The *SRPR* Interview: Jose-Luis Moctezuma

Edgar Garcia: Let's start with a first question: where do you see your work coming from and what has it taught you about where it's going right now?

Jose-Luis Moctezuma: I have to begin with my first chapbook, what I consider the first mature work I put out as a poet, *Spring Tlaloc Séance* (Projective Industries, 2016), which was a work that intended to revise the notion of "Mesoamerican lyric" by redirecting it through the information-saturated concerns of the present. What does an ecological crisis like the persistent water drought in California look like from the perspective of Tlaloc, the rain god? How does the Aztlán myth reconfigure, in terms of space-time, in the network semantics of the internet, where place, duration, and knowledge are smashed into one? As a xicano poet I am interested in these questions—broadly speaking, the relation of ancestrality to a hyperaccelerated present—but the predominant theme was always this congestion, this riotous clamor of information, stimulation, and competing vernaculars that typified the zonal intersections of twenty-first-century experience, especially for poets writing today.

These concerns were elaborated further in my first book, *Place-Discipline*, where Chicago became the locus of a series of interrogations about its history, scale, and formation from a phenomenological and situationist perspective. I did not intend to be exhaustive—how can one be exhaustive about any city, much less a major cosmopolitan one, without missing a blind spot or losing some vantage point in the end? —but I did want to be formally expressive and experimental in my small grasp of a city founded upon a wide and divergent range of migrations and counterhistories. As the book title indicates, *Place-Discipline* was interested in hyphenation and disciplinarity, the hyphenated body and the disciplinary power of the city, surveillance networks and the information "spectrum."

The spectrum meant several things in the book: the electromagnetic and radio spectrum which makes possible our communication, radio,

and surveillance networks, and the notion of the spectrum as a counter for distinctions of race, class, gender, and other socializing categories that render the individual (and at times groups and entire neighborhoods) both highly visible and highly invisible in an intersectional sense, depending of course on where one is situated, on one's spatial, economic, and psychic coordinates within the built environment. I was thinking here of Ralph Ellison's injunction at the end of *Invisible Man*: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" The lower and higher frequencies, the becoming visible or invisible depending on one's placement or mobility, conjures the possibility of other personhoods both real and *spectral*. To be of the spectrum, but also to be a ghost, a phantom, inside the spectrum of invisible frequencies. In this respect, I read Sun Ra's *Space Is the Place* (which was deeply influential for this book) as meaning more than just outer space or alternate futurities but also: the higher and lower frequencies, psychic coordinates in the other worlds created and inhabited by memories, ghosts, apparitions, and alterities of form. Defacements of the data spectrum that attempts to facially map and recognize everyone.

Which brings me to my new, forthcoming book, *Black Box Syndrome* (Omnidawn, 2023), where I switch gears, formally speaking, but I also remain interested in spectrality and invisible transmissions. Speaking here of poetic form, *Place-Discipline* was invested in emancipatory forms that ran the gamut of free-verse experimentation, whereas *Black Box Syndrome* is a book invested in constriction, precision, and reduction. *Black Box Syndrome* is my "pandemic book." The germinal idea for it and its composition took place in the winter of 2020–2021. While teaching a college course over Zoom (the campus was closed due to the pandemic), many of the students did not turn their cameras on, and I was faced with a field of black screens (literally, black boxes) that posted only their names in white letters. There was no face-to-face situation in which I could get to know them, and although at the beginning of the semester I asked them to consider turning their cameras on so I could get to know them, eventually all of them decided to keep their cameras off. I couldn't blame them because it was a weird and difficult time, and I did not pressure them to do otherwise—as I saw it, it was the new situation, the new nature of things.

The course ended with me never getting to know or even seeing what most of my students looked like, and it felt like there was a long gulf between myself and the rest of the world caused by quarantine, sheltering in place, lockdown, pandemic blues. Was this a new "syndrome," a byproduct of a global virus? I learned online that there is something called "black box syndrome," a term that I define in the afterword of the book. The definition felt deeply unpoetical, and yet, I found an odd, ugly, but still apt poetry in it. It seemed to describe what I felt like while trying to teach people I never got to know in any normal, face-to-face sense.

EG: That's interesting. I do sense a level of paranoia in this new book. Can you speak a little about that?

JLM: Yes, I think the book is interested in paranoia as an aesthetic (i.e., sensory) byproduct of the times. It was during the lockdown that I became interested in the origins of conspiracy theory and the weird, corrosive disinformation cults that seemed to spread with greater speed and reach thanks to the pandemic's reduction of human contact to "extremely online" lifestyles and the proliferation of private myths and information rabbit holes. The January 6 insurrection, for example, seemed to point at the real-world effects of these deeply pernicious belief systems. I read Fredric Jameson's "Cognitive Mapping," in which he writes that conspiracy theory is "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system." I became fascinated with Jameson's framing of conspiracy as a form of perverse representation of the invisible yet omnipresent effects of late capitalism, which the pandemic seemed to reify in a form of atmospheric or environmental helplessness.

Such helplessness was echoed in the strange historical case of James Tilly Matthews (1770–1815), whose complex description and drawings of the "air loom" seemed to provide a figural model for conspiracy theory, though during a different period: Matthews experienced the French Revolution firsthand, a time of tremendous paranoia and conspiratorial action networks, and his theory of the air loom felt like what Jameson described, "a desperate attempt to represent" a system too complex to describe or grasp in a single narrative. Tilly Matthews's

air loom led me to the work of the psychoanalyst, Victor Tausk, whose paper, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," published in 1919, provided an interesting, even if outdated, account for Tilly Matthews's condition. I could not help but rethink the black box model as a version of the influencing machine, and the helplessness of the pandemic found its correlative in the symbolic image of the black box, which came to represent a wide range of things.

EG: The black box also seems to be related to the I Ching-inspired hexagrams, which are a dominant presence in the book. Can you describe the significance of the I Ching and why the poems follow the hexagram form? Are these poems intended to be divinatory?

JLM: The poems are not divinatory in any way, but I did find myself returning to and consulting with the I Ching as a powerful means of reconceiving the black box in terms of a hexagram, whose formal and temporal constraints provided an opportunity to play with form and lineation. In a strange distortion of the divinatory process itself, I fed the hexagram inputs and the poems were its outputs. I began to see each poem as an organism, whose lines and breaks felt different each time I read them, and I continued the series until I reached the sixty-fourth hexagram. I found the process liberating, as chance operations sometimes tend to be.

My readings into Aztec animistic science (teyolia, tonalli, ihiyotl, nahualli) gave me a secondary hold on the organic potential of each poem: the poems felt like an attempt at rethinking the poem-as-organism, an organic poetry that breathes and speaks differently, depending on the reader. Not a lifeless poetry that is merely mechanical or memetic, but a poetry that speaks in and through chaotic embodiment, albeit in the restrictive space of the hexagram. Perhaps this is the throughline that runs from *Spring Tlaloc Séance* to this new book: the interest in forms of chaotic embodiment. Chaos is in everything, in the micro and in the macro, in molecular and in molar bodies, and I seem to find poetry in the potential of chaos to undo or derange any attempts at normative expression.

EG: I see another throughline in your work regarding media and media theory. Can you say more about that? How does it relate to the themes of risk, divination, surveillance, and paranoia?

JLM: I don't myself feel paranoid about the surveillance society we live in, one especially in which we tend to overshare and give more and more of ourselves to corporate networks that monetize our own cognitive labor and productivity, but I do find myself seeing poetry as a means of keeping separate my public and private life and, in this way, keeping sane in a world that feels bent on degrading human dignity through police violence, through border violence, through gender violence. I am not someone who likes to mix my different public and private personas together or attempt to find any consistency between them, which I think a lot of us are seduced by these same networks into doing with some moral or ethical imperative in mind, as if our online persona had to be the "authentic" one.

I don't think there should be any consistency between our public and private personas, and people have a right to privacy in a new profound sense: their interiority must be protected at all costs since it is the end goal of these surveillance networks to map out and manipulate one's own psychic processes—an interminable interpellation of subjectivity. Poetry is the guardian of interiority; it allows us, it allows me, a way of staying ahead of the colonizing instincts of surveillance capitalism, cognitive capitalism. It is important for me to keep the public and private partitioned so that I don't fall into the delusion of authenticity, one which our social order is strongly guided by, but it's one that I don't really subscribe to. We are numerous of course. By chaotic embodiment, I also refer to the presence of multiple private selves that are at play in the imagination, many of which conflict and contradict each other, and it's this internal and perpetual self-contradiction that I think poetry preserves and magnifies.

EG: It sounds to me like this concern with the public and the private ties into the effect of saturation you spoke about earlier, especially in relation to being overread, being overexhibited, and then overreading others at the same time—having a glut of access. And I don't mean just interpersonal access, but access to world historical cultures, indigenous and otherwise, too. I wonder, on that note, if you can say a little bit about how you're thinking about this glut. Information in these works comes up in literal ways, as in a poem called "FYI" ("for your information"), and there's one on cryptocurrency, that is, more information economy. Still, in spite of all that access (configured

through the instability of the information economy), these poems feel confident in the stability of our world-historical past. I wonder if you could say a little bit about that.

JLM: For sure. In relation to the unpublished pieces, I started a series where I was attracted to the strange poetics of internet-speak, a "new-speak" if you will, that functioned through acronyms. These poems have titles like "GOAT," "LOL," "TFW," "FYI," and so forth. I was fascinated by how this internetspeak collapsed and defamiliarized everyday phenomena and personhoods into these abbreviated signs. Certainly, demotic language already does that, it's what language does in the first place, but it was a new demos, a new demotic form that arranged itself according to a different sensorium—a digitized compression that represented a new way of thinking predicated on the making miniature of world history, a portable world-historical system that funneled itself into our dialects and language forms. The idea, for example, of there being a "GOAT" ("greatest of all time") for every possible medium, event, sport, etc. felt like a reduction of history to the recency bias of the present, something which the world-historical system makes possible and, more expressly, something which the digital economy makes possible through statistics and statistical modeling and the information glut you referred to. There's just more of everything in general—more games, more numbers on the board, supposedly more "world events," though this is more a case of exposure than of frequency—and of course we are getting "greatest of all time" discourse for everything because numerically the present outweighs the ever-receding past. The drive to constantly have a "GOAT" discussion feels like a drive toward legitimizing the information glut of the present and erasing the sense of ancestrality that I still hold on to, an unquantifiable realm of action.

I'm again thinking of the paradoxical invisibilization that such hyperexposure creates. You're not supposed to see all of the wiring behind the walls, so to speak; you're not supposed to be aware of the different radio and communication spectrums that are increasing and diversifying around us. And yet that's what produces the saturation. There's this drive to miniaturize vast amounts of information, a drive that's growing in the way that the universe is constantly expanding, to the point where it's invisibilized. And so that for me was fascinating.

That's the beginning point, and it's where the black box comes out. What happens inside the black box is a way of processing or framing that question. Information goes in and something new comes out, but you don't see what is happening inside.

Of course, I'm speaking from a lack of specialized knowledge, as well. I'm not a programmer, I don't write code, I'm not someone who knows anything about how algorithms work. It's hardly as mystical as I make it out to be, and it's likely very mundane from the programmer's perspective. But perhaps writing code has its own poetics that I'm unaware of. However, for someone as unlettered as I am about writing code, it comes across as deeply unpoetical. Financial transactions are infinitely unpoetical, and yet they have so much more to do with the way people exist in the world nowadays, for the millions who have credit power and the billions who are without it. I feel like in everyday transactions and everyday encounters, there are these immense, invisible processes that are kind of new to the world but are sort of dominating the way that you make a simple transaction like pumping gas into your car or buying a latte somewhere with just a flash of the card. These are really complex processes that you're not seeing or agentially involved in; you're just a node in a larger network of nodes. That is a new kind of nature, or at least a new sense of what's "natural" to us, the financialization of everyday life.

These programs and codes are all in service to an increasing financialization of everything. That to me is fascinating and that's why I am really interested in the idea of saturation, but also, I guess, the opposite of saturation, a metaphysical drought that saturation causes. Not just Baudrillard's "desert of the real," but also an actual desertification of large parts of the world due to the climate crisis. There are global regions that will be submerged with rising water levels and other regions that are going to be complete deserts. Saturation as a byproduct of global capitalism will potentially make a desert of many places. That to me is all implicated in this paradox of saturation and drought. This paradox of having multiple access points, but also the kind of making invisible of the complex machinery, networks, and systems that allow these processes to take place. The loneliness of the labyrinthine Amazon warehouse, itself a tragic parody (and grotesque replacement) of the ever-dwindling Amazonian rainforest.

EG: Your points about nature remind me of this quote from cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins where he says it takes a lot of culture to make a state of nature. So, you know, the two are integrated, mutually constitutive, and in some ways together pose the problem at hand, which is how to think about these natural and unnatural, physical and technical, biological and scientistic processes without making them all metaphors—a metaphor of nature.

JLM: Certainly, we as poets are guilty of scaling things down to the metaphor, though it is more accurate I think to think of scaling *up* to the realm of metaphor. The metaphor, etymologically speaking, is the first and last transmission. The metaphor is the first vehicle. It's the first technology, the carrying over from one situatedness to another. For me it's not even about resemblance, but about the alchemy of crafting situations. In terms of media theory, the metaphor is the very first vehicle of transmission and communication, as Marshall McLuhan might have said somewhere. It means to carry over, literally: to transmit.

A true poet is, unlike what some people outside of poetry may think, never vague. The metaphor is a supremely concrete process, it can be quite physical. Conversely, I think of programming, algorithms, and code-writing as a new type of metaphoricity, the rendering of complex instructions and processes into a language that requires instruction and experience to understand. In my opinion, such writing is a lot more abstract than poetry is; it is far less concrete and physical, and yet it weighs more heavily on the present somehow. Code-writing and programming activate metaphors that have far-reaching, tangible, world-shrinking effects. And that goes beyond the realm of just merely the aesthetic.

So, I think that I agree with you, and I think the metaphor is also very much a material process. It's not just merely making something abstract or making something resemble something else. It can have real-world implications. I see the metaphor at work in what the programmer does. The coder is literally "doing" metaphor. And they may not think of it that way, but it is the transmission or the translation of one set of coordinates or one set of directives and commands to produce something entirely different. The black box model became a way of thinking about it.

EG: So, for you, the black box becomes the metaphor of metaphors, which in the book also felt like a process of processes. I felt like this was the first time in your work that your orientation to process was very palpable. What project are you working on now?

JLM: I am currently working on a series of ekphrastic poems that are centered on the history of landscape and landscape painting—subjectless and nonfigurative landscapes. Landscape painting might feel very bland precisely because it is seemingly without subject. I'm honestly bored by a lot of landscapes in Western art until we get to modernism in art history, but that's probably more a fault of my own than any perceived lack in the landscape tradition. Nevertheless, I found myself questioning the value of landscape art, and I've been reading and thinking through traditions of the "picturesque" and the "sublime," and I've been interested in interrogating these traditions through a critique of the enclosure movement in Europe that, arguably, informed the ideological basis of the colonial project in the 1600s. The landscape is itself, pictorially speaking, an object of enclosure, the enclosure of the field of vision. So, these poems attempt an ekphrasis from a different perspective, an ecopoetical perspective or what might also be a decolonial perspective. The poems speak to famous works of landscape art that defined and moved the tradition forward, but I'm also incorporating works that translate or "transmit" the landscape tradition in experimental films by James Benning, Michael Snow, Abbas Kiarostami, and others.

EG: Fantastic—I can't wait for that new work.