

CARLOS COLÍN



Tierra y Libertad / Little México

2020

Reading the Migration Library

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Conversation

(Lois Klassen and Carlos Colín; July, 2020)

In the summer of 2020, as hundreds of foreign agricultural workers tested positive to COVID19 while located in Canada—a situation that prompted the Mexican Government to suspend travel of workers to Canada for a few days—I took to up a physically distant conversation with Carlos Colin, in writing. The email format enabled a multi-lingual dialogue, with Carlos helping to make my beginner (on-line translated) Spanish readable, in exchange for a few English edits from me. I began by asking him about the recent exhibitions I had seen of his work, which brought Mexico into a local and critical context. We eventually got around to talking about his cultural service work with the organization, Dignidad Migrante.

Lois Klassen—In the exhibition statement that accompanied your 2019 exhibition at grunt gallery, *Strident Aesthetic: Towards a New Liberation*, Dana Claxton noted how Vancouver is home to people from South and Central America. Your artistic production of icons for those locations and cultures lead her to ask these questions,

How do we consider these communities, some with Indigenous lineage, and the complexities of colonial imperial borders and cultural liaisons from the tip of the south all the way up to the north?

How is Canada implicated in ongoing slaughters of Indigenous, activist communities, and just ordinary folk wanting a better life?

How can the everyday politics of Mexico or any Latin American country play out its reality here... through visual art?

Estas preguntas son la razón por la que estoy aprendiendo español. Hay más personas que hablan español que inglés en todo el mundo. Nuestra dependencia del inglés en América del Norte no refleja la influencia e importancia de las culturas *Latinx* e indígenas en el sur global. ¿Cómo abordas estas preguntas de Claxton?

Carlos Colín—I think Dana Claxton was questioning how Canadian society, within its multicultural approach, accepts and integrates Latin American culture into a Canadian context—especially the Latin American communities in exile, or migrant agricultural workers. Let's remember that, some of the slaughters of Indigenous, activist communities in the region, and Latin American people in general, are perpetrated by mining activity by companies

based in Canada with political and economic interests in natural resources, to name just one specific situation of inter-connection and responsibility.

On the other hand, there is a Latin American upper-middle and upper class who envision North America as a better place to live. These Latin Americans commonly think that everything in Latin America is wrong. They do not arrive with a financial need as a priority. The manifestations of Latin America from this point of view are often cliché and misinformed about grounded Latin America culture. This includes the way they embrace their *indigencity* as a cool asset, and how they barely know about Latin American workers or those who are exiled due to the dictatorships. I am not generalizing, but in my experience living and working in Vancouver this happens very often. It transforms the cultural issue into one of socio-political oblivion.

My commitment as a visual artist living and working in Canada is to create a critical approach between Canada and *la Patria Grande*, in the words of José Artigas or Simón Bolívar. By doing this, I aspire to create effective Latin American contemporary art methodologies from abroad, while at the same time contribute with an understanding of Latin America in Canada –for those who want to understand, and for those who recognize the importance of *Lati-noamérica* in America, as a whole (always including the Caribbean).

LK— Something we have in common in our art is the practice of giving-away. All of the books in *Reading the Migration Library* are produced to be given away or exchanged. At your exhibition at the grunt gallery, I picked up a set of three posters on brown card, and I rubber stamped my notebook with stamp of the inverted map of *Sur America* that was freely available on a plinth. At your exhibition at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford I picked up an oversized poster with Emiliano Zapata's *Tierra y Libertad* slogan. I also picked up a full set of the photo postcards that you had on a carousel, with

recognizable locations pictured from the everyday lives of agricultural workers in the region. I mailed them to people who had connection to the agricultural workers in the Fraser Valley. (This included my parents. My mother often told us about picking hops and berries with her mother when she was growing up in Abbotsford.)

These piles of beautifully (and expensively!) produced give-aways suggest to me that you want to share cultural wealth that is often restricted for average gallery visitors. The gesture echoes minimal and conceptual art strategies that work to engage audience members in social justice. Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres used both stacks of give-away posters and candies in galleries as a way to distribute the weight and grief of the AIDS crisis, for another example.

Your grunt gallery exhibition handout begins with a quote for the Uruguayan artist and conceptualist Luis Camnitzer,

Art has slowly deteriorated to become primarily a form of production instead of a way of shaping culture. Thus, it is viewed as a discipline and not a methodology.

What is your impression of the impact of art methodologies (give-aways, as one example) in shaping culture these days? Working in Canada now, what is the influence for you of the Latin American conceptualists' methods—some of which resulted in very real political consequences for the artists?

CC— I understand that when an artist produces artworks, it is hard for the artist to disarticulate their position as producer of art as a commodity, and the way their art is also their labour. Historically, artists must subsist through art production. Conversely, there is an aura in the art world that separates, in snobbish and elitist way, the artist from society. I understand through Camnitzer the idea of production in art as a surplus value for the elite who can pay for it and who are unfortunately shaping culture through that elitist system.

But Camintzer offers the concept of *shaping culture* that articulates as art as being capable of living alongside, and with, society. By society, I mean the working-class—art and artist who are not only committed to the time needed to make art, but also to society. This is one of the differences between discipline and methodology.

I am attached to Latin American conceptualists' methods and methodologies. They are the groundwork of my own artwork—even while I'm currently working from Canada. Arts are politics by nature, and a big group of Latin American artists (visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers, poets, dancers, actors and actresses, and photographers among others) have understood that the arts are not aside from the reality in the *Sur*. A committed art, with its society and social benefits and aspirations, is crucial for the wealth of the region. I consider myself a working-class artist, and my commitment is with my society here in Canada, US, and in Latin America.

The purposes of art methodologies are to create a solid and wealthy art production to serve the society, primarily the working-class society. There is no artist in this world who does not receive inspiration from their societies—mainly from the popular sector, the least recognized sector. When I include in my projects the give-aways I aim to create a construction of critical thinking with the community that assists the gallery experience. This is so that the people who attend can create a link and stage for critical thinking with their own community, and so on. Between the artistic and academical methodologies, and the society, there must be a correlation where reciprocity benefits the way that we are shaping culture.

LK— En un reciente pódcast de Duolingo en español, *Libros tras las rejas* (*Books Behind Bars*), aprendí sobre Ana Sicilia, una periodista y modelo argentina que ha establecido numerosas bibliotecas para prisioneros dentro de las

cárceles argentinas. Sicilia dice en el pódcast que tener acceso a libros cuando era niña le dio acceso a una educación que no le dieron a sus padres de clase trabajadora. Pudo llegar a una biblioteca municipal en bicicleta cuando era joven y continuó sus estudios postsecundarios, incluidos algunos trabajos de posgrado y empleo profesional. Ella vincula las bibliotecas a la libertad para los presos.

Sicilia dice: “Yo sabía que los libros iban a ser una vía de escape para esas personas privadas de libertad”. También como usted, ella ve la importancia del placer en medio de otras limitaciones de los derechos humanos. Ella dice: “En ese contexto, llevarles libros a personas que duermen en el piso y que no tienen comida, podía parecer extraño. Pero eso era lo único que yo podía hacer para hacerlos sentir mejor. Yo sabía que un libro podía ayudarles a abrir sus mentes y ofrecerles cierto tipo de libertad.”

Cuéntame más sobre el por qué estás destacando el valor de la lectura como una actividad de ocio. ¿Por qué su libro / póster resalta esta perspectiva cuando la termina con esta línea, “Los trabajadores agrícolas merecen días de ocio y el derecho a la pereza y a divertirse.”?

CC— Para mi el ocio también significa conocimiento, y la pereza y el esparcimiento revitalizan el espíritu. Con esto no quiero decir que no tienen que trabajar, pero tienen que dejar de ser explotados trabajando menos, que estén mejor pagados, que tengan derecho a sector salud, y por ende, derecho a disfrutar de sus ratos libres. La mini biblioteca que se hizo en conjunto con The Reach Gallery Museum consistió en una serie de libros de todo tipo de géneros, principalmente literatura, para que los trabajadores pudieran tener también el derecho de leer. La diferencia con Ana Sicilia, es que los trabajadores no son presos (aunque desafortunadamente lo parezcan), el concepto de libertad es diferente, y su tiempo libre es muy limitado en comparación a un recluso a pesar de estar encerrado. Con los trabajadores agrícolas yo no pienso en el libro

para que les abra la mente, sino que alimenten su deseo de saber, libertad en el sentido de saberse y sentirse seres humanos, capaces de pensar, recapacitar, y del como pueden buscar esa libertad que programas como el PTAT no les da por las largas horas de trabajo.

Considero que el libro es un instrumento y conocimiento, al cual todos tenemos derecho. Es por esto, que me gustaría además de incluir libros de literatura y poseía en las mini bibliotecas, también incluir libros de política, de conflictos agrarios, armados, e indígenas en México, Canadá y Latinoamérica, de filosofía, de historia latinoamericana, de las Primeras Naciones y de historia canadiense.

LK— Aside from conceptual and performance art, you have shared examples with me of programs in Mexico where books are published for free distribution as both public policy (*Fondo de Cultura Económica*) and political opposition (*Para Leer en Libertad*). What are the responsibilities of artists and activists that you feel need to be considered when books are prepared for free distribution through cultural settings in Canada and Latin America?

CC— The *Fondo de Cultura Económica* was founded in 1934 by Daniel Cosío Villegas, and was focused on the students of the National School of Economy in Mexico. That is why, the word *económica* is not related specifically to affordable and cheap books for society but over the years, when *el Fondo* included other topics like humanities and science among others, the word *económica* created this popular feeling for affordable books. The name in Spanish unconsciously constructed a poetic expression about books, culture, and knowledge as economic culture. On the other hand, *Para leer en Libertad* is an organization that was created as an organization to promote reading. It has created a Mexican reading society with affordable and free books.

I believe when visual artists or activists are immersed in social, cultural, and political topics, and share their knowledge with their communities and societies, they also must generate an interest with the people. Personally speaking, here in Canada, if I am talking about social, cultural, religious, economic and political Latin American topics my goal is for the public to be assisted in the gallery experience through artist talks, conferences, or even drinking coffee in a coffee shop. That way they may develop the curiosity to read more about Latin American themes, and consider connections and inter-connections with the Canadian issues and realities. I am not teaching anything to anybody. The idea is to share knowledge and create curiosity, to know more about something. And of course, reading is one of the possibilities to connect and understand our situations. I think the idea behind free distribution is more closely aligned with distributing knowledge to make a society aware of its reality.

LK— Entiendo que ahora formas parte de la junta y asesoría de Dignidad Migrante. Me comentabas que estás trabajando en la creación de un archivo no solo cultural para la organización. Me recuerda el objeto muy poderoso que incluiste en tu exposición en The Reach, el cual era una manta que los trabajadores agrícolas presentaron al alcalde de Abbotsford. La manta incluye las huellas de las manos (en color café) de los trabajadores, junto con huellas de pies de bebés. Estas huellas de pies representan a las hijas (en color rosa) e hijos (en color azul) de los trabajadores que nacieron en México mientras estaban en Canadá, ayudando con la producción de alimentos para los canadienses. ¿Qué esperas reunir en el archivo cultural de Dignidad Migrante?

CC— La idea del archivo surge de la necesidad de información y conocimiento al querer realizar la exposición en The Reach Gallery Museum, ya que necesitaba una información mas próxima a los trabajadores además de mi experiencia

con ellos y lo que había encontrado anteriormente. En esos tiempos, Dignidad Migrante fue la única institución que me abrió sus puertas para acercarme a los trabajadores migrantes, ya que ninguna otra organización o granja en La Columbia Británica donde los trabajadores laboran me contestaron. Cuando pregunté a la Dignidad por material visual, escritos u otra forma de archivo, me comentaron que no tenían muchas cosas a la mano para poder ofrecerme, así que todo el proceso con ellos fue mas oral. Ahora que los miembros de Dignidad Migrante me han integrado a su comunidad de manera permanente, de lo cual yo estoy muy agradecido, la idea del archivo es juntar la mayor información posible para futuras generaciones de trabajadores que vienen a trabajar no solo a BC, sino a toda Canadá, y para las personas que quieran conocer mas sobre la labor de apoyo que se construye dentro de la organización, tengan acceso a información de libre acceso que puedan consultar con la mayor libertad posible. Con este archivo la intención es fortalecer a Dignidad Migrante con un registro de sus actividades y la lucha diaria que se hace en la institución. La intención es que el archivo contenga videos, documentales (incluyendo los realizados sobre la Dignidad), fotografías, manifiestos, artículos de periódico, reseñas, obra de arte, libros, entrevistas y casos de los trabajadores.

LK— An archive of cultural work sounds like a valuable resource. It is also a contribution that is uniquely suited to an artist sitting on the organization's board. Can you describe some of the cultural legacy that temporary agricultural workers have left in this region?

CC— I consider that since the workers started to come from Mexico to Canada since 1974 through the SAWP (Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program), they have already forged a cultural, and socio-political legacy in Canada. These are workers who are not just Mexicans, but also people who come from the

Central American region. The same is true for the agricultural workers from the Caribbean, who have come since 1966. From their completely new food contributions while on the farms—introducing Latin American food to the region, their presence created a business that supplies the workers with specific cuisine. This opened a new food market to Canadians, beyond the touristic approach to Latin American food. They of course also leave their efforts and energy in the fields every year. They have a will to excel in Canada and in Mexico, and they bring a respect for this country despite mistreatment by some farm owners. Moreover, the workers are showing younger Canadians that they are the ones who put fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy products on their tables, and also build their houses—in places where they also aspire to live one day. The problem is that nowadays the young generations are not aware of this population of workers, who contribute more to this society than everyone else. So, this is the moment that we must work alongside the workers, to give them a voice and to show “multicultural” Canadian society that there are human beings working the fields and in the industry for their benefit. At the same time, Canadian society should be more aware and willing to work alongside them, respect their rights, and care for them as part of their community.

The archive that we are planning at Dignidad Migrante Society includes footage of the workers in their daily work, and whatever else they want to add or contribute to the archive. The workers are sending us their photographs and videos of working in the farms and in the industrial sector. This enormous cultural contribution will enrich Dignidad Migrante Society, and Canadian society, by offering knowledge and resources to understand programs like SAWP. It will help Canadians to appreciate the labor and cultural legacy from the migrant workers who have worked and continue to work in Canada, for Canadians.

Dignidad Migrante Society



Dignidad Migrante Society (DIGNIDAD) is a worker-based non-profit organization of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) from numerous countries. We are entirely volunteer-run. Our mandate is to promote the self-organization of TFWs in general and of agricultural workers in particular; to ensure access to their rights, and to help them resolve their daily problems during their stay in Canada.

DIGNIDAD strives to build a community of TFWs and allies where the voice of each worker counts, and where workers from many backgrounds walk together with affection, respect, joy, humour, and hope, where workers provide each other with mutual aid and support through good and bad times.

For 13 years we have been assisting, at no charge, thousands of TFWs with interpretation, applications for benefits such as parental/maternal benefits, compassionate, Family Care and sick leave, as well as the Canadian Pension Plan and Old Age Security, providing assistance with claims related to private medical insurance, and represent workers with Worksafe, Employment Standards Branch, and human rights complaints. We have assisted numerous workers experiencing abuse and exploitation to obtain Open Work Permits (OWP), and refer them to medical, tax-related, or legal services that we are not able to provide ourselves.

We organize and run 20 different workshops to provide accurate information and services to TFWs about all of these topics and more. We deliver and visit dozens of farms every season, including in the Lower mainland, the Okanagan, and Vancouver Island. The materials that we use for those workshops have been used by several settlement organizations. On average, DIGNIDAD assists at least 3,000 TFWs each year in a variety of ways.

In 2009 we started hosting various events, including a Health Fair, a Father's Day dinner and the International Migrants Day event. DIGNIDAD also produces a biannual report entitled *Beyond our Plates*, which provides updates on the situation of TFWs in B.C. In addition to our informational workshops for TFWs, we have also worked to raise awareness of our cause through the performance of our interactive workshop, *Guacamole: a cooking lesson for justice* and a bike race, *Ride for Rights*. In 2019 we initiated a Mother's Day celebration (*Planting Hope*), and we started small video clips on Youtube with basic information about TFWs. <https://youtu.be/teCIrw95mVI>

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An artist book/poster by
CARLOS COLÍN

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Reading the Migration Library is a publication project initiated by Vancouver-based artist, Lois Klassen in 2016. The project aims to create and circulate artist books and ideas on the topic of migration.

This project would not have been possible without the Government of BC funding through the BC Arts Council.

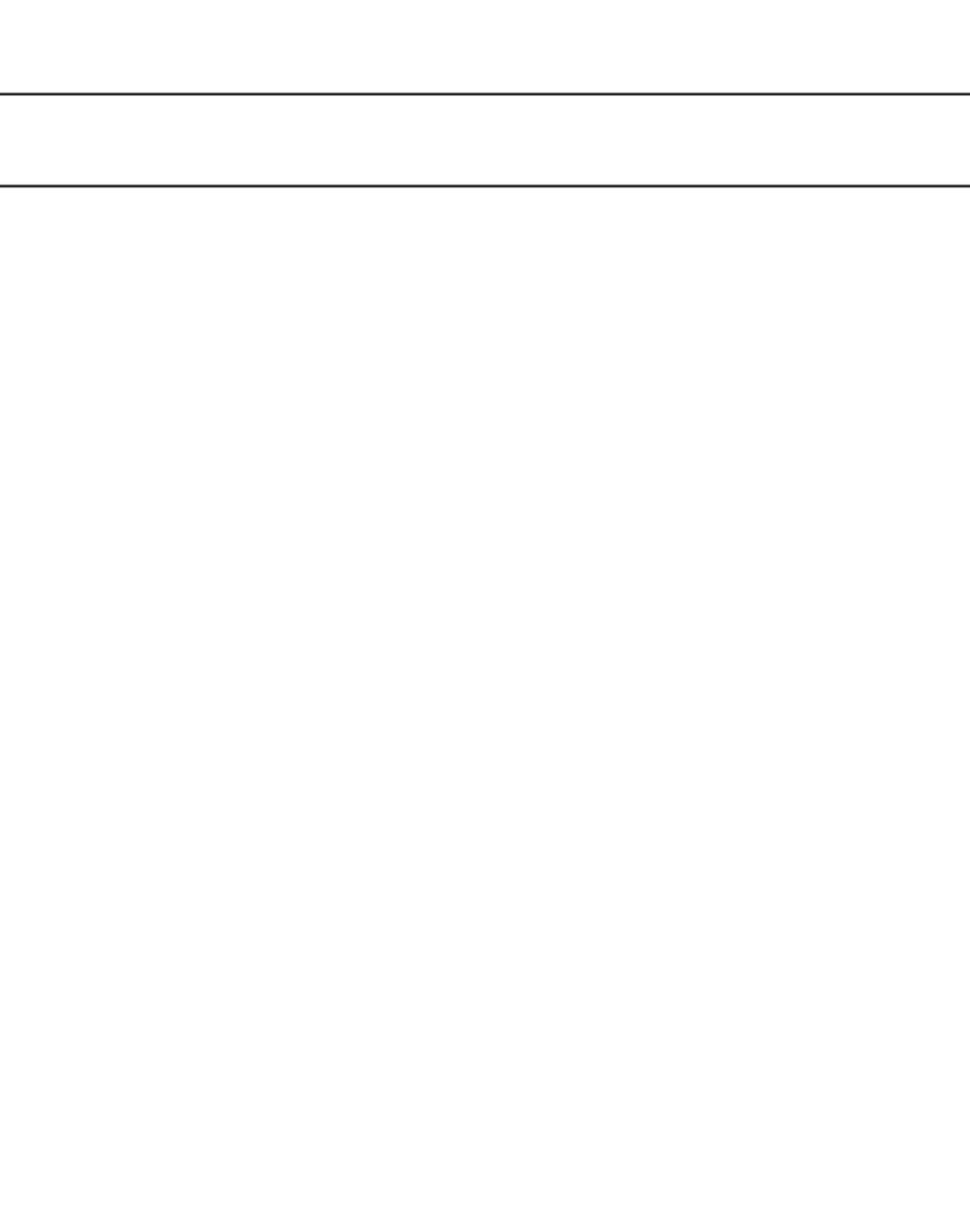
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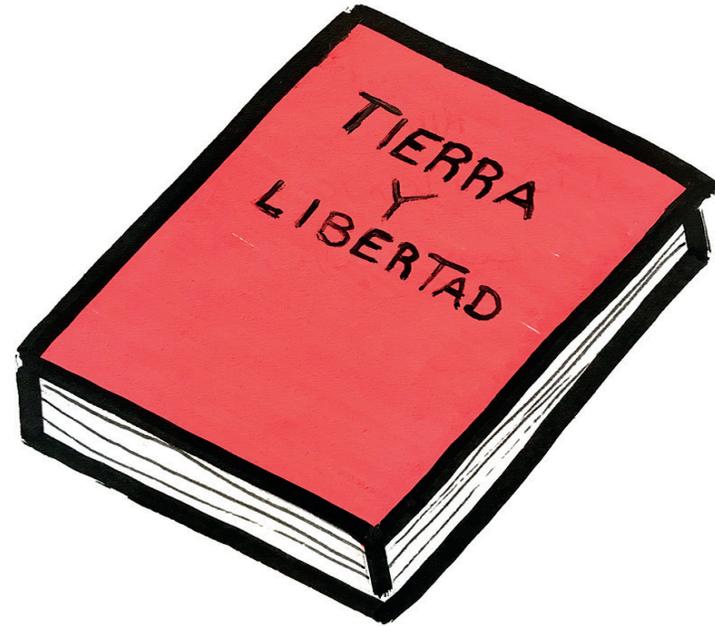
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Las Mini-Bibliotecas fueron proporcionadas por The Reach Gallery Museum en Abbotsford, BC, Canadá, como parte de la exposición "Little México" realizada de mayo 23 a septiembre 15 de 2019. La idea de este proyecto era el poder contribuir al esparcimiento de los trabajadores agrícolas Mexicanos a través de la lectura después de sus largas jornadas de trabajo. El ocio es un derecho universal, y la pereza es un bien necesario para llevar una vida llena de arte, ciencias, y la satisfacción de las necesidades humanas y espirituales. Todos los trabajadores agrícolas merecen días de ocio, el derecho a la pereza y a divertirse.

**THEN
BORROW
ANOTHER!**

Please feel free to borrow any of these books to read and enjoy in your free time.
Please return the books when you are finished with them, so others may enjoy them too.

**!DESPUÉS
TOMA
OTRO!**

Con confianza puedes tomar cualquiera de estos libros para leer y disfrutar en tu tiempo libre.
Cuando termines de leerlos, por favor devuélvelos, así también otros pueden disfrutarlos.

Mini-Librarías for Mexican migrant farmer workers have been provided by The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford, BC, Canada, as part of an art exhibition titled "Little México" that was held from May 23 to September 15 in 2019. The idea behind this project is to make a contribution to the daily amusement of visiting farmer workers, of reading after their long hours of work. Leisure is a universal right, and laziness is a necessary good in order to lead a full life that includes art, science, and the satisfaction of human and spiritual needs. All the migrant farmer workers deserve more days off and the right to be lazy and have fun.

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