

Technological Expropriation in Latin American Poetry: A Historical Perspective

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I will analyze the relationship between poetic language and the different technologies of communication developed since the beginning of the 20th century, in the Latin American context. I will depart from the very first technological innovations of phonographic recordings and photography, all the way to the current forms of networked communication brought by Internet. I understand poetry as a frontier for language experimentation, in which changes in communication technology are incorporated into the experimental practice. Changes in poetry are not only formal, but they also signal changes in the economy of cultural exchange.

According to Marshall McLuhan, printed books had a role in the step from a feudal economy into a capitalist economy, as “printed books” —said McLuhan— “themselves the first uniform, repeatable, and mass-produced items in the world, provided endless paradigms of uniform commodity culture for sixteenth and succeeding centuries” (163). If books, as commodities, provided the first hints of a way out from the feudal society, the current changes in our ways of communication could be seen in a similar fashion, as a sign of emerging alternative economies. I am interested in the possibilities that different media open for post-capitalist forms of accumulation and exchange, a break-away with market logics made possible by an economy of squandering. In this paper, I analyze the technological incorporation carried by Uruguayans Roberto de las Carreras in 1905 and Luis Bravo in 1998, who experimented with technical novelties in their respective times. Afterwards, I analyze some phenomena of creation of alternative networks of distribution, outside the market of literary circulation, such as Brazilian Marginalismo and the current experiment of collective anthology *Elective Affinities*. In all those cases, I highlight how technical

means serve the quest not only of expressive forms, but also of economic alternatives for distribution and exchange. In all them, we witness a revolution of the book format allowed by new technologies. The comparison will also allow to consider the issue of the relationship between media and literature from a historical perspective.

By 1900, the awareness of the new technological conditions played an important role in *Modernista* literature, where we could easily find both naysayers and enthusiasts of technology. Among the former we could signal José Enrique Rodó, worried by the chance that a new technological society could undermine the spiritual identity of Latin America, symbolized by Ariel, by contrast with a more materialist and technical society, that he identified with Caliban in his classic essay on the relationship between Latin America and the United States. But among the integrated, the anti-rodosian¹ Julio Herrera y Reissig and Roberto de las Carreras were highly interested in bringing new technologies into their own creations. For instance, in the debate about the originality of Herrera y Reissig's poetry triggered by the prologue by Venezuelan critic Rufino Blanco Fombona to the French edition of Herrera's poetry (Paris, 1914), where Blanco Fombona accused Leopoldo Lugones of plagiarizing the Uruguayan poet, Horacio Quiroga told, in response to the accusation, that Herrera y Reissig had listened to Lugones' poetry beforehand, recorded in a wax cylinder that Quiroga himself had brought to Montevideo in one of his trips to Buenos Aires. This happened by 1900, before Quiroga definitely established in Argentina. Blanco Fombona appreciated the advantages of technology, that allowed for piracy, the best service that could be done to a *Modernista* poet in order to go beyond a narrow circle of readers.

Roberto de las Carreras expresses interest in innovating the book format in his commentary of *Pedras preciosas* written by the Brazilian consul in Uruguay Luiz Guimarães, and published in Montevideo in 1904, by printer Barreiro y Ramos. Roberto de las Carreras dedicates one chapter of

his *Parisianas*, a series of commentaries about some newly released books, where he describes the novelty that this publication represented for the local literary field. The book represents, for Roberto de las Carreras, the recreation of Paris in Uruguayan soil. It belongs to a Parisian store window, where books could be seen among waves of red velvet, and, according to De las Carreras, it looks like a jewel. Guimarães' book-object brings together a variety of plastic sensations, visual in the illustrations that populate its pages, tactile in the different textures provided by the different kinds of paper used in its binding. It was also the result of the collaboration of different artists: the Italian painter Scarzolo Travieso, who illustrated the book, and the musician Alberto Nepomuceno, who composed the music for the poems, and whose scores appear at the end of the book.

One year later, De las Carreras will publish an erotic book with similar features, that also incorporates photography into the design. In *Psalmos a Venus Cavalieri* the author keeps developing the topics of free love and eroticism that made him notorious in Montevideo. In some of his previous books, *Sueño de Oriente* and *Amor libre: Interviews voluptuosos con Roberto de las Carreras*, in which the author promoted breaking away with the bourgeois institution of marriage in order to become collective lovers in a future anarchist society, he had already shown a careful elaboration of the book's graphic design. *Amor libre* was printed by the publisher of the anarchist newspaper *La rebelión*, where De las Carreras wrote promoting his ideas on sexuality, and discussed the theories of free love with fellow anarchists in Uruguay and abroad. He took advantage of anarchists' know how in graphic design, that according to Lily Litvak, was instrumental in the technical virtuosity displayed in anarchist publications:

It is noteworthy the typographical experimentation carried by anarchist newspapers, possibly as a reaction against the uniform disposition sometimes associated to conservative publications. In general, anarchist newspapers were well printed. We must remember that

frequently editors were drafted among typographers, the aristocracy of the workers' movement (Litvak 269).

Roberto de las Carreras explained to his friend in La Plata (Argentina) Edmundo Montaigne his project for a new kind of book in a series of letters. The book is an offering to the Italian opera singer Lina Cavalieri. Initially, the author seeks a printer abroad, convinced that there are no local conditions in Uruguay for such a book, where graphic design was as relevant as the poem itself. This derived from the fact that De las Carreras most frequent editor, Dornaleche y Reyes, didn't want to publish an expensive book without the guaranties that the expenses would be covered. The book planned was an expensive one, that required special materials, photographs and the buying of rare typesets. However, the book could be published in Montevideo, not by Dornaleche but by Barreiro y Ramos, the same editor that had published Guimarães' book. What seemed impossible to Roberto de las Carreras by 1903, became possible by the importation of new printing materials. In a later letter to his friend in La Plata, he says:

I carry in Montevideo a typographic miracle. I would have never believe it possible in the city of Saint Phillip. This is a marvel almost as puzzling as Death. Try to figure out, that is, try to conceive with Dantean efforts of imaginations, the following: Barreiro, dean of our booksellers and printers, brought from Paris *la fine fleur* of artistic sheets and typesets of its kind. I see it and do not believe it. It will be a book printed in gold! . . . on a dark red paper of a fader archaic elegance. It must be said to this regard that there is no elegance without archaism (De las Carreras, *Carta a Edmundo Montaigne*).

Psalm a Venus Cavalieri was an experiment in graphic design, printed in thick hand-made paper of a dark red color, with *Art-Nouveau* capitals printed in gold, a special typeset inspired by old Elzevir printing, bound in leather and closed with satin tapes. The book would finally include a

series of pictures of the Italian singer Lina Cavalieri to which the book is consecrated. Written in poetic prose, the author experimented also with the proposal of free verse that Santos Chocano was promoting from Peru, in a programmatic text that appeared in the pages of *La Revista*, the poetry magazine published by his friend Herrera y Reissig. The book was not meant to be sold, but rather to be given as a gift to the Italian singer. In his letters, the author expresses his wish of printing only one book at least, to send it as a present. Roberto de las Carreras was aware of the novelty the book meant in Uruguayan literature, and probably in Hispanic letters. However, he stresses in his letter to Montaigne that the display of typographical virtuosity and the incorporation of photographs into the book (a relatively recent technique in graphic design by 1905) were meant to reproduce an archaic object, that would bring back literature to its Greek origins.

Almost a century after, in 1998, Luis Bravo made a similar claim when he published his CD rom *Árbol veloZ*, also an experiment in incorporation of new technologies into Uruguayan literature. Bravo belonged to the group UNO, that published poetry books in the 80s with a graphic conception highly influenced by Brazilian *Concretismo* and later *Marginalismo*, that is also present in *Árbol veloZ*. But the blending of avant-garde techniques in this work aims at the recreation of an archaic form of art:

Poetry since its origins (if we go back to the Greek *epos* or the cosmogony hymns of the ancient Oriental and Occidental civilizations) has been designed as Chant; a particular way of blending the sound and image of words created to be recited accompanied by musical instruments like the lire (an element that drove to name the genre as Lyric). The Renaissance definition of the *Lire de braccio*, evokes a string instrument of the XV and XVI century “used for polyphonic improvisations”. Such definition is specially adequate to be rendered into this work of imbrication between verbal and musical textures that make the foundation

of “Swift Tree” (Bravo, “Intro”).

As paradoxical as it may seem, this interest in recasting the ancestral practice of poetry in the new reality is common to both writers. In her analysis of this work, María Rosa Olivera-Williams appeals to the notion of *remediation*, coined by Bolter and Grusin, showing how old media is refashioned by the use of new medium. Luis Bravo’s utopian conception for a new book resembles in many aspects De las Carreras project: a collective work, in which many artists take part (hence the signature in the CD: “Luis Bravo + 20 artistas uruguayos”) and the wish that “the synesthetic motivation, the hunger for images, and the diversity of rhythms of the receptor or listener at this end of the century —and we are positive of the XXI century as well— obtains here the possibility to connect with the ancestral poetical art” (Luis Bravo, Intro).

The material difficulties were also similar in both projects, which depended upon material conditions that were not locally available. Luis Bravo was less lucky than Roberto de las Carreras: while the *Modernista* author was finally able to print his “milagro de la tipografía” in Montevideo, *Árbol veloZ* had to be manufactured in Canada, because there was no CD manufacturer in Uruguay back then. Created in Macromedia Director (now Adobe’s) the work consisted in a binary for Windows (.exe) made with an early version of Flash, very popular among video-game designers, to which, as Jill Kuhnheim notes, the navigation system of the CD rom resembles. When Luis Bravo imported the CD roms from Canada, they were held at the facilities of the Uruguayan custom authorities because he had to pay copyright fees —for a work that he himself had created!

While in their analysis both Jill Kuhnheim and María Rosa Olivera-Williams point at the great attachment that *Árbol veloZ* still has to the book economy, I think we can better understand both Luis Bravo’s book and Roberto de las Carreras’ *Psalmos* . . . as an attempt to recreate pre-capitalist economic conditions, expressed in the desires of both authors to reenact archaic forms

of poetic practice by means of technology. Rather than a market economy, their economies seem closer to one of squandering, a purposeful waste of resources where the final cost highly surpasses the potential exchange value of the work of art. Borrowing the notion from Bataille, Charles Bernstein applies it to the logic of video-games, that permeates the conception of *Arbol veloZ*:

An economy of scarcity suggests a goal-oriented behavior: the desire for accumulation; this is what Georges Bataille has dubbed a “restricted” economy, in contrast to an unrestricted or “general” economy, which involves exchange or loss or waste or discharge. The drive to accumulate capital and commodities is the classic sign of a restricted economy. [...] While the dominant formats and genres of video games seem to involve a restricted economy, the social context of the games seems to suggest features of an unrestricted economy. For while the games often mime the purposive behavior of accumulation/acquisition, they are played out in a context that stigmatizes them as wastes of time, purposeless, idle, even degenerate (Bernstein 131).

Luis Bravo’s work has much in common with video games not only by its appearance and navigation system, but also by the tools used to create it. Moreover, it is in itself an attempt to overcome the limitations of the exchange regimes that the book culture carried. Kuhnheim points at the similarities between *Modernista* resistance to market incorporation and the commodification of art, and the contemporary experimentation with digital media:

Just as the *modernistas* respond to the dominant values, assumptions, and discourses of the turn of the last century and positioned art as an alternative to these, this artists take up elements from mid-twenty century *concretismo* and *vanguardismo* and combine them with influences from the late-twentieth-century market economy and digitalized world to give us new ways to imagining art’s role in the present (Kuhnheim 167).

According to Kuhnheim, these poetic practices can be read as an alternative “to the mercantilization of image and word through electronic commerce” (ibíd). But as acts of cultural resistance, these poetic experiments meant also an attempt to overcome the technological divide. Although María Rosa Olivera-Williams argues that “the geographic division between First World/Third World or North/South do not seem to play an important role because most of the continent is electronically connected and it has access to the rest of the world” (349), in the works analyzed here, the awareness of the differences in access to technology played a role in the conception and the making of both *Psalmos a Venus Cavalieri* and *Árbol veloZ*. One century ago, the technological divide had to do with the appropriation of graphic and printing techniques, today it seems to have to do with infrastructures to increase bandwidth, hardware manufacture (back in 1998, CD manufacture, for instance) or domain creation and registration. Another issue that aroused with the publication of *Árbol veloZ* had to do with outdated legal frameworks to respond to a new media reality, that ended up in the retention operated by custom authorities.

Technology itself offered ways to overcome these limitations. As I mentioned before, one of the antecedents of Luis Bravo’s experiment were the Brazilian movements *Concretismo* and *Marginalismo*. *Concretistas* had a strong tradition of experimenting with visual poetry, and were among the first to take advantage of the basic animations made possible by the layered gif image format. On the other hand, by the end of the seventies *Marginalistas* took advantage of technologies that today may seem obsolete, such as the mimeograph or the photocopy, but that in their time provided with an advantage for the distribution of poetic discourse, for the bypassing of editorial constraints during Brazilian dictatorship, and also provided an opportunity for the collective creation of poetic works. The aspiration for a collective subject of poetic discourse is common to these projects: in the cases analyzed, the multiplicity of media formats required the participation of

several artists. In the case of Brazilian *Marginalismo*, the ephemeral magazines were published by a collective, that composed in several cases in “four hands”, conceived as a big poem (in Portuguese, *poemão*) that interrupted the institutionalized practices of the literary field. According to Débora Racy Soares,

There are many intrinsic senses to the idea of *poemão* that go from the collective production of books, through poetry series, to the writing in four hands. However, it is necessary to understand that the *poemão* by Cacaso aspires at being a voice that belongs to everyone and that, as result, do not belong to anyone in particular. In that sense, the *poemão* written by the so called “marginal” generation of the seventies, is a very specific response to its time, and signals the urgency of what we call the “avoidance of poetic authorship” (Racy Soares 16, my translation).

The *Marginalista* practice sought to give away their creation, and framed themselves in the economy of gift that Bataille proposed, by taking advantage of the new techniques of copy and distribution. In a way, they recast their communication in an authentic culture of piracy, similar to the one carried by anarchist publisher at the turn of the century, with which Roberto de las Carreras worked closely.

Internet took these alternative exchanges to a new level. The example I wish to analyze is the initiative of the series of blogs named after Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities*. In them it can be witnessed a new approach to the anthology, one that takes advantages of the possibilities of the network in order put together communities of poets. The idea started with the first collective blog in Argentina, following the model of the art magazine *Ramona*, where the artists published in one issue acted as curators for the next one. In the case of *Elective Affinities*, the community around these blogs is created by peer recognition, although without the size limits of a printed publication.

First the appearance of the first blog in Argentina, the experience has moved to other countries. Here in the United States, it can be maintained that it is a Latin American incorporation, since its creator was the Chilean poet Carlos Soto Román, who is still behind the project. In those projects, the logic of the anthology is replaced by a collective selection, which allows the site to grow as a rhizome.

These cultural practices establish an experimental space in a textual scale of the gift economy common to the practices here analyzed. The question that can be asked is whether these technological transformations will have the impact that the printing press had at the end of the 15th century, as McLuhan suggested. The laboratory that poetic language represents can provide some answers, because it allows to identify the concrete uses given to new media: the examples here analyzed tell that besides the formal experimentation, new media has been used to circumvent the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, in proposing new ways of exchange and networking.

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