

MANDORLA

NUEVA ESCRITURA DE LAS AMÉRICAS • NEW WRITING FROM THE AMERICAS

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AN INTRODUCTION TO NADAISMO

After hiding in the secretaries' restroom to escape a mob that wanted to kill him for his involvement with the recently overthrown dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Gonzalo Arango fled Medellín and traveled the countryside of Colombia. He stayed with friends when he could, but more often he would sleep in taverns. Arango wound up in Cali, another burgeoning industrial city of the late 1950's, like Medellín, where thousands of people sought refuge from the ongoing violence, La Gran Violencia, that was sweeping the countryside. Lying on a couch in his friend's office he thought to himself, *what do I have? Nada.*¹

Nadaismo began neither as a literary movement nor as a political movement. In 1958, when Gonzalo Arango returned to Medellín to preside over a miniature book burning² and read his First Nadaista Manifesto from a roll of toilet paper, there were no indications of literary pretension or grand aesthetic revolution. Primarily a prose writer, Arango's poetic oeuvre is scant, with twenty-some-odd poems total. His contribution to the literary life in Colombia was moreover through his person than through his writings. As the prophetic leader of the Nadaistas, he offered an alternate means of cultural production for a generation that lost all confidence in the institutions and values of Colombian society—cultural institutions like the Catholic Church that condoned the massacre of “godless liber-

als”³ or the literature of the preceding generation that heroicized the murderous acts of so-called revolutionaries. The Nadaistas never offered a new aesthetic or political vision—nothing other than the discrediting of Colombia’s prevailing order. It was nothing other than a violent response to violence⁴.

Most of the early attendees at Nadaista hangouts were drug addicts, thieves, adulterous men, and homosexuals.⁵ Most of the poets that went on to be associated with the movement were at least a decade younger than Arango, some as young as seventeen. Many were self-educated, or had attained little more than a high-school diploma. In challenging Colombia’s literary and cultural establishment, the Nadaistas incited the scorn of an intellectual elite against which their only weapon was a kind of scandalous histrionics: public blasphemy at the Medellín Cathedral, denunciation of established literary figures and the Colombian canon, a fake election booth with Nadaista candidates, orchestrated infighting (i.e. burning an effigy of Gonzalo Arango at Arango’s behest), etc.⁶

Nadaismo has been referred to alternately as a Colombian Beat Generation, Colombian Dadaism, or a Colombian Futurism, yet Nadaismo is itself *as a wave is a wave*. It is total disavowal born in a particular context of violence and political instability. Although the Nadaistas fought against nationalism and provincial literature, they are uniquely Colombian in their origins and their language. Despite whatever misgivings current Colombian intellectuals may have in regards to the merit of Nadaismo when (erroneously) considered as a purely literary movement, the fact remains that Nadaismo has played a major role in the history of Colombian literature and popular culture. Not only does Nadaismo contribute to the individuation of Latin-American literary traditions in respect to the dominant, Euro-centric canon, I would like to imagine that Nadaismo offers a means of approaching literature for young Latino/a poets in the U.S.; that is, rather than focusing on our own provincial dialects and differences, to look upon the embattled nature of Hispanics in the U.S. and to recognize a common imperative to reject a society that allows racial profiling and persecution of peoples in states like Alabama and Arizona, a society that uses convoluted arguments of inclusion to justify the discontinuation of ethnic studies programs, a society that barely bats an eyelash when a politician calls Spanish the “language of the ghettos.”⁷ At a time when the de-centered political outcry of Occupy movements and other a-

political agendas seek to create major changes through cultural revolution rather than institutional engagement, Nadaismo can offer a new way to imagine our identity not only as Latino/a, but also our identity as Americans.

To that end, I have attempted in these translations to be as faithful as possible to the original documents. The poets included in this selection are two of the most representative (if such a thing can be said of such disparate poets) and the most widely recognized poets from the Nadaista movement: Gonzalo Arango and Jaime Jaramillo Escobar. As stated earlier, Gonzalo Arango was the founder and defacto, guru leader of the Nadaista movement. I've included along with a few of his poems a selection from the First Nadaista manifesto in which he gives the group its non-definition and anti-position. The translation of this Manifesto was particularly challenging because of his philosophical and critical diction, and because I am not well versed enough in Kierkegaard to find the passages he references and am therefore translating the translation of Kierkegaard into English.

Jaime Jaramillo Escobar's punctuality, responsibility, employment and compliant citizenship made him the most atypical Nadaísta. Nearly the same age as Arango, both men were about a decade older than most of the other members; whereas Arango was a charismatic and histrionic leader, Escobar spent years writing under the pseudonym X-504. X-504 famously said in his only interview, "The secret to my style is that I'm always naked when I write,"⁸ and in this same spirit of contradiction, the same self-defeating spirit that seems to unify the Nadaista movement, I have approached the act of translation with the intent to disrobe.

NOTES

1. This anecdote is a translation of a text from Eduardo Escobar's book, *Gonzalo Arango* (Procultura 1989). Eduardo Escobar was a prominent poet in the Nadaista movement whose work is not included here simply because of my own time constraints. Other poets not included here but closely associated with Nadaismo are Jotamario Arbelaez, Amilcar Osorio, Armando Romero, Elmo Valencia, Alberto Escobar, Dario Lemos, Jaime Espinel and Jan Arb.

2. This book burning, as described to me by Armando Romero, consisted of various cheap and innocuous books for children and young adults. Because the

fire produced such an insignificant amount of smoke, they added newspaper to give the appearance of an actual book burning. According to Romero, with such a scarcity of printed matter, esp. works in translation, no one in their right mind would have burned a book of any value, even books of questionable literary merit.

3. "The most visible immediate response within the church to [*La Violencia*] was to identify the cause of religion wholly with the Conservative party, and condemn the Liberals as atheists and communists." Daniel H. Levine and Alexander W. Wilde. "The Catholic Church, 'Politics,' and Violence: The Colombian Case." *The Review of Politics* 39 (1997): 216-40.

4. This "*respuesta violenta a la violencia*" is Armando Romero's phrase, taken from his book *El nadaísmo colombiano, o, La búsqueda de una vanguardia perdida* (Tercer Mundo 1988) and is notably repeated in many of his essays on the subject. Romero repeats this dictum in the introduction to his most recent anthology of Nadaista poets, *Antología del Nadaísmo* (Sibilina 2009).

5. This statement was made by Gonzalo Arango in an interview titled "Gonzalo Arango: De la nada al ser." *Arco* 16 (1975): 16-30.

6. *El nadaísmo colombiano, o, La búsqueda de una vanguardia perdida* (Tercer Mundo 1988).

7. Newt Gingrich.

8. This quote and the anecdotal description of Jaime Jaramillo Escobar's meek compliance come from the epilogue that Gonzalo Arango wrote for Escobar's first collection of poems, *Las poemas de la ofensa* (Tercer Mundo 1968).