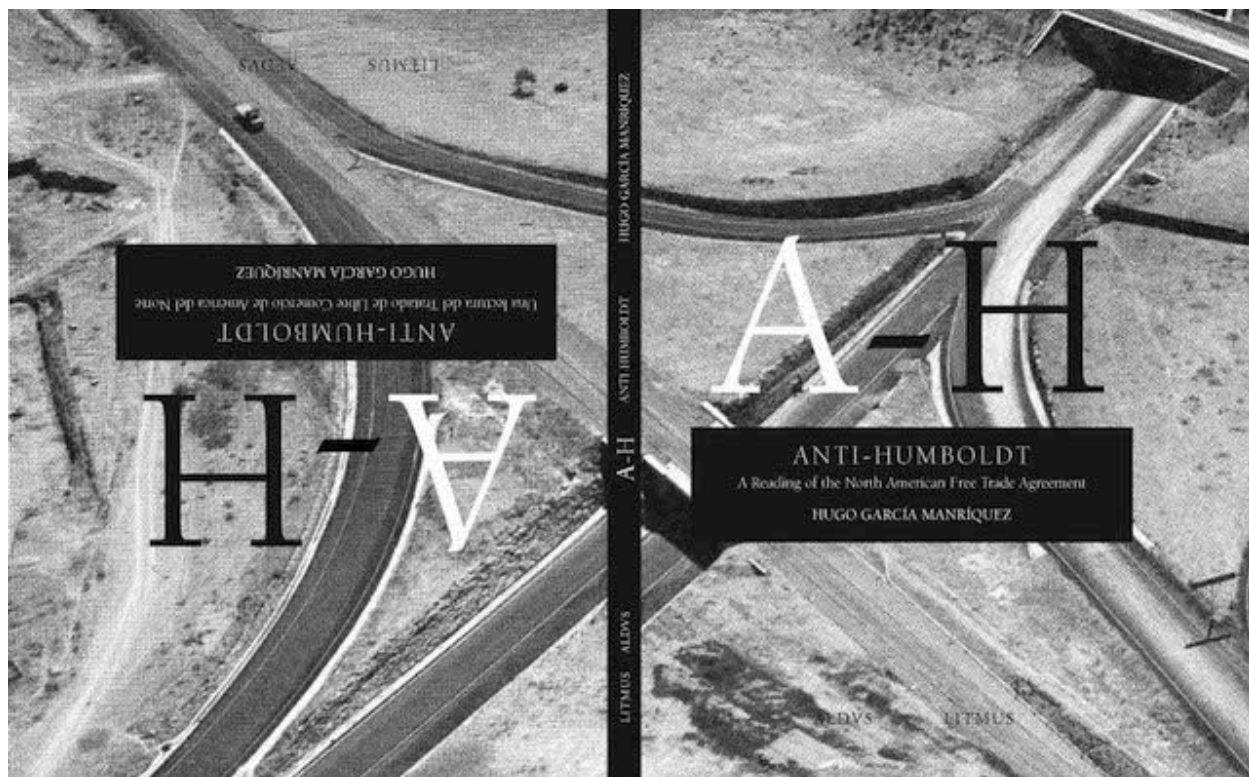


# LITMUS PRESS

*Anti-Humboldt: A Reading of the North American Free Trade Agreement*



**Hugo García Manríquez**

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## **Anti-Humboldt is a bilingual erasure of the North American Free Trade Agreement in Spanish and English**

In 2010, Hugo García Manríquez set out to work through the North American Free Trade Agreement in Spanish and English. The result is a bilingual artifact that interrupts and re-politicizes NAFTA's neoliberal language, becoming a space of transnational encounter that strangely falls on the same continuum as the work of 19th-century naturalist Alexander von Humboldt—a continuum upon which the institutions of Law and Science dream of stabilizing the flux of contingency into the language of the market. No longer univocal

in meaning, the remains in *Anti-Humboldt* resist being situated, making evident the madness of language and rationality: words that—to echo George Oppen—“have run mad / In the subways / And of course the institutions / And the banks.”

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## Praise for *Anti-Humboldt*

Unveiling as he erases, García Manríquez teaches us to find the political in the poetic and the poetic in the political as he carefully reads and shrewdly re-writes one of the most influential documents in the modern life of Mexico and North America altogether: the NAFTA agreement of 1994. A dexterous excavator, García Manríquez produces pauses and hollows, openings and miscreations, in an otherwise finished version of contemporary neoliberalism. His *Anti-Humboldt* interrupts the flow of pre-established practices and discourses of politics, turning my reading and your reading into a veritable collaboration with the political. These are our eyes, discerning the passing of time between black and gray inks; and these are our fingers, pointing at real lives and real deaths—half-emerging and half-concealed—in between lines. Only rarely has Mexican poetry enticed the present with such critical insistence. Only rarely has post-conceptual poetry mattered this much. — **Cristina Rivera Garza**

Within *Anti-Humboldt*, García Manríquez opens a path towards a cruel ecopoetics, a bilingual experimentalism and a new prosody. There’s something merciless in this work: it instantly makes nearly all of Mexican poetry anachronistic. — **Heriberto Yopez**

[T]wenty years after the NAFTA document took effect, Hugo García Manríquez translates, re-creates, and, as I am thinking of it, miscreates the NAFTA agreement through an entwined activity of reading as inscribing... Hugo’s miscreation is a tale of our wickedness—our knot of complicity, passivity, and outrage as both the benefactors and casualties of the document’s stipulations. — **Divya Victor**

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## Lesson Planning — Writing Exercises

- Have students do their own erasures of political/historical documents. Encourage students to select a document relevant to their lives, the present moment, or the class’s area of study. For a short in-class exercise, do a one-page erasure. For a larger assignment, perform erasures on a multi-page document and ask students to write a poetics statement on their erasure. What principles did they follow or what constraints did they create for themselves in choosing what to

redact? What is the intended effect of their erasure? What aspects of the document did their erasure highlight?

- Alternative erasure exercise: Re-erase one page of *Anti-Humboldt*. Discuss how the new erasure creates a new poem with different effects and meanings.
- In his essay “On *Anti-Humboldt*” (pp. 71-76), Hugo García Manríquez explains that erasure was a means of exploring the way that “the current language of international law” was incommensurate to Mexico’s social reality. *Anti-Humboldt* uses erasure to perform a poetic interrogation of “a caesura in the language of law” (p. 72). What other poetic techniques might be applied to the NAFTA text (or other political/historical documents) in order to interrogate the shortfalls and distortions of legal/political language? Some possibilities for other poetic techniques: surrealist image, repetition, collage, hyperbole, metaphor. Try applying a different poetic technique to the document to see what effect it has.
- Brainstorm and then discuss economic policies that affect your students’ lives and communities. Ask students to write about aspects of these policies of which they are critical. Then, ask them to imagine rewriting the policy to better serve the community. This writing can take the form of an essay, a poem, a letter to a local politician, an op ed, etc.

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## Lesson Planning — Discussion Questions

- García Manríquez makes use of a poetic strategy of erasure. How does this strategy work? Can you discern a pattern or logic to what gets erased and what remains? What effect does the erasure have on the original text—for example, in terms of sound, image, meaning?
- García Manríquez chooses to leave the “erased” language of NAFTA just-visible in *Anti-Humboldt* as a ghostly gray. How does this partial visibility/legibility of the erased text affect our reading of the poem? Do we register the gray text as a kind of “background noise”? How does it interrupt or interact with our more active reading?
- Speaking of the erased texts as “ghostly gray,” are there ghosts in *Anti-Humboldt*? Who or what are they? Who or what are they haunting?
- Many contemporary poets have used erasure as a means of rewriting, and sometimes critiquing, a historical document or prior poetic text. García Manríquez mentions the influence of Jen Bervin’s *Nets*, Ronald Johnson’s *Radi Os*, and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* on the composition of *Anti-Humboldt*. If your students have read any of these three books, or other erasure poems, ask them to consider the similarities and differences—for example, in terms of subject matter, the poet’s relationship to the source text, technique, the effects of the erasure, and so on.

- For bilingual classes or students: Compare a passage of the book in its English and Spanish versions. How would you describe the “translation” between languages? How do the passages differ? What different feelings arise from reading the text in Spanish versus English? What does the book design have to say about the relationship of these two languages to each other? Does it affect the way we read the text(s)?
  - What can we glean about the relationship of the US and Canada to Mexico through the text of *Anti-Humboldt*?
  - What is the experience of reading *Anti-Humboldt*? How does it sound? What does it feel like? What images transpire while reading? Are there persons or “characters” in the text? Who are they? Is there a speaker? Describe.
  - *Anti-Humboldt* makes reference through its title to Alexander von Humboldt, a late-18th/early-19th century German explorer and naturalist. What does Humboldt have to do with the late-20th century NAFTA agreement? How does Humboldt (or his legacy) appear in the text? What does it mean to be *Anti-Humboldt*?
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## Reviews

“MISCREANTS & MISCREATIVE WRITING: On Hugo García Manríquez’s *Anti-Humboldt*,” by Divya Victor @ The Poetry Foundation’s Harriet the Blog.

“From legalese into nothingness: A review of Hugo García Manríquez’s ‘*Anti-Humboldt*,’” by Marco Antonio Huerta @ Jacket2

“New books of poetry that include a crucial search are rare,” says Heriberto Yépez in a review translated into English by Guillermo Para at [Venepoetics](#).

Jay Besemer [reviews \*Anti-Humboldt\*](#) @ Galatea Resurrects

[David Buuck interviews Hugo García Manríquez](#) @ Tripwire

“Sobre el *Anti-Humboldt* (o de las palabras),” by Javier Taboada @ Tierra Adentro

“TLC y poesía: el ‘*Anti-Humboldt*,’” by Heriberto Yépez @ Milenio

“Cuando la literatura no deviene mercancía,” by Isaac Magaña Gcanton @ Letras Libres

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## Supplementary Materials

### Related Content

“Translation is willing and willful displacement,” says Jen Hofer in [“Authentic texts’: Translation is trade without commerce”](#) @ Jacket2.

Hugo García Manríquez, [reads from \*Anti-Humboldt\*](#) / [lee fragmentos de su \*Anti-Humboldt\*](#).

[FIELD WORK](#): poems by Hugo García Manríquez @ Open Space.

Text of the [North American Free Trade Act](#)

National Endowment for the Humanities: [“Humboldt in the New World”](#)

Glossary: “Erasure Poetry” [defined](#) at poets.org

[Kenyon Review](#): “[The Weight of What’s Left \[Out\]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on Their Craft](#)”

[Evening Will Come](#): [Erasure Issue](#)

For fun: WAVE Books [Erasures](#)

### Relevant News

[“Under NAFTA, Mexico Suffered, and the United States Felt Its Pain,”](#) in the *New York Times*

[“NAFTA: 20 years of regret for Mexico,”](#) in *The Guardian*

“[T]rade protections preserving small-scale, low-yield agriculture – which for many lies at the heart of Mexican identity – were largely dismantled, sparking an uprising by the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas”: [“NAFTA 20th Anniversary,”](#) in *Latin Times*

[The Economic Policy Institute](#) reports that NAFTA’s failure has cost the United States jobs across the nation

The TPP, or “NAFTA on Steroids,” in [The Nation](#)

“How the Trans-Pacific Partnership Threatens America’s Recent Manufacturing Resurgence,” in [The Atlantic](#)

“Trump Just Signed the U.S.M.C.A. Here’s What’s in the New NAFTA,” in [The New York Times](#)

“The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry” in [The New Republic](#)

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## Contributor Bio — Hugo García Manríquez

Hugo García Manríquez is the author of the chapbooks *Two Poems* and *Painting is Finite*, and two books in Spanish: *No oscuro todavía* and *Los materiales*. Recent work has appeared in *Dreamboat*, *Dusie*, *Spiral Orb*, *Tierra Adentro*, the collective chapbook *Field Work*, and in the collection of essays *Escribir Poesía en México*. His work as a translator includes William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, published in Mexico in 2009, and, in 2014, *Mecha de Enebro*, his translation of *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld* by Clayton Eshleman. He has also translated essays and poems by Charles Bernstein, George Oppen and Myung Mi Kim. Hugo lives in Oakland, California.