

## THE *SRPR* INTERVIEW: EDGAR GARCIA

**Jose-Luis Moctezuma:** Let's start with the *Cantares Mexicanos*. How can you introduce this work to those who aren't familiar with it? And what's the story behind how you decided to create a new translation of this work?

**Edgar Garcia:** I'd just finished a collection of essays on the *Popol Vuh*, the K'iche' Maya story of creation, which was put to paper in 1702, which in turn is likely based on a now lost or inaccessible version from the 1550s, which itself is but one of many representations of the stories of the *Popol Vuh* found in the art of Mesoamerica going back to at least the first century. But in thinking about the colonial context of that now-lost version from the 1550s, in a time when some people might have been old enough to remember a time before the Castilians while still other people were being born in a world already encompassed by colonial crisis—let alone the explicitly colonially situated version from 1702—I came to the *Cantares*, which is a collection of songs from mid-sixteenth century Central Mexico in a time when colonial transplantation was already in full force (in so many formal and informal ways), meaning that while they are a collection of Nahuatl language songs, they also look back or enact their memory and maybe even sometimes invent the songs of a previous or precolonial time. In looking back to that previous time, what I find compelling is that we don't get a romanticized, predictable, quasi-racist vision of a happy homogeneity of Indigenous history and culture; rather, what we get is what we would find in any advanced, cosmopolitan, multicultural, and multiethnic society the world over, which is conflict, strategic alliance, contradiction, crisis, and also world-making. And that was the kind of world I encountered that motivated me to start to translate the songs. And what inspired me to translate them in the way that I do is that all the translations out there I found to be somewhat lacking in a recognizable musical quality, when these were songs, they were courtly music. So, the style of translation intends to bring out that music of contradiction.

**JLM:** You touched on a lot of things I wanted to cover. I know there are previous translations by Miguel León-Portilla and John Bierhorst. And your tonal approach is different from theirs, which you've described to me as "Tudor," that is, as something contemporaneous in English with the time that these songs were compiled in the sixteenth century. This prompts a point of comparison with Pound's attraction to Golding, to the musicality of the sixteenth-century translations of Ovid, sometimes more than to Ovid himself, as a way of creating phrase in translation.

**EG:** Great question. And I think there are two questions there. One is about the extant translations and the other is about my translation. I'll start with the extant translations. Although I've learned most everything that I know about these songs from León-Portilla and Bierhorst, from these titanic scholars of Mesoamerican culture, they're not entirely poets. So, their translations, while excellent in laying out the content and context, miss something of the form (the historical form and the formal niceties amongst the various poets and singers of the songs). What I was trying to get at was an approximation, a formal equivalence, of the music of these songs. What do I mean when I say I was going for a Tudor sound? I think that translation is always a mirror. There's nothing like a perfect or definitive translation. Anyone who says they've accomplished such a thing is shitting in your mouth and calling it a sundae because there is no such thing; there are only so many mirrors and mirrors facing other mirrors. And for me, being the person that I am, growing up in the way that I did—a child of Central American immigrants who spoke Spanish and English as first languages but who lived at a palpable remove from my family history and lands, coming into cultural and historical consciousness in the potent contradiction of living an intellectual life in English—when I think of the sound of the mid-sixteenth century, I happen to think of a Tudor sound. That's the baroque mirror that I am, facing the troubled mirrors of these songs, also caught in colonial contradiction, if anything translating myself into them rather than them into me. And just as you have in the English of that time an emerging sense of linguistic loss or endangerment amidst overwhelming cultural heterogeneity, you have a comparable thing in the *Cantares*, that is, new worlds being learned about in all directions. That produces this pullback into

an anxious music of one's own language. Historical style. There's so much anxiety in the poetic rhythm and rhyme of the nascently global sixteenth century.

**JLM:** I know the symbol of the mirror was a key concept for the period, so I want to also bring in the other mirror here, the Caravaggio work, which is a different book but which seems to, perhaps darkly, mirror some of the intellectual concerns of your *Cantares*. Of the many things you mention, court astrologer and magician John Dee stood out to me for his own divinatory mirror, which was an obsidian mirror from Mesoamerica. I'm interested in the similitudes of how you're thinking about the baroque in the Caravaggio book and what you're saying now about the *Cantares*. As a friend and longtime reader of your work, I'm thinking about this similitude in terms of what you've written about as an *inamic* pairing in *Skins of Columbus* and *Signs of the Americas*, that conceptual doubling of the kind found in Mesoamerican literary and philosophical works. How does this parallelism feature in the relation between your work on Caravaggio and the baroque and your work on the *Cantares*?

**EG:** How the two works are mutually animating? I think that I have to answer it in different terms because the mirrors of my earlier work haven't left my mind yet. It's not just the case that the *Cantares* and Caravaggio work are facing each other. In a way, the felt inadequacies of *Skins of Columbus* served to animate and fill out *Signs of the Americas*; and the felt inadequacies of perhaps being too removed from my object of inquiry in *Signs of the Americas* served to animate and fill out *Emergency*; and the felt inadequacies of *Emergency*—where, yes, I was more immersed in the object, looking outward from it, but it was not exactly poetry—came to animate and fill out the work of the *Cantares*; and that came to configure the work on Caravaggio. And how that last move is happening, I don't know that I know yet because they're not finished works yet. But what I think is happening has to do with the ideas of the Counter-Reformation, which were extremely powerful in this time, and which seem to me to have preceded Luther, Calvinism, and the Reformation, insofar as the epistemic anxiety of the Counter-Reformation is as easily triggered by the encounter with the Americas as by an encounter with white resistant others in Northern Europe. A lot of the sensibilities of the Counter-Reformation are already there at

the moment of encounter in the Americas, forcing me to ask then what is the relation between the baroque (that is, the quasi-political and quasi-aesthetic modality of the Counter-Reformation) and indigeneity; and how is the colonial production of indigeneity as such (insofar as no Indigenous person in this time would have called themselves that) also already a product of the baroque, of the radical epistemic anxiety of the first encounter with new worlds. We're coming around then to *Skins of Columbus*, about which some people have asked me, why would you write this? Why would you put your dreaming mind in the sociocultural landscape of Christopher Columbus, in all its toxicity and violence? Because you don't make poetry by avoiding the poison. And the poison at hand in this newest work is the poison of the baroque. Caravaggio is no hero. He was an extremely violent man. And what fascinates me is his violence and its quasi-aesthetic, quasi-political relation to theories of sovereignty, especially states of exception, implicitly and explicitly claimed by the conquistadors in the Americas. Caravaggio is also just a devastatingly phenomenal painter; a painter who, Poussin said, came to destroy painting.

**JLM:** One of my favorite parts of the Caravaggio work is on tenebrism. I'm just going to quote here something that relates to this idea of newer works as extensions, encounters, or reversals of earlier works: "If tenebrism sets a template by which the Americas can see its political and aesthetic specificity, and if such conditions as those which make Matamoros into Mataindios and then Mataespañoles in turn make tenebrism more self-aware, its necessary mirror, then the artist who writes such words as follow must have seen herself clearly in just that mirror: 'What is it to be Mexican? Modern, yet pre-Columbian; young, yet old; anti-Catholic, yet Catholic; Western, yet New World; developing, yet underdeveloped; independent, yet colonized; mestizo, yet neither Spanish nor Indian.'" And this is in relation to an interesting comparison you make of Caravaggio to Frida Kahlo, who, you say, "is Caravaggio's great legatee in the Americas.... Kahlo is a student of Caravaggio; Diego Rivera a student of Rembrandt." I see an interesting cleavage between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Rembrandt, who is the great painter from a Reformation standpoint, whereas Caravaggio is working from a Counter-Reformation standpoint, from an explicitly Catholic

worldview. How does this comparison help you to reframe the discussion around Caravaggio with respect to the notion of the baroque and to the conquest of the Americas?

**EG:** With your question you make me realize that tenebrism is a theory of history—nonsynthesizing history—not led by spirit into further contradictions that then get resolved or sublimated, leading to new contradictions, but rather led by contradictions that stay in a configuration of repetition. And to me that is what a baroque theory of history in the Americas is, a sense of not moving forward, of repeating with a difference but just repeating, and associated with that a kind of immobility where these transtemporal comparisons between Kahlo and Caravaggio make sense to me as a form of history in the Americas. That is, I don't think, in this work, as Rembrandt thought that history progresses by way of so many *protesting* pieties or Protestant positions (the smoky light of spirit in his style). Rather, I think, as did Caravaggio, that history is in a standstill and it's this dramatic of dynamic oppositions (tenebrism) that gives the paintings their sense of life (the sharp light of bodies interfering with other bodies to give rise to his style of shadow work). Santiago Matamoros was the moniker given to the apostle St. James when, per Castilian lore, he arrived to help them drive out the Moors (Matamoros means Moor-killer); these same Castilians saw him again (Cortez even reported seeing him) in the Americas, so they renamed him Mataindios (Indian Killer); later, when he is reappropriated by revolutionary armies in the nineteenth century he becomes, surprisingly, Mataespañoles (Spanish killer); and then of course he is also known as an avatar of the Haitian orisha of metal and combat, of revolutionary force, Ogou Feray. These are configurations of repetition as a model of historical opposition and social contradiction. tenebrism. Kahlo picks up on it. Rivera, in his Marxist telos, not so much. It's also reflected in the poetic form of the *Cantares*—parallelism, a style of nonsynthesizing dialectic or oppositions—the touchstone poetic form of Mesoamerica.

**JLM:** You bring this up in the book, the difference between spirit or geist and shadow or ombra. Let me quote again: "How different Hegel's account of the interactive dynamic between the personal mind and the world's unfolding self-awareness would be if it were a phenomenology of *ombra*, rather than *geist*.... Caravaggio provokes a

viewer in that notion: the body itself is a light source in his works—perhaps not directly as you see in medieval painting, but interactively, in relation to other bodies. *Ombra* is the relation of light to other bodies, other light sources, that unfold by way of the dynamics of luminism.” Why *ombra* instead of *geist*? I know you’ve sort of answered that; but maybe could you say more about *ombra* as a key term for this work.

**EG:** Bodies in a room. You can’t make shadows without bodies in a room. It’s a sense of history that is based on the relation of bodies in a room, bodies in space, to other bodies, in such a way that does feel repetitious but that to me is what the baroque is, which is different from *geist*, which is a kind of unknowable and abstract spirit, pulling bodies into self-realization, alien from Caravaggio and the history of the Americas as I’ve received them in the totality of their violence, devastation, creativity, and ongoing world-creation.

**JLM:** Speaking of bodies and shadows, I want to go back to your sense of the authorlessness or multi-authoredness of both the *Popol Vuh* and the *Cantares*, which as you point out were constructed in moments of crisis and historical emergency. You write that “the *Cantares* were understood in this spectrum of liability. Those who helped to circulate them, singers and the patrons of singers, could be imprisoned or killed for promulgating the wrong gods and wrong magic.” Eventually Bierhorst called them “ghost songs.” In thinking about this spectrum of liability, in thinking about the *Cantares* as “ghost songs,” and also in thinking about the *Popol Vuh* as being written in a time of deep crisis, what is the prevailing ambition of your version of the *Cantares* in relation to your understanding of your ancestors? I know that your sense of the ancestral—the debt, gratitude, or obligation to the ancestors—is part of the engine that is driving the way that you’re approaching the *Cantares*.

**EG:** Bierhorst’s description of the *Cantares* as “ghost songs” is extremely controversial. It was the thing for which he was most criticized on the publication of his translations because in his commentary on the translations, he used this term “ghost songs” which refers to a nineteenth-century North American phenomenon of messianic, partially Christianized (but in very complicated ways) world renewal, wherein the idea was that the ghosts of the ancestors would come back

to eliminate the whites and redeem and reestablish the old Indian communities and lifeways of pre-contact times. Bierhorst sees some of that in the Mesoamerican, Nahuatl-language *Cantares*, and he was severely criticized for de-territorializing “ghost song” qua “ghost song,” from its North American context and putting it into a Mesoamerican context. Another scholar recently emailed me to ask if Mesoamerican peoples even believed in ghosts. And it’s really hard to say, because even in the *Popol Vuh* when you go down into the Underworld, there are no dead people there. There are Lords of the Underworld and demigods and bat houses and whatnot but it’s not a hell; similarly, there are multiple kinds of afterlives in the *Popol Vuh*, all happening at the same time. There are afterlives of reincarnation, of prophecy, of metempsychosis, of seasonal transformation, but no ghosts. So, calling it a “ghost song” was rather inaccurate and hence controversial, as he was told. But why I like it—and it’s not to subscribe to the idea that these were “ghost songs” qua “ghost songs”—is that it calls to mind the fact that just like the “ghost song” tradition of North America was a direct response to colonial power, by Indigenous revitalization already implicated in colonial power and governance, that’s what the *Cantares* are. Even without ghosts, even if we don’t say that these speaking voices in the songs are the ghosts or revenants of Axayacotl or whomever, the structure of the poems as a response of Indigenous revitalization amidst colonial catastrophe to me feels comparable. That’s how I think about them as being related without having to bring in the question of ghosts. How do I relate to that? I think that sometimes projects call on you without you knowing why. Voices, contexts, histories, and legacies call on you without you knowing why. And that’s how I’ve been called to this work. That’s how I’ve felt challenged in it but enabled insofar as, if I can make anybody think more carefully about these songs—barring the idea that my translations are in any way, shape, or form going to be authoritative—if I can just make people know the intellectual vibrancy and historical dynamism of these songs, then that’s it, I’ve done what I’ve been called to do. And that’s maybe what ghosts are: what are the things that call on you, that won’t let you go until you’ve given them their chance to speak?

**JLM:** You write here in the *Cantares* that these “were like ghosts uprooted waiting to be planted again.” This is why it felt that you were

drawing on the tradition of the “ghost song,” which, even if it wasn’t the most accurate term, is a useful term in thinking about the ancestors and why you’re called upon to attend to and translate them.

**EG:** It’s a mode.

**JLM:** It’s a mode, yes. I like that. One final question. Let’s talk about Lévi-Strauss. I love that the *Cantares* begins with a dream you have, which sets the tone and spirit for the whole work. It’s a fascinating dream you have about Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which you are a suicide prevention specialist in ancient Mesoamerica. There’s some realism here because there are no phone networks, and your work mainly consists of organizing and attending gatherings of people where you hear and counsel them on their thoughts, dreams, and worries. This feels oddly real and accurate to me. Somehow you encounter Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, and you write about how he came across as someone who dreaded and loathed doing the field work in the Amazon that would be so critical for him, and how even the idea of leaving his hotel room was onerous for him.

**EG:** That’s all pretty accurate! He hated field work. His *Tristes Tropiques* starts, “I hate traveling and travelers.”

**JLM:** That’s true! How could I forget that! [Laughter.] But you basically end on an insight into Lévi-Strauss that feels like a kind of mantra: “so human, all too human.” I think of course of Nietzsche in relation to that, but here it seems to mark Lévi-Strauss as a kind of ghost, let’s say, within this work. How is he haunting or lurking in this work?

**EG:** I teach a PhD seminar, sometimes, called “Anthropological Poetics.” The conceptual nugget of that class emerges from an observation that so much of twentieth-century theory—and let’s just define theory very roughly as consciousness of social contradiction, Adornean—comes out of the discipline of anthropology. Why is it that so much of theory emerges out of structuralist and post-structuralist frameworks? I think it’s because anthropology has as part of its disciplinary formation identification of social contradiction—being out there and contradicted by something that is radically different from what you know—for better or worse, that is, taking into account all the disciplinary problems of anthropology. Lévi-Strauss becomes for



me in that framework a nodal subject for anthropology. And if I had to pick one of the kinds of anthropologists that I might be, I'd pick that one, structuralist, but never without the caveat that Indigenous studies would have to come first. So, I think that what was happening in those dreams that open the book—and, as a sidenote, on strictly spiritual grounds, I would never invent a dream for my books, these are my actual dreams—is that I was producing the orientation of Indigenous studies as means by which to arrive to twentieth-century theory with its avatar in structuralism as a kind of weird healer, absorbing him (Lévi-Strauss) as yet another subject in need of suicide prevention by way of the knowledge and cultural poetics of the Americas. And he needs it from his object of inquiry, which he himself is producing in a way. And, as I've said, I'm a part of that production. He needs me and, therefore, I'm going to give him the rough but thoughtful treatment that is necessary to habilitate the nonsynthesizing dialectic of structuralism, its fixation on polarities, and even of the contradictions animating the normative force of the work ... of the dream ... of the poem. To make these things livable here, now.

**JLM:** That gets back to the dreamwork of your earlier work.

**EG:** Yes, it does. And I think that's a fine way to end. [Laughter.]

**JLM:** Agreed.