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INTERVIEW

Abstract: Since its publication in 1974, there has been a concerted effort to force Alejo Carpentier's Concierto barroco to conform to the musical genre from which it derives its name. In spite of Carpentier's advanced knowledge of musical form, these efforts have largely resulted in imprecise or inaccurate representations of the Baroque Concerto, or selective interpretations that avoid inconvenient narrative details. Without the imprecision or textual violence exhibited in its analytical predecessors, the present article seeks to correct these imprecisions and understand the function of musical form not as a formal constraint, but rather as both a superficial and structuring element in the novel. By first analyzing the neo-Baroque aspects of Carpentier's technical style, I will offer interpretations of three key moments in the novel when European Baroque musical form is subverted, reinvigorated, and transformed by way of contact with distinctly American styles and perspectives. In considering these moments, I will suggest that the Baroque Concerto of Concierto barroco is not a Baroque Concerto at all. Rather, Carpentier narrates an inventive creation story for a musical genre that is more consistent with the novel's pro-American ideological stance; the modern, syncretic, and transatlantic counterpart of the Baroque: jazz.

KEYWORDS: transatlantic; music; jazz; neo-Baroque; syncretism; Alejo Carpentier; musical form

"América, continente de simbiosis, de mutaciones, de vibraciones, de mestizajes, fue barroca desde siempre."
—Alejo Carpentier, “Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso”

Two motifs permeate the critical literature surrounding Concierto barroco with remarkable consistency. Despite its compact form, ornate language, and the extraordinary density of thematic material elaborated in the text, one critic aptly notes that “la crítica se ha ocupado de estudiar dos elementos en particular: la música y la presencia de América en la obra” (Aguilú de Murphy 161). This laconic list of “elements,” while accurate, conceals the impressive breadth of material that each element entails. Succinct and highly ornamented, it takes on an impressive range of specific and precisely modulated thematic material; America's “presence,” for example, in truth encompasses the tenuous relationship between history and its cultural representation, the spent cultural hegemony of Europe in the colonized Americas, the nature of criollo identity as mediated between the New and Old Worlds, and the extraordinary capacity of the New World to recolonize the Old through a reinvigoration of its artistic forms. Music, a common element in Carpentier's literary enterprise, calls specific attention to itself in Concierto barroco by virtue of its title. The text of Concierto barroco is permeated with explicit and implicit references to musical culture, ranging from performance and composition to prevailing tastes and formal innovations. I contend that the prevalence of these motifs, their curious entanglement, and their constant interaction not only organize Carpentier's narrative on the surface, but also function more essentially as the mechanism that propels the development of the novel's ideological content. Indeed, the rejuvenation of European cultural forms in Concierto barroco plays out precisely through the intervention of American cultural products, both ancient and contemporary, into Old World musical structures. Rather than replacing the old with the new, Carpentier instead locates the cultural evolution of the Old World in the Americas; in doing so, he replaces outmoded claims of European cultural hegemony in the Americas with a neo-Baroque, profoundly anti-colonial enterprise that privileges cultural cross-pollination over transplantation, and syncretism over appropriation. Specifically, I will demonstrate, through a new reading of the importance of musical form in Concierto barroco, the ways in which Carpentier draws on the notion of jazz, a modern and uniquely American “Baroque concerto,” as the novel's central image to describe both the superficial and the formal aspects of his novel; that is, how jazz participates explicitly in the elaboration of the novel's thematic content, as many critics have noted, while also forming the structural metaphor that supports it.

In developing this relocation of cultural production, Carpentier recounts portions of his novel in the highly specialized technical language of the European musical Baroque. A renowned musicologist in his day and author of several books on the genesis and development of music in the colonized Caribbean, Alejo Carpentier wields his Baroque terminology with ease and precision, but nonetheless takes particular care to render Concierto barroco accessible to a wide audience of readers without extensive musical training. Much of the specialized musical language that Carpentier employs tends to serve the same function literarily as it does musically: that of typically Baroque ornamentation. While something superficial may be
lost on the uninitiated reader, who does not fully understand the author when he writes, for example, about “las piezas de moda que Doménico [Scarlatti] empezó a sacar del clavicembalo,” adorning los aires conocidos con mordentes y trinos del mejor efecto” (47, emphasis added), the meaning of the passage nevertheless remains functionally intact.

In contrast, when Carpentier introduces a non-trivial, relatively unknown musical concept (e.g. concerto grosso) that acts as a central, structural metaphor, he carefully develops the concept's most thematically relevant features. When the novel's protagonistos “[desencadenan] el más tremendo concerto grosso que pudieron haber escuchado los siglos” (42-43) in the tour-de-force fifth chapter of the novel, in which jazz as the central structural metaphor makes its most compelling appearance, Carpentier textually delivers the essential contours of the form to readers not previously aware of the characteristics of the concerto grosso. The description of the ensuing musical performance demonstrates that the concerto consists of a supporting orchestra (“el frenético allegro de las sesenta mujeres que se sabían sus partes de memoria”) over which a variable number of soloists —in the novel the number ranges from one to four— demonstrate their “infernal virtuosismo” (43) before returning to the beginning (the da capo) and bringing the movement to its conclusion with all instruments playing together. The more particular, technical details of this complex form are superficial to the thematic development that takes place in this scene, and Carpentier tacitly omits them. However, Carpentier’s choice of the concerto grosso is far from casual; according to the evidence available in the text, it shares nearly all of its salient features, including a circular structure with built-in soloistic opportunities, with jazz. We shall return to deal with the implications of this congruence shortly.

As pertains to the importance of musical form, the critical literature generated by this short novel seems to have taken its cue from the decorative facet of Carpentier’s Baroque lexicon, and has employed a surprising amount of vague, fundamentally ornamental musical terminology. Whether due to lack of perceived importance or lack of musical training, most critics have at the same time coyly sidestepped any real structural analysis of the novel’s musical content. Imprecise references to Concierto barroco as “a sort of Baroque concerto” (Bost 24, emphasis added), or to the supposed symbolic meaning of the “Baroque concerto” in the novel (e.g. Fama 337) abound; however, such references often suffer from any well-developed understanding of what these terms refer to in musical or literary contexts, and serve rather as convenient metaphors for grounding otherwise convincing interpretations in the novel’s evocative title. By extension, however, these terms, as foundational structures upon which to build analytical arguments, while suggestive, find themselves largely empty of critical meaning.

The striking exceptions to this unfortunate trend include one of the first pieces of critical literature available on Concierto barroco: a conference given by Marina Gálvez Acero only four years after the novel’s publication; and Sonia Feigenbaum’s article analyzing the status of music in two Carpentier novels. Both articles constitute improvements over others by seeking to explicate the superficial structures characteristic of the concerto grosso, and organizing some of their interpretations around those structures. In their analyses, both authors gloss the basic contours of the concerto grosso, Gálvez Acero in order to read the novel as a literary incarnation of the Baroque concerto genre, and Feigenbaum to define the relationships between the novel’s characters as the two subgroups in the orchestra (soloists, or concertino; and full orchestra, or tutti). These glosses accord in large part with the conclusions the reader is able to draw from Carpentier’s own description, briefly analyzed above: the Baroque concerto consists of “un diálogo entre determinadas solistas […] y una masa orquestal que los secunda” (Gálvez Acero 539). These analytical foundations are relatively solid from a musical standpoint, and the dialogic metaphor lends itself productively to the development of a narrative argument. Unfortunately, these and future attempts to develop more in-depth, structural analyses, either fail in their attempts to accurately describe the finer details of the Baroque concerto grosso, confusing it as Gálvez Acero does with the Classical sonata form, or more often elect not to attempt any such development at all. The ensuing deterioration of these analyses and subsequent analyses building on the same flawed premises carries significant analytical consequences that have not as yet been fully elucidated. I propose in the following pages to elaborate a new vision of the importance of musical form in the novel that more soundly reinforces Carpentier’s syncretic and anti-colonial ideological project.

The breakdown of the aesthetic and formal assumptions of previous arguments allows, furthermore, for the re-evaluation of the relationship between musical form and literary narrative. While so-called “programmatic” (i.e. “narrative”) music exists, music is, at bottom, a structurally non-narrative space: the best it can do is suggest. Literature, on the other hand, is a profoundly narrative object that only rarely and ephemerally conforms to the same contours demanded of musical objects. With this in mind, a scan of the available literature on Concierto barroco demonstrates the pervasive nature of theses that assure the at best questionable character of any subsequent analysis. The repeated attempt to coerce a fundamentally narrative object into a structurally non-narrative space, a gesture repeated by large swaths of the available secondary literature, is in reality an impossible task: everything in the novel will not fit. The question that remains is how to read Concierto barroco musically while avoiding both the totalizing nature of formal musical analysis and the temptation to forcibly read the novel into a musical space. I have already partially answered this question in the introductory analysis of Carpentier’s treatment of cosmetic and familiar musical language in the novel. After developing this response in more detail, we will return to the disjunction of musical and narrative spaces in order to arrive at a more profound understanding of the importance of musical form in Concierto barroco.

While it is extremely problematic to map narrative structure
onto musical structure, it is far less complicated and potentially more revealing to characterize certain narrative practices as akin, *mutatis mutandis*, to methods of musical development. In this regard, Carpentier takes advantage of his formal, academic understanding of music and musical techniques and disseminates his specialized vocabulary throughout the text, at both the superficial, ornamental level as well as in deep, organizational structures. Recall that it is possible to separate Carpentier’s deployment of musical terminology in *Concierto barroco* into two distinct categories: ornamental language and structural language. Ornamental language corresponds to the most characteristically Baroque musical technique, and it is unsurprisingly in terms of Baroque technique, not form, that critics have developed the most effective, purely musical readings of *Concierto barroco*.\(^7\)

Nevertheless, ornamental language constitutes only one example of Baroque technique in the novel. The celebrated opening paragraph epitomizes the method of motivic development common to the musical Baroque aesthetic, which sought to derive the maximum amount of material from each melodic motive, referred to as *fortspinnung*.\(^8\) It is revealing to consider the remarkable opening gesture of the novel in the interest of analyzing how Carpentier continuously deploys and transforms a single narrative motif: *plata*.

De plata los delgados cuchillos, los finos tenedores; de plata los platos donde un árbol de plata labrada en la concavidad de sus platas recogía el jugo de los asados; de plata los platos fruteros, de tres bandejas redondas, coronadas por una granada de plata; de plata los jarros de vino amartillados por los trabajadores de la plata; de plata los platos pescaderos con su pargo de plata hinchado sobre un entrelazamiento de algas [...]. (9)

Much of the literature regarding *Concierto barroco* makes passing reference to this first sentence as an example of Carpentier’s interest in chromaticism, an important interpretation. But it also masterfully illustrates what one might call narrative *fortspinnung*. The word *plata*, used initially in a utilitarian context to describe forks and knives (*silverware*), rapidly takes on much larger connotations. In the next phrase, it becomes part of the musically alliterative “*de plata los platos*”, in which *plato* constitutes a clear transformation of *plata*, which in turn has inverted its position in the sentence in typically Baroque anastrophe. Mere words later, the relationship between silver and nature is reversed as the former comes to incorporate the latter into itself both in design (“un árbol de plata labrada en la concavidad de sus platas”) and function (the fruits of nature are collected in silver containers). Silver is symbolically “crowned” with a (silver) pomegranate. Finally, everything collapses into the discourse of silver, metonymy and metaphor for the New World and all it contains: silver workers craft silver containers for wine; silver fisherman catch silver fish; the novelized world is nothing but silver for another half page before the motive, spent, is discarded for others (briefly *seda*, later *vino*). Still, even after being thus exhausted, the motive of *plata* returns briefly on various occasions in this chapter —most significantly at the end, as if to conjure notions of a truncated recapitulation— and in nearly all subsequent chapters to conjure up all the connotations carefully constructed in this first paragraph. The entire first chapter is quite thoroughly spun out of this fundamental image of silver.\(^9\)

This is not the only example of Baroque musical technique in *Concierto barroco*. The exceedingly long, unbalanced sentences and paragraphs that permeate the novel are further examples of elaborate Baroque phrase structure, and of the spinning out and embellishment of motives until draining them of syntactic potential. The novel offers many easily identifiable moments of *crescendo* and of cacophony, that is, of “¡imposible armonía!” (25), some of which will be discussed shortly. Knowledge and recognition of these techniques can productively inform our reading of the text on the level of appreciation, but ignorance of them does not impede a correct and satisfying reading. So we must ask: Why read this narrative like a piece of music at all? Why *Concierto barroco*?

In our analytical zeal to make the text conform to our designs, it is altogether too easy to overlook what the text itself has to offer. Countless analyses of *Concierto barroco* have established that principal among the major themes dealt with in the novel is the Amo’s discovery of a distinctly American creole identity over and against the colonized European identity he sets out to understand. There are three moments in *Concierto barroco* in which the musical structures plainly offered in the text underscore, develop, and transform this theme. In each case, a traditional European genre comes into conflict with an American concept or reality that must be rejected, assimilated, or otherwise subsumed into its hierarchy. In each instance, America emerges as vital before a moribund Europe, and flexible in contrast to European rigidity. Likewise, in each case, the aesthetic of the Baroque, reborn in the American Amo and the Afro-Caribbean Filomeno, and especially the free, improvisatory formal structure of the *concerto grosso*, prove relevant to the development of Carpentier’s ideological project. The first of these moments is the *concerto grosso* performed in the Ospedale della Pietà; the second is the final rehearsal of Vivaldi’s *Montezuma*; the third, Louis Armstrong’s concert in Venice.

The performance in the Ospedale della Pietá initially presents the trappings of a traditional *concerto grosso*, a musical competition between three historical virtuosos: Antonio Vivaldi, Doménico Scarlatti and Georg Friedrich Händel. In order to understand how three musicians improvise simultaneously without giving rise to utter cacophony, we must pause to touch upon another Baroque phenomenon: figured bass. While bearing in mind that melody occupied a privileged position in Baroque music, we should not suppose that composers ignored harmonic progression altogether. Indeed, all melody was accompanied by, at the very least, a subordinate, contrapuntal melody —known as the *basso continuo*— that suggested a basic harmonic line. The inclusion of the harpsichord, capable of
playing multiple tones at the same time, prompted many composers to prescribe successions of specific chords by sketching out, beneath the bass line pitch and the pitches that were to appear simultaneously, thus forming the chords desired. These numbers are referred to as “figured bass.” As the specific spacing of the chord tones (i.e. the vertical order in which the figured tones appeared) nearly always remained unspecified, to say nothing of melodic figures or ornamentation added within the bounds of the prescribed harmony, figured bass allowed for a measure of improvisation within carefully controlled boundaries.

Returning to the concert proper, it initially seems that Händel will win out:

— ‘¡El sájón nos está jodiendo a todos!’ —[grita] Antonio, exasperando el fortíssimo.
— ‘A mi ni se me oye’ —[grita] Doménico, arrestando en acordes.” (43)

At this moment the American Filomeno, having collected “una batería de calderos de cobre, de todos tamaños,” makes an inspired intervention. He begins to pound on his improvised instruments “con cucharas, espumaderas, batidoras, rollos de amasar, tizones, palos de plumeros,” usurping the Saxon’s victory, and fundamentally transforming the concerto grosso into its contemporary and unequivocally American descendant: jazz. The European composers are so captivated by Filomeno’s jazz-like “ocurrencias de ritmos, de síncopas, de acentos encontrados, que, por espacio de treinta y dos compases lo dejaron solo para que improvisara” (43–44) before returning to the interrupted concert and bringing it to a close. It should not escape readers familiar with the genre that 16- and 32-measure chord progressions are two of the most prevalent melodic structures in jazz, and that, as with figured bass, the harmonic progressions within whose boundaries musicians improvise are prescribed and notated in advance on jazz scores. Nor should we fail to mention the curiosity that jazz percussion solos typically occur immediately before returning to the final statement of the melody, as it does for Carpentier’s instrumentalists.

In this subversion and substitution of form, Carpentier develops a number of crucial thematic points. Filomeno’s rhythmic intervention is a clear reference to the Afro-Cuban rhythms for which the Caribbean is famous; the 32-measure melodic form is typical of the jazz made famous in the United States. This intervention, which temporarily supplants the concerto with a profoundly American form and captivates the composers who stand in metonymically for the dominant European Baroque, clearly demonstrates the latter’s inability to either resist or fully assimilate Filomeno’s wholly American contribution, as when Vivaldi cannot help but echo the Cuban’s chanted refrain of “Ca-laba-són-són-són”, but also cannot help but translate it into the ecclesiastical language he understands: “Kábala-sum-sum-sum” (45–46). In the words of Debra Castillo, Vivaldi’s “inspired misinterpretation of the primitive ritual takes that ritual out of its unknown culture and inserts it into his culture, making of the song a baroque composition while at the same time signaling the end of the concert, the end of the carnival, the return of system” (75, emphasis added). Later, upon reflecting on the previous night’s performance, the Amo comments: “Buena música tuvimos anoche,” to which Filomeno’s rejoinder, set in the lingo of jazz, is of the utmost significance: “Yo diría más bien que era como un jam session” (54). Filomeno leaves no room to question his full appropriation of the antiquated European Baroque concerto and its utterly effortless transformation into the jam session, infused with spontaneity and vitality.

The next noteworthy musical moment, and the only of the three that does not explicitly relate to jazz except by contrast with the previous example, is the final rehearsal of Vivaldi’s Montezuma, at which the Mexican Amo—transformed first into Montezuma and now, significantly, into an Indiano—and Filomeno are in attendance. In terms of the novel’s staging of various interventions by foreigners with respect to European and American cultural assets, the previous evening’s jam session and the composer’s operatic rendering of the history of the Mexican conquest could hardly differ more. In unmistakable contrast to Filomeno’s uncomplicated rejuvenating contribution to a cultural staple of the European Baroque, Vivaldi finds it necessary to commit extreme and at times arbitrary violence to the narrative of Moctezuma’s encounter with Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Tenochtitlán in order to bludgeon the plot into line with rigid European expectations. This violence, which the Amo/Indian characterizes as full of grandísimos disparates, includes bastardizing Náhuatl words, such as Huitzilopochtli; switching the Aztec general Tuetile’s gender from male to female so as to insert him/her into a spurious love story; inventing all manner of personages and occurrences not found in any historical account; deleting wholesale La Malinche and Cuauhtémoc, the latter of whom the Amo refers to as “el héroe verdadero de todo esto”; and fabricating a surprise happy ending in which Cortés pardons a still-living Moctezuma (and by extension his Aztec subjects), who in turn swears eternal fealty to the King of Spain and the true God of Catholicism.

The Amo’s historical and American sensibilities are offended by the blatant transformation of his cultural heritage to conform to the necessities of European (in particular, Italian) opera, in which a love story, unity of action, beautiful sounds and ideas, and what Vivaldi calls “ilusión poética” (69) ultimately trump historical truth and accuracy. The Mexican’s reaction to Vivaldi’s creative license—“¡Falso, falso, falso; todo falso!” (68)—represents an important moment of crisis in his burgeoning cultural awareness, already highly commented in the critical literature. Vivaldi, impeccably aware of European cultural paradigms, systematically counters the Amo’s objections: Náhuatl is a fundamentally unsingable language; Teutile’s name was uncharacteristically pronounceable and sounded credibly feminine; the inclusion of Cuauhtémoc would have violated the unity of action by introducing a subplot; La Malinche
was “una cabrona traidora” whose part no one would have agreed
to play; Moctezuma’s death by stoning was “muy feo para un final
de ópera,” and historical accuracy is of no concern to opera in the
first place. It becomes clear during this conversation that the Amo
cannot accept the inflexible nature of European opera; which must
radically revise Mexican history, excising or rewriting problematic
elements and inserting what is absent, in order to assimilate it into a
structure that is capable of understanding and, more importantly,
performing. In other words, Vivaldi explicitly prioritizes the accurate
reproduction of European cultural norms over the accurate recount-
ing of the episode of Mexican history that he selects as the vehicle
for that reproduction.

Vivaldi’s operatic enterprise thus stands in stark counterpoint
to Filomeno’s comparatively effortless, evolutionary transformation
of the concierto grosso into jazz, not by violating or doing violence to
its inherent structure, as Vivaldi must do, but merely by imbuing it
with his own immanent american-ness while leaving it otherwise in-
tact. When Vivaldi later comments that “En América, todo es fábula”
(70), he indicates not only the destabilizing presence of the quotidian
marvelous (lo real maravilloso) for which Carpentier is famous but,
more urgently in Concierto barroco, expresses the melancholy recognition
that, whether because of the unsettling awareness of lo real maravilloso or not, the cultural hegemony that Old World Europe
once exercised over America and American themes has expired; that
is, that Europe can no longer dictate how the New World is to be un-
derstood, because Europe no longer grasps how to understand the
New World without essentially transforming it, if it ever did in the
first place. When the Amo later associates fábula with the future, he
refers specifically to this fundamental lack of understanding, which
constitutes an insurmountable epistemological gap:

—“Según el Preste Antonio [Vivaldi], todo lo de allá es
fábula.” —“De fábulas se alimenta la Gran Historia, no te
olvides de ello. Fábula parece lo nuestro a las gentes de
acá porque han perdido el sentido de lo fabuloso. Llamar
fábulo..." ——marcó el indiano una pausa—: No entiendes que lo fab-
uloso está en el futuro. Todo futuro es fabuloso”.... (77)

European hegemonic cultural practices are located in the past;
America, where fábula continuously and spontaneously emerges,
lies in the future. The atmosphere of America gives form (da for-
ma) to the subjects that Europe in its rigidity de-forms (deforma),
and the Amo resolves to return to his homeland, where the air, “al
evolver[lo], [lo] esculpe y [le] da forma.”

The first musical example discussed demonstrates America’s
capacity to transform stagnant European mores by injecting them
with a new, distinctly American vitality. The final rehearsal of Montezuma stands in stark counterpoint as an unequivocal demonstration
of Europe’s failure to perform the reverse operation, instead forcing
American themes into the molds of its own obsolete forms, leading
Vivaldi to muse: “Otra vez trataré de conseguirme un asunto más
romano” (71) as opposed, one assumes, to the indigenous subject
the Amo found so offensive. The final significant musical moment
in Concierto barroco is also the briefest: the opening notes of Louis
Armstrong’s concert in Venice. It indicates a nascent, but nonetheless
remarkable, shift in the direction of the cultural hegemony that
Carpentier has systematically contested, and embodies the culmi-
nation of everything that precedes it. Profoundly American, here
imported by Europe, the cultural capital that jazz claims in the novel
is prepared flawlessly by Carpentier, beginning with Filomeno’s im-
promptu jam session, to constitute what Shelly Jarrett Bromberg
calls “the New World’s legacy to the Old” (20). Nevertheless, as
the bells of the the torre del Orologio ring out in concert with Arm-
strong, Carpentier affords Europe a final nod. Rather than inverting
the old hegemony and establishing Europe as culturally beholden
to the Americas, he instead indicates the foundation for a new in-
tercultural syncretism. He refers to Armstrong’s concert in Europe
not as uniquely American, neither an invasion nor a cultural appro-
priation, but as the result of organic, transatlantic cross-pollination,
by way of jazz’s European Baroque and afro-Caribbean roots, as a
“nuevo concierto barroco al que, por inesperado portento, [vienen]
a mezclarse [...] las horas dadas por los moros de la torre del Orollo-
gio” (Carpentier 83).

Before attempting to read Concierto barroco within a European
Baroque musical form, one must first consider to what end Carpen-
tier would wish to produce such a novel in the first place, given
the thematic material expounded in the text. Assigning to Concierto
barroco a standard European Baroque form would indeed be an-
thetical to the hybrid, syncretic, and vehemently pro-American,
pro-autochthonous ideology the novel proposes. Moreover, the
fundamentally non-narrative character of music makes it an unlike-
ly, and at best dubious, candidate for the basis of a structural read-
ing of any novel. At the same time, the importance of music within
the works of Carpentier, and in particular within Concierto barroco,
cannot easily be overestimated. The continual subversion and rein-
vigoration of European musical forms —in particular old, Baroque
European musical forms, such as the concierto grosso—, through
contact with American elements allows Carpentier to construct a
compelling metaphor for the vitality and remarkable originality of
the New World freed from the hegemonic constraints of the Old,
able not only to inject new life into stale and inflexible hierarchies,
but to contribute fresh growth to a stagnant cultural system no lon-
ger adequate to deal with syncretic, transatlantic realities.
END NOTES

1 harpsichord: A stringed keyboard instrument in use from the 16th to 18th century [...] similar in shape to the modern grand piano. This and all subsequent definitions come from The New Harvard Dictionary of Music.

2 mordent: An ornament, especially a single or multiple alteration of the principle note with its lower auxiliary.

3 trill: An ornament consisting of the more or less rapid alternation of a note with the one next above in the prevailing key or harmony.

4 That is, the concerto grosso.

5 Feigenbaum also notes, as many others have, that Filomeno’s jam session fuses Baroque music with Afro-Cuban rhythms, but does not draw the connection between that fusion and jazz (439-439).

6 By taking pains to underscore numerous of literary elements loosely congruent with the sonata form, each consistent with the Classical aesthetic of order and balance, many critics have engaged in an exercise that amounts to an analytical wild goose chase. They count among their findings the typical contour of the Classical sonata form, which describes an arc that leads away from a point of harmonic rest to a point of harmonic tension through the exposition of two contrasting themes; that prolongs that tension by harmonically and melodically transforming the themes; and returning to a point of harmonic rest by recapitulating the original themes. In stark contrast, in the typical late-Baroque concerto grosso both exposition and the recapitulation are optional, often thematically unrelated to the material presented by the soloists, and frequently truncated or presented without any fixed order. Rather than formal themes, the concerto grosso deals in short motifs —melodic fragments—that the soloists combine and transform throughout the movement. The Baroque favors thematic unity over contrast, and unbridled motivic development over thematic transformation or harmonic tension and release. The harmonic itinerary of the concerto grosso arises, indeed, only as the result of simultaneous melodic motion (counterpoint) rather than a programmatic harmonic strategy.

7 Consider Klaus Muller-Bergh, Ester Gimbernat de González, and Hortensia Morell, among others.

8 “[Ger., spinning out]. The process by which melodic material is continuously derived from a brief figure [...] so as to produce a continuous melodic line rather than one characterized by balanced phrases [...] The term has thus been used to characterize textures typical of music of the Baroque as against those of the Classical period.”

9 One might also note a certain emphasis on the vowel “a” within certain sections of the passage —”...un árbol de plata labrada en la concavidad de sus platas recogía el jugo de los asados...”—, also potentially derived from the motivic word plata.

10 The 32-measure gap left for Filomeno’s solo by the Baroque Europeans reinforces the notion that the instrumentalists are engaged in the performance of jazz, as strict melodic structures of such length are not a feature of the concerto grosso, which prioritizes the transformation of melodic themes over harmonic progression and the large-scale structure of melodic statements.

11 Historical antecedents exist for adulterations such as these. Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes, in his Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España, “[...] y pusimos fuego a sus ídolos, y se quemó un buen pedazo de la sala con los ídolos Uichilobos y Tezcatepuca” (253). As Carpenter’s protagonist notes, the former constitutes an adulteration of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (and the latter of Tezcatlipoca).

12 Consider Raquel Aguilón de Murphy, David Bost’s “The Operatic World of Concierto barroco”, and Antonio Fama.

13 Vivaldi says, “La ópera no es cosa de historiadores,” (69) but proceeds to defend many of the opera’s historical inaccuracies by citing questionable sources.

WORKS CITED


El intelectual melancólico y la mártir revolucionaria en *La violencia del tiempo* de Miguel Gutiérrez

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El recientemente fallecido escritor peruano Miguel Gutiérrez (1940-1996) brindó en su novela *La violencia del tiempo* (1991) una de las reflexiones más agudas sobre los motivos desencadenantes del conflicto armado peruano (1980-2000). El presente ensayo propone que la “vergüenza” es presentada en la novela como síntoma esencial de la sociedad peruana, a raíz de la discriminación racial y de clase. La vergüenza es, como lo indica Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, “performative”, virando de un extremo al otro, de la melancolía a la rabia, “teatralmente” y por ello, reconstituyendo a la identidad en su vaivén. En *La violencia del tiempo* (así como en *La generación del 50: un mundo dividido*, 1988), Gutiérrez critica (y al hacerlo, se autocrítica) al intelectual de su época, el cual cae en la melancolía y es incapaz de tomar acción revolucionaria. Por el contrario, la novela presenta a la “mártir revolucionaria” como complemento activo del intelectual, capaz de tornar la vergüenza de melancolía paralizante a acción concreta en la realidad. Deyanira Urribarri y Zoila Chira son así, personajes ejemplares de una vergüenza “transformativa” mientras que Martín Villar (alter ego de Gutiérrez) sucumbe a lo que Walter Benjamín llamó la “melancolía de izquierda” en la que la “revolución” subsiste únicamente como objeto melancólico. De esta forma, las mártires revolucionarias en la obra de Gutiérrez son la proyección de un ideal: de una izquierda digna y de una revolución aún posible. Al mismo tiempo, son objetos que permiten que la escritura persista y con ello, se haga honor a la vocación del escritor.

**KEYWORDS**: conflicto armado interno, guerra interna, sendero luminoso, Miguel Gutiérrez, narrativa peruana, affect theory, vergüenza

Uno de los episodios más impactantes de la novela *La violencia del tiempo* (1991) de Miguel Gutiérrez (1940-1996) se da en una clase de Historia de la Universidad Católica donde el joven Martín Villar, alter ego de Gutiérrez:

Sintió ruborizarse al comparar su terno de casimiro ordinario con los elegantes y sobrios trajes de auténtico paño inglés, cortados y acabados por auténticas y afamadas sastrerías londinenses, llevados por apuestos y atléticos jóvenes rubios, en todo caso blancos o levemente trigueños con una sutil patina de bronce encendido, distintivo de buena casta y señorío, con apellidos como Ponce de León…. (I, 118)

En la lección de Historia se habla sobre “pureza de sangre” con la misma urgencia y gravedad que en los tiempos de la Colonia. El “rubor” deja paso a la sensación de sentirse ultrajado “no de manera abstracta sino visceralmente” (I, 119). Sin embargo, puesto que según “hábito de su infancia” está acostumbrado a esconderse, a pasar desapercibido, no es capaz de hacer un gesto de protesta y ello lo atormenta: “Mi deber para con los míos- se dijo- es salirme a pasar desapercibido, no es capaz de hacer un gesto de protesta y ello lo atormenta: “Mi deber para con los míos- se dijo- es salirme de clase, pero por entonces aún padecía de inasibles y tenaces coerciones espirituales como para abandonar el aula en señal de protesta” (I, 119). Sobreponiéndose a su timidez, intenta reclamar y denunciar lo absurdo de la discusión. Lo intenta hacer varias veces, sin éxito, temeroso de verse expuesto ante la multitud e ignorado por un profesor elitista e hispanófilo. Martín siente que su “yo se había difuminado” y que su voz era ajena: “Entonces me dije que mi voz no me pertenecía, yo era un conglomerado de otras voces y por primera vez me consideré parte de una comunidad. Me esforcé por hablar alto: había que atacar, nunca ofrecer la otra mejilla como sentenciaba mi tío Miceno Flórez” (I, 121). Finalmente, se levanta a hablar y percibe a su alrededor las múltiples voces, los murmullos (reales o no) que lo juzgan y denigran.

Publicada durante el conflicto armado interno peruano que enfrentó al Estado, la sociedad civil y al grupo maoísta Sendero Luminoso *La violencia del tiempo*, es la respuesta del escritor de izquierda Miguel Gutiérrez a la situación política del país. Es una larga novela de muchos personajes y líneas argumentales, que no alude directamente al conflicto sino que más bien intenta presentar los motivos que lo desencadenaron escenificando a la Historia del Perú como una de cruda violencia desde sus inicios. Así, cuenta la historia de la familia Villar, desde el soldado español Miguel Villar que inicia el “linaje” en Congará, Piura, al unirse con la india Sacramento Chira (durante el siglo XIX, aunque simbólicamente evoca a la Conquista) hasta Martín Villar, quien narra su juventud en los años sesenta. Como lo indica Martín, él y su familia son el eco de la Historia peruana: episodios de vergüenza y rencor como el arriba descrito abundan en la familia Villar y son ejemplos de la peruanidad. La pareja de Miguel Villar y Sacramento Chira remite
al conflicto que el narrador considera constitutivo de la identidad peruana y por extensión, latinoamericana: la violación y por tanto, la bastardía: “Eramos, pues, un pueblo de bastardos, frutos de la violencia, la derrota y el engaño, como cierta tarde sostuviera con adolescente vehemencia Martín Villar” (I, 117). Para Cruz Villar, el hijo del conquistador abandonado por su padre, la bastardía será una “herida” que lo volverá aislado y renoroso. Relacionando racismo y machismo, vinculará el odio a su madre—odoio que extenderá hacia toda mujer—con el odio hacia la raza indígena, y a la suya, mestiza. Tanto él, como su hijo Santos, continuarán con el legado de violencia que caracteriza a la sociedad peruana. El mestizaje, de este modo, no será signo de la unión armónica entre razas que se dan encuentro en la identidad peruana y que tienen como supuesto paradigma al Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. Todo lo contrario, la historia del Perú es desde siempre violenta e injusta, donde unos pocos ejercen un control arrogante al percibirse como racialmente superiores, más aún cuando claman su pertenencia a familias nobles o hidalgas.

Así, en la novela las descripciones sobre la vergüenza con respecto a la propia identidad racial son múltiples. “Bastardos” dicen rendir “loas a Dios de los cielos por haber propiciado la incursión nocturna del padre blanco en el cuartito de la oscura mamá”, dignificándolos “por el lado del pellejo” y del apellido que podían usufructuar con “podrido orgullo” (II, 103). Como dice Martín Villar sobre el origen de su familia, a la cual con ironía llama “estirpe”:

Lo que importaba era el porte, la sangre, la buena casta. Así lo consideró Sacramento Chira cuando revestida de sus mejores galas y untada con las flores del amor loco marchó a su encuentro para usurparle su semilla. Pues a eso se redujo ella. A ser un surco abierto anhelante y feraz, porque los indios (y este era un saber adquirido a eso se redujo ella. A ser un surco abierto anhelante y feraz, porque los indios (y este era un saber adquirido delante de la más remota infancia, quizá en el mismo pezón materno), los indios, fuesen varones o mujeres eran hembras por naturaleza, como hembras condenadas por Dios para ser violadas por el macho y por el macho convertidas en siervas, en esclavas, en concubinas y zorras de los señores de cuero blanco” (III, 13)

La raza indígena se expone como sinónimo de debilidad, una subjetividad inherentemente violada, humillada, por una raza más “fuerte”, superior. Las descripciones fenotípicas abundarán—el color de la piel, la textura y color del pelo—y sobre todo serán relevantes para “catalogar” a las nuevas generaciones, los hijos que son a la vez esperanza de un futuro más digno y miedo de un retorno más profundo a la abyección. La vergüenza, así, será herencia transmitida de generación en generación: hijos que sienten vergüenza de sí porque sus padres sienten vergüenza de ellos y que se avergüenzan de sus propios hijos cuando los tienen. De este modo, Cruz Villar “huye de sí mismo” y agresivamente abjura de su sangre a la cual atribuye “toda la desventura y desdicha de la vida” (III, 10). Primorosa Villar será vendida por su padre Cruz a raíz de una supuesta visión mágica en la que se le indica que ella al juntarse con un blanco, reivindicará la “sangre” de los Villar. El último eslabón de la cadena de vergüenza en la familia Villar será Martín, quien admite haber abjurado de su “sangre” y repudiado su “cuerpo”: “Pretendí huir y saltar y dejar atrás (olvidándola, aniquilándola) aquella sangre que para mí representaba no solo la pobreza, la ignorancia y la superstición, sino también la fealdad, la derrota, el rencor y el odio, el lado oscuro y abyecto de la vida” (III, 11).

De este modo, las humillaciones sufridas en la familia, especialmente de parte de los poderosos, (como la venta de Primorosa Villar al terrateniente Odar Benalcázar) tienen una repercusión que perdura por generaciones. Con ello, Gutiérrez parece evocar la antigua hipótesis antropológica sobre el crucial papel del honor en las sociedades mediterráneas, en donde el honor propio está determinado por la actuación de la familia en sociedad y en especial de las mujeres. De forma más amplia, esta hipótesis puede llevar a hacer una distinción entre culturas de “culpa” y culturas de “vergüenza”, en la que las primeras serían sociedades individualistas mientras las segundas serían sociedades colectivistas. Según dicha perspectiva una cultura de la “vergüenza” sería una en que el orden social depende del ejercicio de “humillación”, es decir, una en que sus miembros “averiguengan” a otros miembros a conformarse con las reglas sociales. Mientras tanto, el control social en una cultura de la “culpa” dependería de la culpa interna de cada individuo y de las instituciones seculares y religiosas dedicadas a castigar la culpa. Por supuesto, esta hipótesis conlleva a que se hagan distinciones en la Antropología entre “Oriente” y “Occidente”, como culturas de vergüenza y culpa respectivamente, siendo la culpa signo de “civilización”. En esta línea podría leerse a Freud, quien asocia el sentimiento de culpa y su papel fundamental en la creación de la civilización a la cultura occidental. Mientras tanto, la vergüenza sería para Freud una emoción de menor importancia, imperante en la primera infancia en relación compleja con nuestra propia sexualidad y en general, nuestra “corporalidad”.

La distinción entre culpa y vergüenza es así motivo de controversia, siendo comúnmente la vergüenza representada como lo que uno es, no lo que uno hace. Así Leon Wumser dice: “Wherever, in one regard or another, one shows himself to be weak and failing, one experiences shame. In contrast, wherever one exerts a form of power, hurting another, one is faced with guilt, though one may have counteracted the sense of shame by exerting one’s power. Thus, all too often one has to navigate between the Scylla of shame and Charybdis of guilt—again the “tragic dilemma” of classical tragedy (The Mask of Shame, 43). Lo que uno es y lo que uno hace son cosas difícilmente diferenciales algunas veces. Puede existir un nivel de “vergüenza” en la culpa (me avergüenzo de lo que soy por lo que he hecho) y culpa en la vergüenza (hago estas cosas por lo que soy). Por ello, la diferencia parece estar en la intensidad con que siente que lo que uno hace se traduce como lo que uno “es” (en
la intensidad de la herida narcisista) pues, la culpa puede traducirse en un nivel de vergüenza “normal” o excesiva, y la vergüenza puede en ocasiones estar desconectada de la culpa.

Para la teoría de los afectos, la vergüenza será primordial para la constitución de todo ser humano. En palabras de Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, quien se basa en Silvan Tomkins:

Recent work by theorists and psychologists of shame locates the proto-form (eyes down, head averted) of this powerful affect—which appears in infants very early, between the third and seventh month of life, just after the infant has become able to distinguish and recognize the face of its caregiver—at a particular moment in a particular repeated narrative. That is the moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child’s face and the caregiver’s recognized face (a circuit that, if it can be called a form of primary narcissism, suggests that narcissism from the very first throws itself sociably, dangerously into the gravitational field of the other) is broken: the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, “giving face” based on a faith in the continuity of this circuit” (Touching Feeling, 36).

La constitución del sujeto nacería—peligrosamente—en sociedad, la idea de un “yo” dependería de su relación con el “otro”, de la imagen que en el “espejo” daría el otro. Ello es “peligroso” pues significa que el sujeto está conformado de modo radicalmente vulnerable, a la merced de la continuación de una cadena que no depende por entero de él. Los peligros de la interdependencia son visibles en La violencia del tiempo, donde Gutiérrez presenta un mundo en que los espejos distorsionan inevitablemente a los sujetos brindándoles imágenes “inferiorizadas” de sí mismos. Ello se da, primero, en el plano individual de la familia, conectado a su vez, con la sociedad. En lo que es una internalización del vergüenza a través de una identificación con el sujeto “vergonzante” (Adamson y Clark, 10), Cruz Villar (bisabuelo de Martín) mantendrá vivo el recuerdo de su padre Miguel Villar, el iniciador blanco de la “estirpe”, quien vivirá como un “yo” ideal al cual volverá persistente e infructuosamente y frente al cual compara cada uno de sus actos, siempre cayendo en desventaja. La figura del “padre” en La violencia del tiempo no será nunca aniquilada pues en vida ejerce inevitablemente un poder déspota y en muerte funge como un recuerdo vivido y atemorizante. Miguel Villar, Cruz Villar, Santos Villar serán todos inmortales y su ley será la del padre primigenio freudiano, que acapara todas las mujeres para sí. La misma función la ocuparán los poderosos en general: tótems que con su sola existencia humillan a quienes los veneran.

De este modo, la vergüenza funcionará frente a la ansiedad de un otro supuestamente “amenazante”, que juzga a uno inferior o de una situación “amenazante”, donde la posibilidad de mostrarse inferior es alta. A la vez, es una mirada interiorizada donde “ese otro” que nos mira está adentro nuestro y por ello, la presencia de un “público” no es indispensable. Como dice Leon Wurmser, la vergüenza es la emoción (affect) del desprecio (contempt) contra uno mismo. Así, un sujeto que se percibe invisible o inferior ante el otro (ante el ojo interior que es un “otro”) sufriría un doloroso deseo de “desaparecer” o “morir” por lo que la vergüenza surge como un “mecanismo de protección” que se manifiesta por lo general en la voluntad de “esconderse” o de no ser “visto”. Como forma de combatir esta emoción las personas elaboran una serie de estrategias de defensa:

A number of defensive efforts for coping with shame emerge: turning passive into active by showing another person as ridiculous and contemptible instead of oneself; narcissistic self imagery and claims in the form of grandiosity and idealization; depersonalization; lying and defeating the representative of conscience; masochistic flaunting of degradation; and provoking humiliation (externalization). (The Mask of Shame, 28)

Visto de forma esquemática, ante la realidad de la vergüenza se puede “optar” por sucumbir ante ella, magnificándola o proyectándola hacia los otros, haciéndolos a estos despreciables. Este es un dilema que se encuentra por doquier en La violencia del tiempo y por ello, los personajes viran alternativamente hacia uno u otro lado, en un proceso que es más una progresión de diferentes grados que una bifurcación. La vergüenza es, como lo afirma Kosowsky, “performativa”.

As best described by Tomkins, shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance. Performance interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though importantly it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity. (37-38)

Así, Cruz Villar es un déspota que violenta física y emocionalmente a sus hijos al mismo tiempo que, siente una profunda vergüenza por su raza y resentimiento por haber sido abandonado por su padre. Martín Villar hereda el sentimiento de inferioridad de su abuelo pero, a diferencia del mismo, trata de canalizar su recorrido hacia los causantes de las injusticias. Sus
reacciones se diferencian, al menos en parte, debido a que el último Villar recibe una educación letrada e interioriza un discurso revanchista de parte de ciertos mentores (un profesor de Historia y unos tios sindicalistas, por ejemplo). De este modo, en Villar se expone, en principio, el fenómeno que Sendero Luminoso manipuló tan bien, brindar una idea de odio frente a un sentimiento de resentimiento, y de forma primaria, de vergüenza. Villar es así miembro del sector que conformó la dirigencia senderista, la clase media provinciana que vislumbró en la educación una salida al “atrás” y un camino hacia el “progreso” pero que al ver los caminos del ascenso social truncados injustamente recurrió a la lucha armada. La meta de Villar será entonces, abandonar los sentimientos de “vergüenza” inculcados y acceder al terreno de la razón. Dominar el cuerpo—con su carga de discriminación racial, de emociones viscerales de inferioridad—a través de la mente—con la “narrativa” revolucionaria, secuencia lógica que le da sentido a lo “v visceral”.

La novela, publicada en el momento más álgido del conflicto armado interno peruano, es, como se ha indicado, la respuesta ficcional de Gutiérrez al mismo. Al mostrar la violenta historia peruana, Gutiérrez pretende indicar las razones profundas -no inmediatas- que desencadenaron el conflicto. Sin embargo, ni el conflicto armado ni ninguna “revolución” es presentada en el contexto contemporáneo peruano. Más aún, en el personaje de Martín Villar no podemos ver el tránsito de la vergüenza al odio sin cuestionamientos. Si bien el rencor y la venganza se defienden como “las únicas armas que posee el pobre para manifestar el agravio padecido y reclamar su justicia” (I, 47), ni el rencor ni la venganza se traducen en violencia activa en Martín Villar. Más bien, La violencia del tiempo no expone en Martín Villar a un revolucionario fanático y ni siquiera a un hombre decidido. Todo lo contrario, Villar no hace suyo un discurso de odio- inapelable, tajante- aunque lo intenta. Abandona el seminario y entra en la Universidad Católica, abandona la universidad y se hace maestro de escuela en el campo, por último, esta última opción es también dejada atrás. Villar explica su trayecto como un “camino de perfección” constituido por la “reivindicación de un linaje humillado, retorno a la comunidad y consolación por la literatura” (III, 312). En otras palabras, Villar desea ser un “santo laico” (como el doctor González), un rebelde ascético que enderece los entuertos del mundo, pero su carácter lo traiciona y cae en un doloroso ensimismamiento que lo aparta del resto.

En su ensayo de 1937 “Duelo y Melancolía” Freud indica que la melancolía es una clase de duelo en el que en lugar de “perder” algo exterior se “pierde” algo valioso interior al individuo. El rencor dirigido hacia el propio ego, sería la trasposición, según Freud, del rencor sentido hacia el objeto originalmente, e inconscientemente, perdido. Este apego a la perdida interior (y al dolor que conlleva) sería tenaz, haciendo que el mundo exterior, la “realidad” (supuesta), desaparezca y convertiría al melancólico en enemigo de toda actividad “útil”. Este proceso sería ejemplar del sujeto moderno, el cual estaría determinado por la voluntad de encontrarse con una “unidad” perdida solo encontrando en su lugar un “vacío”, al someterse a una “actividad mental que se desboca y se enreda sobre sí misma” (Shaeffer, 356). En este contexto, la figura del intelectual sería el epítome del sujeto moderno pues este se enfrentaría a la pérdida de valores, la extinción del mundo tradicional, la racialización y alienación de la vida, producto de la modernidad. Se da entonces una paradoja. El intelectual sería capaz de cuestionar la realidad y por ello, pretendería cambiarla pero el mismo acto de cuestionamiento sería una traba para el desarrollo del proyecto ideado. Como dice Wolf Lepenies: “El intelectual lamenta el estado del mundo, y su lamento termina conduciendo al pensamiento utópico, al esbozo de un mundo mejor con el objeto de expulsar la melancolia. Por esta razón, la melancolía tiene que desaparecer de la utopía. Más aún, en la utopía existe, como norma, una prohibición estricta de la melancolía” (Melancolia y utopía, 25).

La prohibición de la melancolía se da tanto en la izquierda como en el liberalismo, por ser contraproducente a la construcción de la “utopía” izquierdistas y liberal. Aunque no mencionado por Lepenies, la melancolía también es contraria a la utopía post-moderna, es decir, al imperativo del consumogoce y el ideal de una vida política y afectivamente distanciada. Sin embargo, para el revolucionario de izquierda la prohibición de la melancolía es especialmente enérgica pues el imperativo de una revolución y una utopía es más explícito. Por ello, sería justamente el intelectual de izquierda quien se hallaría en mayor peligro de caer en la melancolía. De ahí la característica “melancolía de izquierda” de la que hablaba Walter Benjamin en la que la acción política es casi nula pero que al mismo tiempo, impulsa al sujeto a aferrarse “melancólicamente” a la idea de la Revolución. Según Benjamin, los sentimientos se tornan cosas para el melancólico de izquierda, tomando tanto orgullo en los trazos de bienes espirituales caducos como los burgueses toman en sus bienes materiales: “We come to love our left passions and reasons, our left analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them” (21). El deseo de la revolución, de este modo, permanecería como un objeto melancólico al cual el intelectual de izquierda volvería obsesivamente.

Villar es muy crítico del papel del letrado en el mundo conservador al exponer a sus “rancios” profesores de Historia. Al mismo tiempo, como se ha indicado, es consciente de sus deficiencias (o conflictos) como intelectual de izquierda. De este modo, dadas las ambiciones abarcadoras de la novela, La violencia del tiempo hace una crítica al papel del letrado en la Historia peruana desde su fundación, y si se considera que, especialmente, la novela dialoga con el conflicto armado interno, la crítica al letrado se hace más pertinaz. Por un lado, el letrado impuso luego de la Conquista el español y la cultura española, e intentó erradicar y denigrar la cultura oral local. Al hacer esto, se hizo socio de quienes estaban en el poder y la mayoría de las veces propagó teorías racistas (el alemán Albrecht es un ejemplo). Sin embargo, hubo excepciones
que tomaron lo mejor de la cultura letrada, el humanismo y amor por el saber, ejemplificado en el doctor González y en el padre de Martín, Cruz Villar, llamado como su antepasado. Las dificultades que encuentra Martín en sí mismo para conducir el idealismo de este último tipo de intelectual hacia la acción social exponen la crítica de Gutiérrez hacia su propia generación y la inmediatamente anterior.

Tres años antes de publicar La violencia del tiempo, Gutiérrez publicó un libro de crítica literaria que también aludía de forma oblicua al conflicto armado interno que en ese momento sufría el país. La generación del 50: un mundo dividido (1988) analiza la obra de los intelectuales nacidos -aproximadamente- entre 1920 y 1935, sean poetas, ensayistas o narradores.8 Aunque el autor hace especial énfasis en la separación entre el juicio estético y el ideológico, sí hace una crítica severa desde el punto de vista ideológico a los intelectuales de esta generación. Por un lado, censura a los intelectuales que se adhieren al poder, sean estos de derecha (pone el ejemplo de Vargas Llosa) o de izquierda (pone el ejemplo de Aníbal Quijano). Por el otro, reprocha el espíritu nihilista de muchos escritores de la época, categorizando al grupo de “depresivo”, dado a borracheras sin alegría y en cuya ficción abundan protagonistas sensibles pero lacónicos. Como dice en otro texto, haciendo referencia a Luder, alter ego de Ribeyro y a Zavalita, alter ego de Vargas Llosa, Gutiérrez deplora que las tensiones de la guerra estaban cerca de alcanzar su grado más alto, cuando aun no se vislumbraba que un año más tarde se capturaría a Abimael Guzmán. Para un autor vinculado al maoísmo, repatriado de la China, y con familia encarcelada por terrorismo (la pareja de Gutiérrez, Vilma y su hijo Carlos Eduardo, ya fallecido), es este momento en el que la vida debe ser una lucha por cambiarla. Sin embargo, escuchamos poco la voz de Deyanura pues esta es más que nada la receptora espectral de la historia que cuenta Villar sobre su familia. La presencia de Deyanira adquiere materialidad- y de hecho, lo hace de la forma más vivida y “real” que puede hacerlo un personaje de novela—puesto que es a ella a quien se le dedica La violencia del tiempo, con la siguiente dedicatoria: “El autor rinde homenaje a la gloriosa memoria de Deyanara Urribarri, muerta en el combate por su ideales de justicia y dignidad humana”.

El gesto es más que un inocente juego metaficcional debido al contexto altamente violento, politizado y paraóxico del momento. Recordemos que la novela se publica en 1993, año en que las tensiones de la guerra estaban cerca de alcanzar su grado más alto, cuando aun no se vislumbraba que un año más tarde se capturaría a Abimael Guzmán. Para un autor vinculado al maoísmo, repatriado de la China, y con familia encarcelada por terrorismo (la pareja de Gutiérrez, Vilma y su hijo Carlos Eduardo, ya fallecido en la cárcel), esta dedicatoria es un peligroso acto político de provocación. Deyanira es entonces el único lazo explícito que une a la novela con el contexto histórico del país. Ella es el único personaje que verdaderamente decide tomar y el único que vincula a la ficción con la acción revolucionaria de la realidad. La simbología de Deyanira como “mujer revolucionaria” es aún más clara en la nueva dedicatoria de la edición del 2010 de La violencia del tiempo, la cual ya no va dirigida a “Deyanira” sino a “A la memoria de las mujeres del Perú que a través de la historia lucharon por sus ideales de justicia”.

El apellido de Deyanira podría evocar a “La pasionaria” Dolores Ibárruri, dirigente política del Partido Comunista de España y militante a favor de los derechos de la mujer. El nombre “Deyanira” puede evocar a “Deyanira”, hija de Eneo, quien mata inadvertidamente a su esposo Hércules al untar su túnica con la sangre de un centauro, quien le hizo creer, con engaños, que su sangre haría que Hércules la amase eternamente. Al mismo tiempo, cabe recordar que “Deyanira” era el segundo nombre de Augusta la Torre, esposa de Abimael Guzmán y fallecida en 1988 bajo
La ambigüedad en la representación de la mujer se hace más visible en el personaje de Zoila Chira, joven adolescente en el pueblo donde trabaja Martín Villar como maestro, luego de que decide abandonar la universidad para dedicarse de modo más efectivo a la acción social. Martín es amante de la madre de Zoila, para luego abandonarla, haciéndose amante de Zoila misma. En el pueblo, aunque Martín desea vivir con los comuneros de modo horizontal, este le es imposible debido a su condición de mestizo, costeño y letrado. Tal conflicto es visible, sobre todo, en la relación que mantiene con la joven Zoila a quien le enseña sobre literatura, sobre la igualdad entre los seres humanos y más aún, modales y buenas costumbres, como que “el vino se debe tomar en copa” (III, 255). La incita a terminar la secundaria y luego a hacerse maestra de escuela. Zoila Chira trata a Martín de “usted”, lo llama “maestro” e indica que él le abrió el entendimiento y la ayudó a valorar el poder de la razón, mientras que se que se refiere a sí misma como “borracha” y a su mente como iluminada pobremente (III, 277). Martín, a su vez, la llama “mi pequeña Zoila” y admite que ella se somete a él, más que por amor “por la conciencia de su inferioridad y de su absoluta ignorancia, la confusión y perturbación de su espíritu” (III, 310). Asimismo, admite sentir “orgullo e incluso pueril vanidad” pues encendió en ella “la primera chispa de rebeldía” y abrió sus ojos “a los caminos de la libertad y la dignidad humana”, coincidiendo esto con “la apoteosis de su carnalidad y la limpia frescura de su belleza” (III, 301). Consciente de la verticalidad entre ella misma y su “mentor”, Chira se alejará de Martín Villar, no sin buen grado de rencor. Más aún, al convertirse en maestra y líder sindical ella adquiere el compromiso político que elude Villar. El terreno de la acción revolucionaria, aquella sobre la cual Martín había meditado tanto, queda con ello en manos de Chira, siendo “Chira” el segundo apellido de José Carlos Mariátegui quien a través de su trabajo sindical se muestra como un personaje clave para el desarrollo de la izquierda radical en el Perú. Mientras tanto, Martín continuará con sus aspiraciones como narrador al llevar su máquina de escribir al campo y al aferrarse a su lámpara de kerosene, necesaria para escribir la novela, que, de forma no explícita, es La violencia del tiempo.

Zoila es un personaje más complejo que Deyanira pues somos testigos de su trayecto de una mentalidad conservadora o “tradicional” hacia la obtención de una conciencia de “clase”. Mientras Deyanira es un personaje seguro de sí mismo y de ideas claras, Zoila duda como Martín y batalla por dejar atrás ideas que son parte de ella, no solo pensadas sino atesoradas con cariño. El mejor ejemplo de la diferencia entre ambas es su relación con la maternidad. Deyanira cree que “la maternidad es el peor agravio que se le ha infligido a la mujer como ser humano” (I, 209) mientras que Zoila, por el contrario, anhela tener un hijo con Martin y le reprocha el hecho de hacerla hecho abortar. Pero es más que las “ideas” del status quo lo que se deja atrás, Deyanira (aunque no lo vemos en la novela) y Zoila (de quien sí somos testigos) deben renunciar a las emociones que impiden su trayecto como luchadoras sociales. Ambas deben superar la vergüenza, expuesta en sus diferentes manifestaciones. Deyanira debió dejar la
Desde José de la Riva Agüero hasta Víctor Andrés Belaunde, el discurso sobre la Nación: “La imagen del autor de haciendo referencia al uso que se le da al Inca Garcilaso en la narrativa se acepta la vergüenza sin desmedro de la construcción de la en oposición a emociones de vulnerabilidad. La medida en que forma racional y que pretenda alimentar a la voluntad del sujeto como lo puede ser cualquier ideología que ordene la realidad de En ambos, la ideología de izquierda es clave para este proceso que evolucionan y que intentan poner su vergüenza “a trabajar”.

La performance alrededor de la vergüenza es una actividad política pues la vergüenza en sí es una forma de espectáculo frente a un “ojo” exterior e interior. Cada vez que se desea establecer contacto se dramatiza la posibilidad de que la vergüenza resurja (las miradas que son ignoradas) o de que se quiebre (cuando las miradas son retornadas como en un espejo), estando el “narcisismo primario” siempre actuando en un vaivén elíptico entre el ocultamiento y la exposición. Para Kosofsky se debe abandonar el concepto de vergüenza como un elemento destructivo y más bien incorporarlo como un elemento performativo:

The forms taken by shame are not distinct “toxic” parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation, but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure. (63)

¿Por qué es la vergüenza performativa en Zoila y no en Martín? ¿En que medida se puede hablar de un proceso performativo en Zoila quien es aleccionada por Martín? Ambos son personajes que evolucionan y que intentan poner su vergüenza “a trabajar”. En ambos, la ideología de izquierda es clave para este proceso como lo puede ser cualquier ideología que ordene la realidad de forma racional y que pretenda alimentar a la voluntad del sujeto en oposición a emociones de vulnerabilidad. La medida en que se acepta la vergüenza sin desmedro de la construcción de la voluntad, como lo propone Kosowsky Sedwick, es compleja. Lo que es claro es que Martín Villar es incapaz de realizar este proceso por completo. A pesar de que Martín intenta liberarse de la identidad que se le ha impuesto (es “provinciano” y “mestizo”, por ejemplo, como se le recuerda en la Universidad Católica), él entiende a su genealogía de forma normativa, como una camisa de fuerza y por ello, siente encapsular su traumática historia familiar en él mismo, con lo cual cada uno de sus actos remiten como un eco hacia el pasado: su relación con Chira y la madre de esta repite el machismo de sus antepasados; su timidez nace de la mala fama de su abuelo y la pobreza de su madre; su rencor contra las clases dirigentes del país evoca no solo al de su familia sino al de todo mestizo humillado en el Perú (y por extensión, a todo desvalido, dondequiera que esté).

Como señala el crítico Ricardo González Vigil, la vocación literaria para Gutiérrez será una forma de gozo y calvario. Como dice él mismo, el escritor, y más específicamente, el escritor peruano, posee un mandato social que proviene de su misma interioridad y que lo hace sentirse “responsable” e incluso “culpable” de la situación del país. Así, afirma en Celebración de la novela, libro que recuenta la génesis de La violencia del tiempo, que “el peso de la realidad social es la piedra de Sísifo del escritor peruano” (142). Esta piedra de “Sísifo” está intrínsecamente ligada, en la novela, al trauma familiar (y por ello, al trauma intergeneracional), el cual a su vez nace y se reproduce a raíz de las estrictas normas que en el Perú condicionan la identidad de los ciudadanos- no solo en cuanto a la raza y clase, sino también en cuanto al género. La piedra de “Sísifo” sería en esta medida, el peso de la propia identidad entendida como un callejón sin salida. Para trascender su realidad social y realidad familiar Martín Villar opta por la escritura, la cual resulta ser una salida y una trampa. Por un lado, la imaginación es una forma de sobrevivencia (“imaginar” mundos mejores ante una realidad desagradable). Pero, por el otro, el vuelo hacia otra realidad se hace imposible si se quiere tener una repercusión política en la realidad. Realidad social y familiar son combustible indispensable de la imaginación y su cadena. Ante esta situación imposible, las mártires revolucionarias en la obra de Gutiérrez son la proyección de un ideal: de una izquierda digna y de una revolución aún posible. A su vez, es justo decirlo, le permiten a Gutiérrez seguir escribiendo. En otras palabras, alimentar una literatura socialmente comprometida y hacer honor a su vocación de escritor.

ENDNOTES

1 Esta hipótesis es presentada también por Octavio Paz en El laberinto de la soledad (1950) en referencia a la “mexicanidad”.

2 Gutiérrez evoca a la figura del Inca Garcilaso en su libro Poderes secretos (1995) mezcla de novela y ensayo. Como dice Peter Elmore, haciendo referencia a el que se le da al Inca Garcilaso en la narrativa sobre la Nación: “La imagen del autor de Los comentarios reales retrataría, casi alegóricamente, la condición peculiar del Perú posterior a la Conquista. Desde José de la Riva Agüero hasta Víctor Andrés Belaunde, el discurso del mestizaje ha sido formulado como apología de un supuesto enlace armónico entre la cultura de los conquistadores y la de los conquistados. Menos que de ensayar la reivindicación de los mestizos de carne y hueso, se trataba de oponer un freno retórico al radicalismo de los indígenas y, en general, a las críticas de los adversarios cosmolópicos o modernos de la hispanofilia” (73).

3 Ejemplo de esta postura sería el libro Chrysanthemum and the sword: patterns of Japanese culture (1946) de Ruth Benedict en el que se pretende
representar para un público Occidental a la cultura japonesa como una basada en la vergüenza y el honor.

1 "Civilización y sus descontentos (1930)

2 "Shame is first the fear of disgrace, it is the anxiety about the danger we might be looked at with contempt for having dishonored ourselves. Second it is the feeling when one is looked at with such scorn. It is, in other words, the affect of contempt directed against the self-by other or by one’s own conscience... Third, is almost the antithesis of the second one, as in: Don’t you have any shame? It is an overall character trait preventing any such disgraceful exposure, an attitude of respect towards others and towards oneself, a stance of reverence... for oneself" (Wurmser, Shame, 67-68)


5 Crítica al poeta izquierdista Erich Kastner, en 1933, reproducida en inglés como "Left-Wing Melancholy".

6 Entre los miembros de la generación se encuentran narradores como Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Antonio Gálvez Ronceros, Eleodoro Vargas Vicuña, Luis Loayza, Oswaldo Reynoso, etc.; poetas como Jorge Eduardo Eielson, Blanca Varela, Javier Sologuren, Alejandro Romualdo, etc., científicos sociales como Pablo Macera, Aníbal Quijano, Efrain Morote Best, Julio Cotler, etc. artísticos plásticos como Fernando de Syszlo y Víctor Humareda, y políticos como Alfonso Barrantes, Hugo Blanco, Guillermo Lobatón, Luis de la Puente Úceda, y por supuesto, Abimael Guzmán. Los miembros pertenecen a muchas subgeneraciones de acuerdo al año de su nacimiento, a su grupo o movimiento artístico, su clase social y a su ideología política.

7 Sobre el tema se puede ver La trahison des clercs (1927) de Julien Benda.

8 Sobre este tema ver Las mujeres de Sendero Luminoso (1993) de Robin Kirk.


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OBRAS CITADAS


Nomadic Identity and *lo cubano* in José Manuel Poveda

*Kathrin Theumer*

José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926) is a contradictory figure in the Cuban literary canon. While he is praised for being the guardian of Cuban letters following the deaths of Julián del Casal and José Martí, Poveda is also censured for his pursuit of creative autonomy and his apparent detachment from immediate reality. For critics like Cintio Vitier, Poveda's "cult to the self" is at odds with the formation of a Cuban national conscience, however what it meant to be Cuban was one of Poveda's central concerns. Confronting the contradictions of the first Cuban Republic, Poveda is outspoken about the island's colonial heritage and the threat of U.S. imperialism, often citing the need to construct a sovereign national personality. Reading Poveda's *Versos precursores* (1917) in dialogue with his critical essays on Cuba's political situation and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), this article proposes that Poveda's obsession with cultivating his artistic personality—one of the most recognized (and misunderstood) aspects of his poetics—is also an expression of his *cubanía*. Analyzing the recurrent theme of wandering as a metaphor for *becoming*, I argue that Poveda's concept of the "I" is itinerant rather than transcendent, involving not only individual but national identity. In this way, Poveda's nomadism also anticipates the migratory discourse of *cubanía* later developed by Fernando Ortiz, opening the way for a fresh reading of this neglected figure.

**KEYWORDS:** wandering, nomadism, Poveda, *lo cubano*, Nietzsche, self, nationalism, eternal return, Zarathustra

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La cultura de los meta-archipiélagos es un eterno retorno, un detour sin propósito o meta, un rodeo que no lleva a otro lugar que a sí mismo.

Antonio Benítez Rajo, *La isla que se repite*

What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In Cuba, transience precedes essence.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition*

José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926, b. Santiago) is not a forgotten poet in Cuba, but his canonicity is perplexing. Cintio Vitier's reading of Poveda in *Lo cubano en la poesía* has largely set the tone for *povedian* criticism, and although Vitier insists that his aim is not to arrive at "absolute conclusions" with respect to *lo cubano*, his lectures establish a poetic genealogy that ultimately anathematizes Poveda (20). Vitier has trouble reconciling Poveda's "Cubanness" with his individualism, affirming that Poveda was "too obsessed with the aesthetics and metaphysics of the 'creative I', the absolute I' to be in touch with immediate reality" (337). But what it meant to be Cuban was one of Poveda's constant concerns. Writing during the early years of the first Cuban Republic, Poveda was outspoken about Cuba's colonial heritage and the threat of U.S. imperialism, frequently citing the need to construct an autochthonous and autonomous national personality. Although Poveda's civics and "cult to the self" have been interpreted as conflicting tendencies and indices of his contradictory character, Poveda's concern with self-definition was deeply intertwined with the construction of a Cuban national identity. In other words, Poveda's preoccupation with cultivating his artistic personality—one of the most recognized (and misunderstood) aspects of his poetics—is also an expression of his *cubanía*.

Vitier largely bases his assessment on the preface to Poveda's only published book, *Versos precursores* (1917), in which Poveda admittedly adopts a self-aggrandizing tone: *Versos*, he affirms, showcases the trajectory of modern poetry and the pathway of the poet toward the "I" (*Obra poética* 187). Read in isolation, Poveda's preface might suggest a rising trajectory that culminates in a transcendent moment of self-realization. As my analysis will demonstrate, however, this thesis is undermined by the book's inaugural poem which leads to a decidedly more uncertain subtext surrounding self-definition. Reading *Versos precursores* in dialogue with Poveda's critical essays on Cuba's political situation, Nietzsche's philosophy and Russian literature opens the way for a more nuanced reading of Poveda's poetics of identity. Analyzing the recurrent theme of wandering as a metaphor for *becoming*, I argue that Poveda's concept of the "I" is processual and contingent rather than totalizing and metaphysical, and deeply intertwined with the formation of a Cuban national conscience. In this way, my essay also suggests a continuity between Poveda's project and the "migratory" nature of later twentieth-century discourse of Cuban identity.

What Vitier misses or misreads in his critique of Poveda's cult to the self is the link that Poveda establishes between the prerogative of individual and collective self-definition. Though the critic does
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acknowledge that Poveda and Boti set out to “rescue the nation through poetry,” he judges their mission as ultimately unfulfilled because of their yoismo: “se proponían un rescate de la Nación a través de la poesía, un traslado de la finalidad histórica perdida, al mundo de la creación verbal autóctona. Mas para lograrlo le[s] faltó algo que no es la afirmación del yo [...] Lo que les faltó fue una visión de la realidad y una incorporación de la cultura” (343). Poveda’s affirmation of the “I,” though, implies a sustained and acute view of Republican reality. The consolidation of the Cuban Republic in 1902 unfolded under U.S. military occupation, and the island found itself once again subjected to an imperial power, “divested of national sovereignty and self-determination” (Pérez 122). Poveda frequently maligns the fiction of Cuban independence, denouncing the Platt Amendment which has “placed the destiny of the Republic in foreign hands,” preventing Cuba from speaking in her own voice (“nuestra voz”) (Órbita 490-91). “Más que hacer la libertad de Cuba,” writes Poveda paraphrasing Antonio Maceo, a hero of the independence movement, “hay que hacer a Cuba” (Prosa, vol. 1, 162). Poveda critiques mainstream reformists precisely for neglecting the task of forming a “national personality” (160), and it is this imperative of nation-building that guides Poveda’s literary mission: “Somos ególatras, y debemos nuestra egolatría a la Patria, la consagramos en sacrificio, a la conciencia cubana. Hemos de colaborar en la forja del alma patria” (271). As reflected in these examples, the poet’s rhetoric of self-definition is not self-centered and may also act as a curative to the chief national ill: “El mal que mina nuestra existencia es la falta de personalidad” (“Derecho internacional,” Órbita 490). In fact, Poveda’s affirmation of the “I” is expressed as a kind of national egolatria, one that might redeem the aililing Republic: “Que la República emprenda el cultivo de su yo,” writes Poveda of the nation (222). Although Poveda’s yoismo comes through as an aesthetic concern in the preface to his book, Poveda clearly situates his literary mission in the context of Republican politics and connects his egolatric explicitly to the formation of a national conscience.

Poveda’s nationalism is difficult to reconcile with the official discourse of lo cubano, however. Louis A. Pérez explains that writers struggling to come to terms with the contradiction between the patriotic ideals of the independence movement and Republican reality often turned to history and the legacy of nineteenth-century as the “basis for national fulfillment,” a prime example being the apotheosis of José Martí as the Apostle of Cuban independence (Pérez 162-2). Poveda, who is wary of mainstream nationalism for its “cult to the past” and “closed borders,” develops his own national conscience in dialogue with European texts and anchors his literary mission not to Martí, but to Julián del Casal. Poveda’s transgression is then not only that of self-absorption but also substitution. Vitier’s eighth lecture, “Casal como antítesis de Martí,” establishes a binary and hierarchical relationship between the ethical modernismo that Martí embodies and the aesthetic modernismo personified by Casal. In this way, Martí transcends the literary criteria of canon formation and becomes synonymous with “national identity,” meaning that Casal is in conflict not only with an ethical modernismo but with the Cuban national discourse (Morán 24). Naming Casal and not Martí as the precursor to his project upsets the continuity of Vitier’s genealogy in Lo cubano en la poesía and worse: Poveda’s decision is tantamount to a refusal to “fulfill Cuba’s unfinished history,” leaving the nation incomplete (Pérez 157).

Making Martí the paragon of Cubanness can only produce one outcome: the demotion of those poets in whose works the “historical ideal” and “unifying center” that Martí comes to represent is fuzzy or absent (Vitier 343). For this reason, Rocasolano can only grant Poveda “partial”—not absolute—“insertion into Cuba’s national conscience” (El último 77). In fact, Rocasolano reads Poveda’s choice of precursor as a move that effectively diverts the course of Cuban literary history: “De haber sido Martí en lugar de Casal, nuestra poesía se hubiera puesto a la cabeza de la lírica en Hispanoamérica” (Órbita 50). Vitier and Rocasolano’s antithetical reading of Casal and Martí forecloses the possibility of analyzing Poveda’s contribution to a theory of Cuban identity on two counts. Choosing Casal not only threatens the “internal organicity of Vitier’s poetic family tree,” it also implies a concept of Cubanness that embraces centrifugal rather than centripetal transcendence (Morán 17).

Like Casal, Poveda’s identity is marked by a sense of itinerancy, a condition that comes through in his letters to Regino E. Boti and the wandering poetic figures that populate his only published book, Versos precursores. Born in Santiago, Poveda develops his literary mission from the provinces, and the many addresses recorded in his letters between 1907 and 1923 testify to Poveda’s uprooted state. During this time, the poet moved frequently between Oriente province and Havana to give lectures, promote his work and attend law school, but Poveda’s confessional letters also reveal another kind of displacement: “Santiague es un medio completamente estéril para las letras,” he writes in 1908, “Créame esto [...] me ataca los nervios y me da ganas de emigrar. Por lo menos emigrar intelectualmente” (Epistolario 57). Poveda’s compulsion to emigrate, even intellectually, is reminiscent of Casal whose gaze was also oriented outward, away from though not necessarily toward a place. Poveda admits in another letter: “Estoy viviendo una vida que me aleja de todo lo que más amo,” and the sense of distance and displacement that defines his life translates into the theoretical nomadism that, in my opinion, underlies the message of Versos precursores (Epistolario 236).

The poetic, literary and philosophical figures that Poveda most admires and frequently poeticizes are wanderers. As early as 1909, in an essay on Maxim Gorki, Poveda praises the “spirit of the vagabondism” that typifies the Russian writer’s heroes: the vagabond is uprooted (“desarrraigado”), roams tirelessly, and does not yield in the face of hardship (Prosa, vol. 2, 144-45). The same freedom and stoicism that attract Poveda to the figure of the vagabond explain his interest in Friedrich Nietzsche’s itinerant prophet, Zarathustra. Poveda was familiar with Also Sprach Zarathustra (1883-85), and his 1909 chronicle, “Nietzsche,” is a partial translation of Zarathustra’s
famous parable, "On the Vision and the Riddle," in which Zarathustra is depicted as a traveler and poet, "extraño viajero" (Prosa, vol. 2, 153). Poveda affirms: "Yo no conozco una parábola más hermosa que ésa por medio de la que Zarathustra expresa la liberación del hastío, de la melancolía, del espíritu de la pesadez, que tan a menudo velan nuestros ojos y nos hacen ver sombrío el cielo, marchitas las hojas, triste y esteril el campiña, vacía y despreciable nuestra existencia" ("Nietzsche," Prosa, vol. 2, 154). Here, as in "Los vagabundos," Poveda finds in the wanderer’s compulsion to roam a powerful and productive alternative to apathy: rather than evading his reality, the wanderer embodies “action” and a “refusal to capitulate” (Prosa, vol. 2, 145).9 Wandering in Nietzsche and Gorki, though, is not a purpose-driven movement; the freedom and strength of character that the vagabond and Zarathustra both embody derives from their ability to roam without a destination or finality to anchor them.

At first glance, aimless wandering might seem to contradict Poveda’s goal-oriented discourse of an independent artistic and national personality. But Poveda’s dialogue with Zarathustra, which centers on the parable that presents the eternal return and the fiction of intransience, reveals why wandering is an attractive theoretical option for the Cuban poet. In this way, my reading opens the way for a deeper understanding of Poveda’s poetics of identity and for a reappraisal of his Versos precursores, which is as much a book of ideas as a recital of literary modernity (Poveda, “Nietzsche” 154). If Poveda’s nomadism germinates in his reading of a foreign text, the translation of the itinerant figure to the streets of Havana in his important essay, “Elegía del retorno,” is also an axis of Poveda’s discourse of cubanía, which derives from the parallel created between the nomadic poetic subject and the island. Although pilgrimage is sometimes abstract in Versos precursores, intertextual dialogues opened with Poveda’s essays surrounding the concept of wandering reinforce the connection between Poveda’s nomadism and his national conscience, making it possible to read wandering as a redemptive strategy that involves the destiny of the poet and homeland.10

Entertaining this hypothesis requires first wading through the self-aggrandizing language of the preface to Versos precursores. Poveda presents his book as a kind of retrospective itinerary demonstrating the path taken toward the definitive modern poem and the poet’s own becoming (“el camino hacia el yo”) (Obra 187). Admittedly, Poveda’s tendency to refer to himself in the third person as Poeta and Autor as well as his frequent recourse to the time-worn metaphors of ascent and high peaks make it difficult not to read self-actualization as a transcendent moment: “el Autor ascendió al sitio ansiado, la cima serena y luminosa desde la cual pudo decir palabras definitivas: se dispuso no ya a aprender del hombre un nuevo poema, sino de enseñarle el poema al hombre” (Obra 189). On the surface, the preface seems to support Vitier’s claim that Poveda casts himself as the hero of a “vast, creative parable” removed from Cuba’s historical and political circumstances (345). But in spite of the book’s declared intent, Versos precursores undermines a transcendent teleology of the self. Poveda makes clear that these are precursory verses revealing the pathway toward the self and not the self-proper (the truly creative work, he says, comes later). This exordium along with the decidedly uncertain ends of the book’s inaugural poem and the first of a series of “wandering” texts, make it just as difficult to read the unity of Poveda’s “I” in absolute terms.

In a move that harks back to the plot of Also Sprach Zarathustra, the poetic subject of “Versos precursores” prepares to break a long silence and period of social isolation in order to impart his wisdom, but the poem that effectively sets Poveda’s book in motion, inscribing wandering as a metaphor for poetic creation, also displaces any sense of purpose:

Pasos sobrios y tercos que avanzan callados hacia fines sombríos, sin saber quizás
cual objeto le muestran los hados,
pero que en la alta noche marchan obstinados
por el gozo de andar no más (v. 6-10).

In fact, the parallel between wandering and composing verses is drawn on the basis of their uncertain ends. Just as forward motion is belied by the tendency to shroud the object of the poetic subject’s journey in uncertainty (“fines sombríos,” “sin saber […] cual objeto”), the speaker’s song is obscure and aimless: “y he de entonar el canto de abstruso motivo, aún cuando ignore con qué fin” (v. 29-30). The absence of finality that undermines the speaker’s message in “Versos precursores” is reinforced throughout the book in poems intertextually linked by the leitmotifs of the pathway and wandering that together suggest a nomadic movement, a “going without destination” (Braidotti 58). The poetic subject’s formidable itinerary along dark, isolated paths does not lead to the “high peaks” prophesied in the preface. On the contrary, the path in “La senda sola” leads only to itself, becoming a symbol for the speaker’s bleak introspection (“y vi la senda sola, desierta y en mutismo / perderse inextricablemente en mi corazón”), and the lure of the suburban alley in “Refugio” is the intransitive movement it invites:

Mejor cuanto más sola la proyecta
calleja, y mejor cuanto más obscura (v. 1-2).

vivir en un suburbio cuyo ingente
recinto misterioso solamente
tus pasos y los mios transitaran (v. 12-14).

In the end, Poveda’s “wandering” poems record a retrograde movement that leads to “Canción de cuna,” the lullaby that seals the poetic subject’s fate: “Bien veis que es sin linde el confín./Prepare el sendero/que luego el sendero/no tendrá fin (v. 5-8).11

Because Poveda places “Canción de cuna,” the lullaby that pronounces the poetic subject’s destiny to wander ceaselessly at the “end” of his series of wandering texts, the itinerary that leads from
“Versos precursores” to “Canción de cuna” is not linear or ascending but cyclical, compelling the subject to set out afresh on the path toward the “I.” This pattern nuances the meaning of Poveda’s precursor verses and also amends his promise of the “truly creative work” that follows them. Creative mastery and self-mastery are, in the end, not simply deferred but “performat ive illusions” that conceal a perpetually incomplete self (Braidotti 12). That is, deferral describes the condition of the poetic subject’s existence and not the post-poned consecration of his status as Author or Poet. By announcing the metaphors of the pathway and wandering that give coherence to Versos precursores, the preface effectively guides its readers to the book’s far less certain subtext: precursor verses are the only kind there can be. This conclusion is inscribed in the book’s very title: the Latin root cursus indicates movement while versus, the past participle of vertere, means to turn or revolve (Merriam-Webster). In this light, Poveda’s tendency to refer to himself in the third person does not flaunt his poetic prowess so much as it conveys self-irony. Though these precursor verses undercut Poveda’s prophesies of self-actualization, the absence of such an “end” should not be construed as a failure (“el descaecimiento de las fuerzas teleológicas de la nación”) (Vitier 34)). The lesson of Versos precursores seems to be rather that self-actualization is not a transcendent moment but an ongoing and contingent process, and this lesson “transcends” Poveda’s book.

“Canción de cuna,” the poem that cements the poetic subject’s destiny to wander, is also the axis of a number of intertextual dialogues that reinforce the link between the motif of wandering and Poveda’s literary mission. In “Para la lectura de los versos del autor” (1914), Poveda refers to the roving poetic figures that populate his verses as ghosts and shadows that carry the same mark as their author: “Y llevan en la frente el sello que en mi propia frente grabó la extraña canción de cuna: se crisparán salvajemente sobre el granito” (Prosa, vol. 1, 237). Likewise, in “Viantandes en la noche,” “La ruta,” and “El destino,” poems not included in Versos precursores, wandering is a fated action, sometimes equated with the process of self-definition rehearsed in Poveda’s book. “El destino” specifically establishes this relationship, presenting a nomadic poetic subject who is compelled to wander by a lullaby:

Es el canto de cuna que mis pasos dirige, la canción que mi angustia no ha saciado jamás; es el canto de origen que, obstinado, me exige ser aquel que yo debo, ser yo mismo y no más (v. 5-8).

In the eighth verse, the parallel structure of the two hemistiches equates the potential and the present self, “being who I ought” and “being myself” (who I am), an expression of Zarathustra’s much-cited command to “become who you are” (Zarathustra, IV, 1 cited in Nehamas 172). Because, as Nehamas explains, you cannot become what you already are or already be what you may become, Zarathustra’s imperative and Poveda’s verse assign an operational rather than an essential meaning to “being,” conveying that “to be you” is to “be becoming” (191). These traces reinforce the message of Poveda’s book and reveal that wandering is not an isolated metaphor but a determining principle of his poetics which posits the self as “essentially” incomplete. In this context, the conflation of Poveda’s “canción de cuna” with the nation’s lullaby in “Guitarras campesinas” (1918) is especially significant for the parallel it draws between individual and national identity.

Poveda’s chronicle reinforces that his search for personal originality is not only an individual or aesthetic pursuit but a broader creative imperative that involves Cuba’s national destiny as well. At the rural home of Juan Gregorio and María Veneranda where friends gather to eat, sing and commiserate, Poveda is transported by the music of a rural guitarist, Pancho Montoya, reflecting: “Aquel no era el canto de mi juventud […] el canto de la victoria, el verso de libertad, el himno de alegría democrática y de fervor patriótico. No. Aquel canto […] era la canción de cuna, la que escuché en mi infancia, la canción de la patria esclava, la del sacrificio sin esperanza” (Órbita 488). Here, as in Versos precursores, the lullaby signals a circular movement, but this time it is not only the artist but the homeland that is fated to return. Through Montoya’s song, Poveda exposes the irony of Cuba’s present circumstance. Montoya’s lament does not evoke the “hymn of democratic joy and patriotic fervor” that defines Poveda’s youth and coincides with Cuban independence but the lullaby from his infancy, which recalls the difficult pathway toward independence and the legacy of slavery (Órbita 487-8). In this way, Poveda draws a bitter parallel between Cuba’s colonial past and its neo-colonial present, but by relating the stages of his personal growth to the stages of Cuba’s national process, he also establishes an important link between his homeland and himself. Although wandering as a motif in Versos precursores takes the shape of an abstract, metaphorical movement, these intertextual dialogues rupture the “world of autonomous verbal creation,” reinforcing the link between Poveda’s nomadism and his concern with Cuba’s construction of a national personality. Reading Poveda’s famous essay, “Elegía del retorno” (1918), I will consider the extent to which the poet’s nomadism begins to emerge as a redemptive strategy to be shared with his homeland. More specifically, confronting the uncertain destiny of his own nation, I think that Poveda finds a productive response to his crisis of identity in Zarathustra’s parable on the eternal return.

In “Elegía del retorno,” the notion of “return” is polysemous: “Estoy de nuevo en La Habana,” begins the essay, but the subject’s first compulsion is to roam, supplanting the sense of “being” in (estar en) the city. To return is not only to be in Havana again, but to be restless, to recall, to repeat. This restlessness and repetition (recorrer, recordar) is reinforced grammatically through the use of the imperfect tense, suspending “arrival” or “completion” (“iba meditando”), and linking wandering and thinking as simultaneous and ongoing actions. At first, the autobiographical subject’s de-
spondent introspection seems to convey a sense of defeat which is experienced initially as a loss of voice but also as a sense of distance and alienation from his homeland, repriming the theme of spiritual exile so prevalent in Poveda’s letters: “nunca mi país ha parecido tan ajeno a mí […] Hoy me siento como si no existiera, y el dolor de Patria que sufro es el de no existir” (Prosa, vol. 2, 31). The inner exile that the speaker suffers is described hypothetically as a denial of existence, but the nation (Patria) is implicated in this suffering in a surprising way (Prosa, vol. 2, 31). That is, it is not only the feeling of estrangement from a place that causes the speaker’s anguish, but the recognition that the nation (Patria) itself endures a kind of inner exile as a result of its colonial history. That this condition involves both the subject and homeland is reflected in the change from the first person singular (“Hoy me siento como si no existiera”) to the first-person plural: Estamos aherrojados por dobles cadenas. No somos independientes. No somos sino una factoría colonial, obligada a trabajar, y a dar su cosecha y su fruto, compelida por el látigo. Estamos desorganizados y envejecidos, como una mala mesnada: no podemos defendernos. Un soplo de dispersión ha barrido las conciencias, y todo cuanto había de dignidad, pureza y valentía en las conciencias; un soplo de disolución ha disgregado todas las energías creadoras del alma nacional. Somos la sombra de un pueblo, el sueño de una democracia, el ansia de una libertad. No existimos (Prosa, vol. 2, 32, my emphasis).

Although the experience of exile here does not involve physically leaving a place, the imperial presence of the United States certainly justifies the feeling of exile within a place; the loss of home is experienced as a negation of existence that is no longer individual and hypothetical (“me siento como si no existiera”) but collective and actual: “No existimos” (Prosa, vol. 2, 32). In The Dialectics of Exile (2014), Sophia McClennen explains that “writing in exile is an act of self-recuperation and a simultaneous effort to construct an identity that struggles against extinction” (121). In this way, the very statement that denies the existence of the speaker and his homeland, can be read as an affirmation of their solidarity and a claim to identity, albeit an endangered one. McClennen affirms that writing becomes a mode of existence for the exile writer, and Poveda’s chronicle, which is in a certain sense also a kind of exile writing, constructs a shared identity, one capable of overcoming even the most desperate of situations.

“Return” in Poveda’s essay does not only mark Poveda’s return to the city, it also signifies the nation’s regression to a state of dependence, this time as a result of US imperialism. Poveda’s essay does not paper over the “dispersion,” “dissolution” and “disintegration” that define the Cuban national consciousness in 1918 with promises of fulfillment or dreams of distant cultures. In fact, the vocabulary that Poveda chooses to describe the island’s neo-colonial condition—“cadenas,” “látigo,” “noche de esclavitud”—faces up to a painful history and connects his elegy to Pancho Montoya’s dirge in “Guitarras campesinas.” Facing this national crisis of identity brings Poveda’s autobiographical subject to the brink of surrender, but he hesitates before throwing his book into the rushing waters of a stream, concluding: “Sería inútil: no podría prescindir de mí mismo” (Prosa, vol. 2, 32). Instead of ditching the book—a gesture that might have cemented his defeat—the speaker instead “turns his back to the current and plunges down the narrowest and darkest path” of the city (32). This decision undermines Rocasolano’s interpretation that Poveda “realized that the word, the essential weapon of the poet, was futile in a moment that demanded action” (Orbita 78). Abstaining from writing is represented as a form of self-denial that the speaker is unwilling to entertain: it would be futile to stop writing. Instead, writing is reclaimed as a tool of survival, the antidote to nonexistence. Poveda’s autobiographical subject very clearly does not forswear the word, so his elegy is not sign of resignation but a mode of overcoming through writing, offsetting his rhetoric of despair:

¡Qué terrible elegía, Patria, qué terrible elegía del retorno! ¡Qué silencio de muerte; qué noche interminable, esta noche sin abrigo, sin canción, sin un grito ni un ensueño, esta noche de esclavitud, que parece como si no fuera a tener mañana! ¡Qué elegía, Patria, esta elegía del retorno, después del canto de triunfo y la loca aventura, esta elegía sin palabras, esta muda elegía, Patria, que el viento de la noche despliega, como un harapón, sobre nuestro infortunio” (Prosa, vol. 2, 33, original emphasis).

Referring to his lament as a “mute elegy,” an “elegy without words,” is ironic, coming as it does at the end of what may be one of Poveda’s most important statements linking individual and national destiny. By fusing their crises of identity, the elegy shows that Poveda’s desire for personality is not self-centered but intertwined with Cuba’s national process, and this identification and empathy is emphasized with the apostrophe to “Patria” in the crescendo of the essay. Through the elegy, the speaker memorializes the shared experience of the loss of national sovereignty. In this way, the “elegiac creative process,” as Claudio Guillén explains in his essay on exile and counter-exile, can be read as an “extended metaphor for the response of the poetic intelligence to the limits given or immediate realities around us” (820). That is, writing is not a passive stance or a vehicle of escape but form of action and civic engagement. This is not the voice of a writer who is “dehumanized and evaded” from his historical moment (Roa 34, cited in Sainz 20). This is the voice of a writer who has internalized his moment and merged his own voice with the “vox patriae” (Pérez Firmat 15). Writing (“componer versos”) and wandering (“errar sin rumbo”) are thus productive responses to the Republican crisis, the suburb a site of active creation rather than silence. The elegy’s despondent tone notwithstanding,
in the end Poveda’s autobiographical subject does not concede defeat but rather embraces the “freedom of an undecided fate” (cf. Ulfers and Cohen). Framed in this way, “Elegía” is not Poveda’s swan song but an extension of the message of Versos precursors that self-definition is not the destination at the end of the path but a continually adjusting process.

The notion of return, then, takes on a further dimension, harking back to Zarathustra’s teaching of eternal recurrence as a conditional proposition that tests the strength of one’s will. Recurrence tests the strength of one’s will not because it implies the eternal repetition of experience, but because it demands “a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is” (Nehamas 191). As a theory of the world, recurrence—eternal circulation—entails that “the universe is not progressing in any way, there is nothing specific toward which it tends, and it will continue as it is now, indefinitely” (Nehamas 149). As a theory of the self, recurrence means that “to be who one is […] is to be engaged in a constantly continuing and continually broadening process of appropriation of one’s experiences and actions” (Nehamas 190–92). This thought brings Poveda to the brink of surrender because affirming the world and self as they are means facing up to the disillusionment of Republican reality and the futility of writing. But Zarathustra’s concept also offers an alternative to the broken promise of a sovereign national identity, a productive way of re-reading Cuba’s political destiny.19 In The Structure of Cuban History (2013), Louis A. Pérez, Jr. explains that the Republican generation “committed itself to the promise of the past in the form of a leap into the embrace of faith in its history” (162).20 Poveda’s response is radical in that it opens itself to the potentiality of an uncertain future (amor fati): his narrative of Cuba’s national destiny severes ties with a transcendent, historical ideal, but it does not foreclose the possibility of growth (Prosa, vol. 2, 32–33). Poveda’s decision to “plunge into the narrow path” of the city expresses his affirmation of the experiences that have brought him to this point and the potential for incorporating new experiences that will in turn shape his identity as a writer (and the identity of the nation) in unknown but potentially enriching ways (Nehamas 192). In this way, Poveda’s recourse to German philosophy is transformative and restorative; Poveda inscribes the concept of wandering as a liberating strategy that opens the way for the construction of a “truer home” (Ignacio Díaz 82).21

On this basis, we might reconsider Poveda’s failure to open a “dialogue with the unknown possibilities of the future” on different terms (Vitier 344). In my view, it is possible to read Poveda’s itinerancy in consonance with later twentieth-century concepts of Cuban culture, a high-profile example being Fernando Ortiz’s aijaco. In a sense, wandering is also at the heart of Ortiz’s metaphor which accentuates the process of cultural formation itself rather than its outcome (Pérez Firmat 23). The concept of identity that Poveda’s work advances is itinerant rather than transcendent, and because it involves not only individual but national identity, a potential link emerges between Poveda’s nomadism and Ortiz’s processual view of Cuban culture. In 1925, 25 years before Ortiz’s aijaco, Poveda sees the arrival of the “heterogeneous masses” that produce the mestiza population of the island as a viable but disaggregated raw material, the potential richness of the stew still overshadowed by the legacy of colonialism and exploitation. Poveda’s circumstance leads him to compare Cuba’s national character to “molten metal” with no melting pot to give shape to it (“La personalidad tribúnica,” Órbita 365). Writing during the first decades of the Republic, a time of disillusionment and uncertainty, Poveda’s simile for the “state of the Cuban soul” is far from optimistic, but an analysis of Poveda’s nomadism exposes the continuity between Poveda’s poetics and Ortiz’s “migratory” discourse of Cubanness in which deferral is not the delay of cultural synthesis but a condition of existence (Pérez Firmat 25, Rojas 56). Caught in a purgatory between the broken melting pot and the aijaco, Poveda develops a poetics characterized by uprootedness, transience and incompletion, the very values that will shape Ortiz’s famous cultural metaphor. The legacy of Poveda’s book is thus visible in the “precursory” nature of his concept of identity.

ENDNOTES

1 I would like to thank Franklin & Marshall College for supporting my research in Cuba (summer 2015) and Jon Stone for his thoughtful comments on my essay. I am also grateful to Sofía Ruiz-Alfaro, Karin Davidovich and Elizabeth Osborne for their feedback.

2 Milena Rodríguez Gutiérrez makes the claim that Poveda is not a “forgotten poet” in her presentation on Poveda’s Versos precursors (814). In Cuba, Alberto Rocasolano is the foremost if not the only Poveda scholar. For a useful introduction to Poveda’s life and work, see his El último de los raros. See also Estenger, Lizaso and the essays written by the poet’s cousin, Héctor Poveda, and Regino E. Boti following Poveda’s death. Outside of Cuba, criticism on Poveda is still scarce, but Hervé Le Corre dedicates invaluable pages to Poveda in his Poesía hispanoamericana posmoderna. For an interesting essay on Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s influence on Poveda, see Esteban.

3 “Los dos tonos de un nuevo motivo de forjadores” (1915) is one of several chronicles that could be read as an unofficial manifesto of the Grupo Nacional de Acción de Arte spearheaded by Poveda. The group’s dual mission was artistic innovation and national restoration: “Sin faltar a la belleza ni a la verdad, tal vez pudiéramos hallar una Patria tan nueva como nuestro arte” (Prosa, vol. 1, 168). In his valuable essay, “Poveda, nuestro aspirante a maldito,” Reinaldo García Ramos also intuits the complexity of Poveda’s mission which he deems not only stylistic but civic: Poveda “[era] vislumbrador y guía de la conciencia nacional, como descubridor y crítico de una verdad civil en la desartalada república recién nacida” (22). Numerous chronicles support this intuition. In 1914, the poet writes: “Yo busco ansiosamente, por la patria, esa palabra que, ante ella me diga: ‘habla,’ y a ella le diga: ‘cree.’ Entretanto, con los puños ensangrentados, con el alma
exalted, yo marcho al impulso de una fuerza implacable" (Prosa, vol. 1, 156). And in “Noche de luna,” Poveda imagines a dialogue with the moon that affirms his destiny: “Te toca la más difícil tarea: formar conciencia. Has de ser tú mismo la conciencia viva del país; debes ser su representación y su síntesis. [...] No importa que ahora parezcas como una idea errante, sin cuerpo que la sustente, y que se pasea, como una luciérnaga, por la orilla del mar” (“Noche de luna”, 495).

In defense of Poveda and Boti’s cubanía, Sergio Chaple is the most transparent: “restarle cubanía a la obra de los autores de El mar y la montaña y la “Elegía del retorno” es proclamar desconocimiento o incompreensión paladinos de su producción literaria cuando no una ligereza” (Epistolar 17). Still, discussions of Poveda’s Cubaness are usually more thematic, drawing on the important essay cited by Chaple and two poems, “La danza global” and “El grito abuelo,” acknowledged by Antonio Portuondo, Rocasolano and Hervé Le Corre alike as antecedents to poesía negra later developed by Nicolás Guillén and Emilio Ballagas in Cuba and Luis Palés Matos in Puerto Rico. Without diminishing the importance of these texts, my analysis exposes that Poveda’s cubanía is not only thematic but theoretical and inextricable from his poetics of identity.

For an interesting discussion of Martí and Maceo, see Poveda (Prosa, vol. 1, 157-67). For Poveda, both José Martí and Antonio Maceo embody the Cuban soul, but Martí is the voice of the national conscience, while Maceo embodies these ideals in action: “Martí y Maceo son dos fuerzas distintas de un alma irreductible: palabra y fuerza. Maceo el pecho de la patria, Martí la frente” (166). In Poveda’s prose, we thus see an inversion of Martí’s usual role. In Vitier’s lecture, Martí embodies action (acto) and Casal the word (palabra).

Rocasolano makes a similar judgment about Casal in the prologue to his edition of Casal’s poetry (6, cited in Morán 29).

See Theumer, Loynaz and Morán on Casal’s itinerancy.

Poveda likely accessed Nietzsche’s works in French translation or through early studies published at the turn of the century in Spain. Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a work that was well-known at the turn of the century in Latin America, but the first Spanish translation in circulation is dated 1919, too late to have influenced Poveda’s work (Ward 494). Nietzsche was also invoked by influential intellectuals like José Enrique Rodó (Ariel, 1900), Rubén Darío (Los ramos, 1896) (Ward 487). On Nietzsche’s influence on Rodó, see Ette. For a thorough analysis of Nietzsche’s influence in Latin American modernismo, see Ward.

See also “Viandantes en la noche,” a poetic intertext to Poveda’s essay, “Los vagabundos” (Obra poética 163). For Mary Louise Loe, Gorky’s vagabonds, characters who have removed themselves from the urban space to live in nature as “restless seekers of freedom,” resemble prophets like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (262-63).

Although Hervé Le Corre is not commenting on Poveda’s work specifically, he interprets the poet-wanderer, in the context of posmodernismo, as a challenge to the notion of the poet as prophet and the prerogative of literary autonomy (Poesía 125-6). For Hervé Le Corre, Poveda’s “ambulatory poetic figures” suggest a fragmented subject while poems like “El retorno” exhibit a conversational poetic language that distances Poveda from the prophetic and imperious toremarfilismo of the preceding century (Poesía 170).

See for example poems like “Palabras en la noche,” “Refugio,” “Retiro” (Obra poética 204-05). Poveda’s “Nietzscheana,” “Esfinge,” and “La senda sola” evoke Zarathustra’s “advance along a steep mountain path” at moonlight, inviting the specific comparison between the itinerant prophet and the poet subject of Versos precursores (Obra poética 204, 234-35).

“Forcas marchas a mi lado” and “Poema de los violines” reiterate the nomadic destiny of the poetic subject and anticipate the message of “Canción de cuna” (Obra poética 240, 243, 246).

This paradigm of identity also unites Poveda with his precursor, Casal. Following Deleuze, Morán interprets Casal as embodying a concept of identity as becoming, one that is rhyzomatic rather than arborescent (57).

When Poveda asks Montoya why they sing, Montoya responds that they sing not for entertainment but to unburden themselves, as an outlet for their bitterness: “Ahora que hay más riqueza, nosotros lo hemos perdido todo: estamos en nuestros campos como en suelo ajeno. No sabemos para quién es nuestro trabajo: [...] y nuestra libertad, como nuestras vidas, está en manos de la guardia montada. Teníamos derechos que conquistamos con sangre y hoy no tenemos siquiera el derecho de protestar contra los que nos desposeyeron” (Órbita 48).

Hervé Le Corre’s interpretation of the essay points out the relationship between “Elegía del retorno” and “El retorno,” a poem that also situates the roving poetic subject in the city streets. For Le Corre, this intertextual link exposes the tension between the autonomy of the poetic text and the expression of immediate reality (Poesía 154).

See also “Noche de luna” which inscribes wandering and reflection as simultaneous and productive actions (Órbita 493-95). The image of the poetic figure as a “paseante solitario” is also reminiscent of Poveda’s reading of Casal in his “Canto élego” and “Palabras de anunciación” (Obra poética 231, Prosa, vol. 2, 12). On Casal’s itinerancy, Francisco Morán’s Julián del Casal a los plieges del deseo is an indispensable text. The relationship between Casal and Poveda, however, remains to be explored in detail.

In this way, Poveda’s exile is not a willed evasion like Raúl Roa suggests in “La pupila insomne,” the prologue to Rubén Martínez Villena’s Poesía y prosa (34 cited in Sanz 20), but an involuntary condition of estrangement within the island’s borders. On the conditions of exile, see Guillén and Tabori.

Reading Poveda’s elegy as a sign of “defeat” may have more to do with the politics of canon formation following the Revolution than it does Poveda’s actual withdrawal from Republican reality. Poveda was certainly not the only Republican intellectual to express his disillusionsment with the status quo. On the discourse of national identity in the first Cuban Republic, see Pérez and Rojas.

Poveda’s adaptation of Nietzsche’s prophet and Gorki’s vagabonds could therefore be read as an example of the “translational” mode of nation-building that defines the “Cuban condition” following Gustavo Pérez Firmat, bringing Poveda into dialogue with more prominent figures like Jorge Mañach and Fernando Ortiz.

For Pérez, Poveda’s “Elegía del retorno” is one of the most poignant registers of Republican disillusionment (38). While it is true that the bold rhetoric of Poveda’s national chronicles is replaced by despondence in “Elegía del retorno,” the essay does not disclose any new “revelations” with respect to Cuba’s status quo. In another essay from the same year, Poveda proclaims “a new generation and a free people” even as he negates the existence of the Republican “I”: “¿Quiénes pueden afirmar que existe el ‘yo’ de la República? ¿Quiénes pueden negar que—sin esa suprema conciencia—
libertad, independencia, patria, son puros símbolos? (Prosa, vol. 1, 221). Poveda expresses the same sentiment in "El candidato de la patria para la presidencia" (1915): “Aún en 1915 no existe la República” (Prosa, vol. 1, 182). In this way, the conclusion in “Elegía del retorno,” that "we do not exist” is not so much a negative revelation as a reprise of a common theme in a different tone. The response that the elegy proposes, however, is not so different from the call to action that Poveda articulates elsewhere. Poveda does not deceive himself with delusions of national grandeur, but he does not concede defeat either.

Le Corre finds that the modernity of posmodernista poetry resides in its deflation of poetry’s sublimity which is also the result of the writer’s experience of colonialism. According to Le Corre, the recourse to “the liberating strategies of textualities considered more advanced,” is an exercise in “importation and transformation” that anticipates the Avant Garde (126).

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A new geological epoch is upon us. At least this is the argument that the majority of the academic community in and outside of the sciences defends. The basic premise behind such a statement is that, due to the unprecedented scale of the human impact on the environment, it is no longer possible to measure, predict, and historicize geological transformations solely in terms of natural occurrences. Human action has become a major player affecting these transformations. Nobel-Prize winning climatologist Paul Crutzen was the first to propose the term Anthropocene to account for this irrevocable and irreversible development in 2000. Even though the term has spread throughout many academic areas and even outside academia, its transformative potential is far from being fully realized. The Anthropocene is still a relatively new concept that has nonetheless spurred heated discussions among those who accept its general principles but do not agree on the terminology. There are disputes regarding certain assumptions embedded in Crutzen's narrative and the Anthropocene has yet to be officially recognized. A decision on whether or not the Holocene era is over will be announced by the International Commission on Stratigraphy in 2016 or 2017 (Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne, "Thinking the Anthropocene" 1). The fact that this novel was not identified by Trexler is not surprising, and I do not suggest that the author knowingly neglected to include this novel in his study. And Still the Earth has achieved the status of a perennial classic in Brazil, but it does not enjoy notoriety among the Anglo-American public, even though a translation was published in 1985. I believe the novel articulated in complex ways many of the issues that come into focus in current debates over the Anthropocene. In spite of being associated with a single and peripheral nation and with a specific historical and political context, the 1964-1985 Military Dictatorship, the novel presciently expressed the anxieties and dilemmas of current debates on environmental issues on a global scale.

My analysis of And Still the Earth will stray away from the specific historical time frame of Brazil of the 1960s and 70s, which informs most of this novel’s criticism. I intend to explore this novel’s...
An Early Anthropocene Novel from the Periphery of Capitalism

Literature that deals with future prognostics, whether one calls it speculative fiction or science fiction, has, more often than not, taken into account environmental problems. If, as Carl Freedman argues, SF performs the role once reserved for critical theory (1-23), I see eco-dystopian fiction as the sub-genre of SF that most incisively and critically engages scientific discourse on the environment. It explores aspects once considered exogenous to scientific thinking and, by and large, to fiction in general. Freedom from the rigor of scientific rationality and from the exclusively humanistic disciplines allows fiction to capture complex interrelations of issues in the current environmental debacle.

In this vein, And Still the Earth, can be read as an early Anthropocene eco-dystopian novel that remains as relevant as any other so-called cli-fi novel of recent times. Regardless of how specifically the novel relates to the SF genre, or the cli-fi subgenre, what is essential is that it contains many of the elements of SF and performs similar social, political, and historical critique as the most important works of that genre. The narrative comprises a multi-layered critique of the mainstream capitalist narrative of progress, human and technological advancement, predatory use of natural resources, and the "endless accumulation" of capital and economic growth (Arrighi 69-96). It does so by questioning the developmental model implemented in Brazil, especially in the 1960s and 70s, the historical period of the Military Dictatorship and what became known as Brazil's "Economic Miracle." The economic policies of that era consisted of market-driven economic orthodoxy, artificially stimulated through massive borrowings from to the IMF, World Bank, and major capitalist nations. Such policies were imposed through political authoritarianism. Government propaganda boasted the success of the military regime's economic policies by heavily investing in megalomaniacal infrastructural projects, which carried strong symbolic value as unequivocal concrete evidence of exceptional technological and economic development. More than a narrative that confronts the Military Dictatorship, And Still the Earth clearly establishes, more broadly, overt and the subtle connections between the triumphant capitalist ideology in Brazil and international capitalism as a whole.

One of the main principles that guided such an economic expansion was the idea that the most remote regions of the Brazilian territory needed to be colonized. There were incentives for the occupation of inland areas such as the Central and Amazonian regions. This principle had already justified the construction of Brasília at the very center of the South American continent, and it also guided projects such as the Transamazônica highway; several dams, including the biggest in the world, Itaipú; the Rio-Niterói bridge, and many others. These came at a great environmental cost.8

Brandão foresees the suicidal impetus of such economic, political and developmental model and amplifies to the level of caricature, the devastation that he personally witnessed. In a video interview, part of a roundtable discussion of this novel, the author reveals that the earlier insights he had about an imminent disaster came from a disturbing image used in an advertising campaign by Ford. The ad consisted of a picture of large truck filled to its capacity with logs taken from a forest also featured in the background. The slogan displayed in the truck's front bumper read: "Pense Ford, Pense Ford." ("Think Strong, Think Ford") ("Redes da criação").

Instead of writing a novel set in the Brazilian Amazon, Brandão chose São Paulo as the stage. The story takes place in an indeterminate year in the twenty-first century. This Brazilian megalopolis suffers the consequences of environmental catastrophe spurred by the prevailing ideology of development of the post-war years. Excessive heat, pollution, disease, synthetic food, violence, segregation, distrust and paranoia are all elements in the novel that represent and reflect on the extreme dehumanization of life. This novel is essentially a narrative that traces the last events in the life of a society in the context of a "tipping point," leading to what appears to be the end of human life on Earth. This dystopian representation of São Paulo and Brazil as environmental wastelands confronts nationalist myths expressed in still prevalent notions of "Brazil: tropicall paradise" or "Brazil: nation of the future."10

The population lives in a complete state of alienation. The few characters with whom the protagonist, a "retired" historian named Souza, interacts have no goals, except for personal gains in some cases. Little of their humanity is left. There is no real social bonding, but, instead, a pervasive lack of solidarity. The struggle for survival is mainly what moves the (mostly disenfranchised) characters. São Paulo is segmented in sectors protected by guards and surveillance apparatuses. These barriers can only be crossed by individuals with formal authorization cards. Each sector of the city clearly represents a certain class or category of people, who are allowed to cross these barriers only for the purposes of work.

In addition to the deterioration of the social and political realms of human life, Brandão places emphasis on non-human life conditions. Material, technological and environmental markers of history are intertwined with the fragmented elements of social and political history. The dramatic scenario in which animals have died out and the Amazon forest has become the largest desert on Earth does not serve simply as a narrative background. These are elements that directly affect the lives of the characters in the novel. The author projects a broad imaginary representation of nonhuman histories, with emphasis on the lack of nonhuman agency, the effects of material and technological development on the natural environment, and the corresponding social and political disintegration, among other aspects. In other words, in And Still the Earth, human and nonhu-
man histories interact in a non-hierarchical manner. It is a quality of what Timothy Morton assigns to expressionist art that “abolishes the play between background and foreground” (*Hyperobjects* 76).

An example of the tight relationship between natural and human life appears in the opening of the narrative in which extreme air pollution, the stench caused by garbage and the unclaimed dead bodies that lie on the streets, cannot be minimized despite the use of giant fans, a phony solution, among many others that the System provides. Besides being a dark comic element present throughout the narrative, the scene is important both for the above-mentioned function of connecting human, environmental and (mostly obsolete) technological elements of life in a dystopia, but also in establishing a surrealist atmosphere of absurd that predominates in the novel. In addition, the noise pollution caused by unrelenting sirens disturbs the characters to the point where they can barely discern what is real and what is part of a nightmare from which Souza and his wife awaken. The image of children’s heads exploding, for instance, appears at first to be a surrealist representation of a given character’s nightmare. Instead, the scene is actually witnessed by Adelaide, Souza’s wife, who continues to have flashbacks that seem to indicate she had lost a child. Whether or not Adelaide and Souza lost a child is never confirmed in the narrative.

The interconnection between human, non-human life, material, sensory, and psychological experiences displayed in a non-hierarchical fashion also speaks of the novel’s complex account of history. The narrative challenges some long-standing assumptions in the still prevailing historiography, which sees human history as distinct and superior to natural history. Humanistic approaches to history also tend to maintain distance from the realm of other sciences. The novel’s explicit, as well as implied, critique of humanistic approaches to history is in line with one of the central issues of theoretical debate spurred by the Anthropocene.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty elaborated perhaps the earliest connections between the Anthropocene concept and its impact on the prevailing theoretical foundation of disciplines such as history and the social sciences. His seminal article “The Climate of History” exposes one of the major weaknesses of the conventional discourses of the social sciences and more broadly of the entire spectrum of disciplines in the humanities. At the core of Chakrabarty’s argument is the claim that “anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (201). And from this general thesis, the author elaborates further implications of the insufficiency of anthropocentric approaches in the social sciences and humanities. Chakrabarty’s controversial assessment of these disciplines has spurred heated debates, even among scholars who by and large agree with his critique of anthropocentrism. Those who attack the now predominant narrative of the Anthropocene argue that Chakrabarty’s and Crutzen’s claims end up restoring and reinforcing anthropocentric views of the relationship between humans and nature. Critics argue that both Chakrabarty and Crutzen propose a linear narrative of the deterioration of the environment dating back to around 10,000 years and progressively increasing the rate of destruction. In contrast to the dominant Anthropocene narrative, scholars of what has been called Capitalocene reject the notion of humanity as a species that is responsible, as a whole and indiscriminately, for the current environmental crisis. Instead, they see Capital as the driver. Hence, they prefer to disavow the term Anthropocene. Other positions also dispute the current dominant narrative. Along with Capitalocene scholars, the so-called Eco-pragmatists, as well as the Eco-Catastrophists claim that establishing a linear narrative of human interference in the environment and generalizing the subject of such actions not only ignores the causes and the main agents of destruction but also leads to political paralysis.

To a certain extent, *And Still the Earth* is not only critical of humanistic view of history but it is also rigorous in its assessment of the past as well as in its projection of the future. In spite of the novel’s caricatureque depictions of social, political and environmental degradation, it retains coherence in regard to some established scientific views of the problem. The post-World War II decades represent, in most scientists’ view a period widely referred to as “The Great Acceleration” (Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne 1). The future represented in the novel suffers the effects of heavy industrialization of Brazil, initiated in the mid-1950s but mostly implemented throughout the dictatorship years and done in a haphazard way. Therefore, the narrative of *And Still the Earth* and that of the “Great Acceleration” are perfectly compatible. As a critique of the ideology and logic of development that supports the ill-conceived modernization project of the dictatorship, Brândão represents this process as irrational.

In this vein, natural history in the novel could be deemed post-natural history, since the only thing that is left are the effects of an unbound and extreme natural environment. The atmosphere is irredeemably damaged as evidenced by the lethal heat pockets that threaten human life. Of the amenable aspects of nature, all that exists is simulacra (i.e. artificially-produced water, chemical scents that simulate natural ones and a tree that has been memorialized in a museum). These artificial recreations nonetheless remain the only elements that allow a measure of relief to human suffering. To Souza these artificial smells still evoke memories and sensations experienced during his childhood, which were never available to some characters in the novel.

Reflecting on this state of absolute devastation of natural resources and of societal values, Souza’s rhetorical questions challenge the idea and the ideals of complete human mastery of the nonhuman aspects of life. These first-person digressions scattered throughout the narrative encompass concerns that extrapolate regional and national realms. Most importantly, these philosophical queries cannot be circumscribed within the specific historical context of the military dictatorship and post-dictatorship:
Souza’s musings about human-induced alterations/modifications in Earth systems and on the Earth’s landscape, by what is known as terraforming, examine the ethical limits of these actions. All the questions, along with the hypothetical answer, ponder the ethics of human dominance, its self-granted superiority, and the disastrous aftermath of such assumptions and actions.

In contrast with these rare moments of serious introspective contemplation, Souza’s daily life experiences and relationships lack depth and meaning. He leads a mechanical and extremely monotonous life with his wife, the frail and emotionally unavailable Adelaide. Beethoven’s “Pathetique Sonata,” the only piece Adelaide could still play on the piano, is metaphorical of their relationship. After she leaves him without notice, and after his apartment is taken over by a nephew and his accomplices, Souza’s life becomes a fast-paced adventure through the wild sectors of the city. In spite of the accumulated losses Souza finds relative freedom and excitement in roaming the city.

The most meaningful event in Souza’s pilgrimage relates to environmental and political subjects. His encounter with his long-time friend Tadeu (a fellow history professor who was also forced into “retirement” during the dictatorship days) represents the only glimmer of hope for a movement of resistance and return to a more humane lifestyle. Tadeu has a clandestine project in which he grows real vegetables and raises a few animals on the outskirts of what’s left of São Paulo. This moment of hope turns out to be short-lived, as Tadeu’s farming project is completely consumed when a hungry mob discovers it. Tadeu becomes depressed and commits suicide. After the annihilation of the only possibility of a modest resistance to the oppressive post-natural world, the narrative loses coherence. Souza, who has not eaten for days, starts to have delirious thoughts.

Nonsense prevails until the very last moments, when the System’s loudspeakers announce that a gigantic shelter, the so-called “Endless Marquee,” is ready for people to protect themselves from the deadly sun. Once again, the solution provided by the state turns out to be another obvious hoax. In the end, Souza’s search for explanations, for reconnection with the past, and for redemption turns out to be a long, disheartened journey toward the ultimate catastrophe. Souza’s erratic quest nonetheless provides insights into aspects of history that go beyond his grasp. Some of these are aspects that have also eluded criticism of the novel thus far.

Linear, Circular and Synchronic Conceptualizations of History

One of the pivotal elements of estrangement central to the plot of And Still the Earth is the fact that memory is forbidden. In order to maintain the populace alienated, the System burned and banished books of any kind. The only news source comes from the government propaganda that constantly broadcasts through loudspeakers the purported social and technological advancements achieved by the System. Time has become impossible to track: people do not know their age or even how many years have elapsed since the environmental destruction started. It is clear, however, that this was a very rapid entropic process, given the fact that Souza, a man in his fifties, has recollections of his childhood and youth that include natural elements (“real” water, trees, rivers, fruits, vegetables, non-artificial pleasant smells, etc.) that have all but disappeared within his lifetime. This specific aspect of the novel’s representation of history is also analogous with the concept of the “Great Acceleration,” which is also taken to an extreme.

An atmosphere of chaos allied with a prevailing aesthetics of absurdity in the novel convey, in a powerful way, one of the most baffling elements of the Anthropocene: in a matter of a few decades the physical and natural environment (in Brazil and by logical inference also all over the planet) withstood destruction on a scale only comparable to those undergone in millions of years. The incomprehensibility of this phenomenon is precisely what Bruno Latour, a leading scholar of the Anthropocene debate, singles out as the main hindrance to the possibility of agency in the Anthropocene: “...in modernism, people are not equipped with the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events...they have difficulty submitting to such a rapid acceleration for which, in addition, they are supposed to feel responsible” (Latour, “Agency” 1). Similarly, Timothy Morton’s concept of hyperobjects refers to certain devices, phenomena, and processes such as global warming as examples of mechanisms that are too complex to be understood (Hyperobjects 9). The overlapping of the disproportionate timescales of natural and human histories, one of the defining elements of the Anthropocene concept, is precisely that which cannot be comprehended with the information that is at Souza’s disposal. Souza and all the other characters feel paralyzed and impotent in the face of unimaginable devastation in such a short period of time.

Souza still has memories and the mental capacity to process memory. What is left of his personal memories, however, is hardly enough for him to make sense of the situation. He also makes an enormous effort to recall events of national history. Yet, both national and individual memories have suffered a severe process of deterioration. It is easier for Souza to understand why collective memory is almost non-existent, than to accept that his own sense of time and his ability as a historian are also compromised. The System has diligently worked on erasing or suppressing various forms of preservation of memory and he was not immune to the process. It is precisely the unprecedented acceleration of the process of envi-
ronmental degradation that hampers Souza’s ability to make sense of both his own history and that of the nation’s. He makes numerous references to government slogans that can be loosely dated but cannot help him establish any meaningful sequence of events. The “Eras” he attempts to recall also seem to overlap. These fictional eras vaguely refer to well-known expressions used by the government and the media to characterize certain moments in the unfolding of various events during the dictatorship in Brazil. For instance, in the novel, the end of the dictatorship in the mid-80s is sarcastically referred to as the “Open wide eighties,” which is a clear reference to the slogan Abertura Política. “The Era of Rapid Enrichment” alludes to the Milagre Econômico, while “The Era of Casuistry” may or may not be a reference to what was called Anistia Ampla Geral e Irrestrita. It becomes evident that the proliferation of these buzzwords serves only to baffle Souza and the reader. They are insufficient not only because they turn out to be hollow, but also because they refer to a limited period of time, which disregards the impact of a much longer history of political recklessness with regard to the environment and every other aspect of life.

And Still the Earth is a novel of great endurance and popularity. Yet, it has received sparse critical attention. There are no eco-critical analyses of and hardly any recent scholarly publications about this novel. This is surprising given the fact that the novel’s most pervasive theme, extreme environmental degradation, has only increased in relevance since its publication. The few publications that deal with the novel thus far have focused on the author’s creative process; the novel’s relation to the SF genre; and, as mentioned earlier, the majority of critics insert Brandão’s text in the specific historical context of the Brazilian military dictatorship. While all of these interpretations are on target, there remains an elision with regard to the complexity of the interconnection between environmental, political and societal issues that are so prevalent throughout the novel. Most critics only mention environmental aspects in passing and tend to view them simply as part of the oppressive setting in a narrative that allegorizes the dictatorship years.

One critic who briefly touched upon the unconventional representation of history in connection to environmental degradation in And Still the Earth was Robert DiAntonio. DiAntonio aptly noted the motif of circularity scattered throughout the plot, especially noticeable in the scene of the protagonist’s encounter with the “girl who spins in circles” (266–275). DiAntonio interprets these representations of circularity as instances of “movement, action, and rebellion...to counteract and stave off the entropic process” (150). Similarly, Elizabeth Ginway incorporates DiAntonio’s argument and provides additional examples of circularity in the text. Ginway finds other instances of circularity in the “perpetual motion machine invented by one of his [Souza’s] relatives, the link between the opening decree against clearing forests and Souza’s lumberjack grandfather...and the final quotation by Galileo about the Earth’s orbit and the cyclical aspects of nature itself.” Ginway sees in this motif an incitement to “a revolution of consciousness” (132). Unfortunately, neither DiAntonio nor Ginway expand on their analysis to explore further the multiple possibilities opened by these insights.

DiAntonio and Ginway’s brief examination of the circular nature of the representation of history remains circumscribed in the immediate experience of the protagonist and narrator and in the historico-political context of the dictatorship. Circularity is just one of the elements in this novel’s complex, non-linear conceptualization of history, which suggests, in addition, a disconcerting synchronicity of multiple and disparate historical timescales.

Reading Brandão’s novel through the Anthropocene requires an expansion of the ecological and historical scope of the narrative’s immediate context of the 1960s and 70s. One way to start would be by examining the significance of the in abime structure of the narrative. This structure alone significantly widens the scope of the novel’s historical timeframe. To see how this novel engages and alters Macrohistorical views of history, it is essential to examine the material included in lieu of a prologue to the novel. This material starts with a chart divided into four lines and columns, three of which contain epigraphs and fragments of poems by modern and contemporary writers and one contains a fragment of a text attributed to Christopher Columbus named “Diante do cabo Hermoso,” dated 1503. All four quotes refer to non-human natural life.

In the subsequent page a second framing document is included. It is a transcription of a document issued by the Count of Oeiras on behalf of the King of Portugal. The document, dated July 9, 1760, is a decree that essentially prohibits the felling of the Mangrove tree. It has the force of law and states that violators will be punished if caught doing harm to these trees. The inclusion of this document as a frontispiece to novel places emphasis on both human and nonhuman species. Elizabeth Ginway sees the decree as an expression of concern for the environment and an effort at environmental conservation, in spite of revealing also the environmentally harmful character of the Portuguese colonial enterprise: “While this is the first attempt at conservation, it nonetheless recalls the predatory use of nature” (134).

Against the claim that the decree expresses concern for the environment, there is an overlooked detail of the decree that further disqualifies the apparent conservationist impetus behind this document. The decree only condemns the felling of trees that still have their bark. The ones whose bark had already been removed were of no concern for the Portuguese authority. The contents of the decree emphasize the economic importance of the Mangrove tree at that time and also the exploitative mentality of the colonizer. Thus, the decree is not intended to protect the tree from extinction or to preserve the environment, but rather to extend the life of these trees and assure that their bark could be used for commercial purposes. In other words, since the document predicts the extinction of the tree and still authorizes its commercial exploitation, the decree cannot be considered a document intended to protect this species from extinction. It is a document intended to protect only the bark of that species of trees and also the business of curing leather. Therefore,
the document is an expression of a pre-industrial capitalist mentality so-to-speak, which foretells, in the novel, the ecological disasters to come. It is significant that the date of the implementation of this law precedes the Industrial Revolution by just a few years. The inclusion of this document as a frame to the narrative establishes a historical point of reference that stretches over two hundred years back from the imprecise point at which the narrative starts and develops. According to Brandão, the approximate date he envisioned was around 2030 or a few decades thereafter (“Redes da criação”).

The unaccounted time in between the issuance of the decree and the historical context of the novel itself signifies in many ways the erasure of national memory and provokes in the reader a vertiginous sense of loss. This ellipsis also has the effect of conveying a magnified acceleration of the passing of time, which corresponds with the absurd acceleration of the entropic process that takes place within Souza’s lifetime. Not surprisingly, the loss of memory and the acceleration of time are precisely the topical elements of one of the most striking passages of the novel. In this scene, Souza is in his apartment and strikes a conversation with a character named the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table. This individual behaves like an automaton, following instructions from Souza’s nephew, who has also been conditioned to serve the System without questioning it. The apartment has been taken over and now serves as a storage place for the invaders’ merchandise (mainly water) and a place to hide corpses of those they killed in order to steal water from them. This man had previously been an agronomist. He is one of the few characters in the novel, besides Tadeu, who is capable of conversing with Souza at the same intellectual level. Typical of Souza’s explorations, this conversation is an inquiry on the interconnections between memory, history and identity:

MAN-WHO-SAT-AT-THE-HEAD-OF-THE-TABLE. “Memories. You’re the last person in this whole country to still be talking about memories. What good are they?”

SOUZA. “They give you a vision of yourself. Of what you were and what you’re becoming.”

MAN-WHO-SAT-AT-THE-HEAD-OF-THE-TABLE. “Only if the world were still following a normal cycle. You’re a history professor, you should know that. For centuries and centuries, historical and social coordinates functioned as expected. But for the last thirty years everything has been out of synch. The acceleration of history changed everything, the dynamics are totally different now, the dynamics are everything, total conception – or else transforming constantly, minute by minute.”

SOUZA. “This new order has a name. It’s called chaos.”

MAN-WHO-SAT-AT-THE-HEAD-OF-THE-TABLE. “No, that’s too strong a word. Chaos implies complete disorder, anarchy. This is confusion, but not total chaos. Maybe disorder would be the right word.” (173) (Emphasis in the original)

In keeping with the general absurd tone of the narrative, the matter-of-fact attitude of both characters in this conversation suggests a total disconnect. Neither Souza nor his interlocutor could grasp the magnitude of the phenomenon being discussed. Or maybe they also do not see any point in discussing it further, because at this point there was nothing anyone could do to remedy the environmental devastation they witness. While the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table describes with a somewhat detached authority (a stereotype of scientific discourse) the central premise of the Anthropocene concept, Souza’s reaction to such complex and thoughtful explication is also blasé. That is, the behaviors and reactions of these characters do not match the tragedy, the urgency, the ramifications, or the magnitude of the problem.

Both characters’ attitudes exemplify a type of “disorder” but not in the literal sense of confusion or chaos to which Souza’s interlocutor refers. The disorder expressed in these character’s reactions fall in Timothy Clarke’s appropriation of psychological jargon used in reference to an individual’s disproportionate reaction to an event or situation. It is a “psychic syndrome…inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects (Clarke 140).” Such a reaction can be expressed either as exaggerated or moderated. In the fragment of the conversation cited above, both characters downplay the phenomenon discussed.

In part, Souza reacts with a certain scorn as he despises the ex-agronomist-turned-criminal. It becomes clear, nonetheless, that Souza does not grasp the full extent of the explanation. Souza simplifies the phenomenon the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table describes by bringing it back to something more familiar and general (chaos). Instead of questioning or elaborating further the description of the process under discussion, Souza reduces it to a single noun. The word chaos may describe the living conditions in the Anthropocene epoch (especially as depicted in the novel), but the qualifier avoids reflection on the historical process. As an old-fashioned historian, Souza is not equipped to make sense of this because the process described by the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table does not satisfy his linear, predominantly humanistic and anthropocentric notions of history. Souza’s reaction is also a common form of denial.

In this sense, even though the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table effectively reveals to Souza part of the mystery, and a key element to make some sense of historical time in the face of the scalar disjunction of the Anthropocene. He also avoids engaging the subject any further, not only because he (and no one) can grasp the full complexity and ramifications of the phenomenon described, but also because it is too late to do anything about it. Souza and all
the other characters with whom he interacts experience the wrath of nature, when Gaia manifests itself in extreme weather events, with the collapse of ecosystems and depletion of vital resources. The magnitude of this process, even with the enlightening explanation of the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table, remains enigmatic, beyond comprehension.

The story ends in a horrific situation in which everyone is destined to die due to the harshness of the environment. As people start to die from the unbearable heat, Souza smells the rain, which brings good memories. This is the only event that suggests a glimmer of hope for the planet. The last line in the book is Galileo’s heretic statement: “e pur si muove,” (“and still it moves”). This quote also suggests continuity, as well as an affirmation of the resilience of the planet. It is, in fact, this last line that inspired the title of the English translation, which was a felicitous choice. By underscoring the reference to Galileo in the title, Mary Watson shifts the focus of the Portuguese title on the nation paradigm (Não verás pais nenhum), to the Earth and brings this narrative to a wider and more historically relevant context. The quote from Galileo also resonates with one of the main challenges posed to conventional humanist history by the Anthropocene.

Bruno Latour coined the term Geostories to define narratives that are both about the Earth and of the Earth. It is a term that refers to history and geology at the same time. In Latour’s conception Geostories are narratives in which the Earth can be the subject or the object, the actor or the recipient of an action. As humanity produces knowledge about the planet, it also changes the planet, which is both changed by humanity and changes by itself. The role of managing the environment on an unprecedented scale is something that will always be necessary.

In And Still the Earth, the final scene re-enacts a prototypical Geostory that ties the entire narrative to Galileo’s heretic remark: “E pur si muove.” Because the sun has become lethal for humans, the System urges citizens to go under the so-called Endless Marquee, which is broadcast with boastfulness and hysterical denial by the System. As Souza struggles with the multitudes of people who attempt to remain under the marquee’s precarious protection, he smells rain—something that has not happened in years. Souza is unsure whether or not this is a result of his delirious state of mind. To certify that this is not hallucination, he wakes up a friend, who feels the wind, but not the smell of rain, because he is no longer able to remember that smell. Souza, on the other hand, is convinced that the rain is coming: “It would arrive sooner or later. Even if it was a long way off...Maybe the moist smell we were smelling came from somewhere so remote it would take a long time to arrive. Hey, is it raining out there?” (373-74).

The final scene represents the culmination of the entropic process and is perhaps the moment when Souza finally realizes, in a possible delirium, the magnitude of both the human impact on the planet and the new, precarious, subjectivity of both humans and the Earth. This ending may or may not offer a glimpse of hope, depending on the reader’s interpretation. The hopeful side of it lies in the realization that some form of life will prevail amidst dreadful environmental conditions. But this future may not include human life. The suggestive and enigmatic quote from Galileo that wraps up the narrative opens up at least two immediate interpretive possibilities: On the positive side, Galileo’s dictum supports the view that the Earth will continue to move, life will go on, and perhaps a new breed of humans will pick up from there. But, on the negative side, Galileo’s remark can be assigned a more literal meaning, according to which the Earth will continue to move by itself, devoid of human life but still supporting some forms of nonhuman life.

Heretical at the time of the Inquisition, Galileo’s dictum remains an undisputable fact. Conversely, instead of closing a chapter in science, his discoveries have in fact inspired recent philosophical discussions related to the Anthropocene and subjected to an intriguing and in many ways prescient spin. In a now classic study, The Natural Contract, French philosopher Michel Serres had anticipated the main argument of the Anthropocene precisely by referencing Galileo. Serres alters and supplements Galileo’s remark by stating that the Earth “has been moved.” That is, the planet moves on its own, but it has also been altered to such an extent as to lose part of its agency. Bruno Latour elaborates on Serres’ argument to propose that, after being “moved,” (i.e. being pillaged) Gaia reacts in unpredictable ways through the natural phenomena that fall largely under the umbrella of climate change. Latour sees in this loss the beginning of a new form of "agency," a status that both humans and nonhumans acquired after human interference achieved the unprecedented geological scale. That is, Gaia was animated by humans, and, as a result, becomes a different kind of agent. By the same token, humans lose the mistaken self-understanding status as autonomous subjects and gain a new status by both becoming geological agents and also becoming subjected to the planet’s actions. By losing their autonomy, both become “quasi-subjects.” Humans become new subjects “because he or she might be "subjected" to the vagaries, bad humor, emotions, and even revenge of another agent (Gaia), who also gains its quality of “subject” because it is also "subjected” to his or her action” ("Agency"5) (Emphasis in the original). Souza’s vision at the end of the narrative could then be an expression of the realization that neither humans nor the planet will carry on as they have hitherto.

Returning to the central theme of my analysis, the multiplicity and complexity of the conceptualization of history in the novel, I identify at least three distinct representations, each with their own epistemology. The first, and most conventional, is expressed in Souza’s attempts at establishing a linear, cause-effect chain of events that could account for the ecological disaster he witnessed in the brief scope of his lifetime. Souza’s views fall faithfully within the precepts of a long tradition of humanistic scholarship started by Francis Bacon and further developed by Giambattista Vico, Benedetto Croce and Robin George Collingwood.

Along with this attempt at establishing a linear timeline, Souza
encounters more frequently a second form, a circular or cyclical representation of history, which Elizabeth Ginway and Robert DiAntonio identified. This repetitive cyclical historicity represents the first challenge to Souza's conventional way of understanding historical time and adds to the dizzying effect of the narrative. The discrepancy between Souza's understanding of the historical process and the “evidence” he finds through his punitive experience in the streets opens up paths in which the impact of nonhuman histories can be factored in. That is, the protagonist’s frustrating attempts at establishing logical causality within the confines of political, economic, and social processes lead him to contemplate other aspects of history that challenge and ultimately invalidate Sousa’s conception of history. The cyclical movement he identifies is enough to discredit the well-established linear norms of cause and effect that guide historiography, but it also demolishes the teleology of progress, development, and human mastery over nature that have guided modernization endeavors in Brazil and everywhere else.

In addition to this impossibility of establishing logical connections in a linear manner, Souza also encounters a third, and even more complex representation of history outlined in the man-who-sat-at-the-head-of-the-table speech. This man’s description of an acceleration process that causes a disturbance in the “coordinates” of humanistic views of political, historical and social processes constitutes an alternative, synchronic temporality previously unaccounted for. If Souza had put more thought into it, all previous explanations would have merged and collapsed. Each of these representations or conceptualizations of history only make partial sense. The synchronic conceptualization adds another layer of significance. This is exactly the central and disconcerting effect of the overlapping of geological and human, or more precisely,humanistic historical timescales of the Anthropocene, which renders both partially obsolete.

And Still the Earth is, therefore, a unique narrative, not only in regard to its complexity and prescience, but also for being one of the rare texts that endures the test of time. It endures in its popularity, in its favorable critical reception, and in its growing relevance. Despite the fact that it relates so closely to a somewhat dated political and historical context, I hope to have demonstrated in this essay that it, in fact, extrapolates these boundaries, inscribing itself in a much broader historical and global context. Ignácio de Loyola Brandão was able to represent and articulate the chaos, contradictions, dilemmas, and misconceptions that are, unfortunately, more truthful than ever. The narrative reflects and anticipates, with uncanny richness of detail, the current debates on climate change, the Anthropocene, and the new possibilities for cultural, social, and political criticism. The novel points out the narrowness of the predominant conceptualizations of history, of our understanding of the relationship between human and nonhuman life. It places emphasis on the irrationality of humanity and capitalism. Brandão also successfully avoided the narcissistic reaffirmation of human superiority that still underlies certain forms of environmental discourse. The author’s choice of non-realist aesthetics of the absurd, hinging on surrealism, was an effective one, for it represents, not only in content but also in form, the irrational drive of capitalism. The novel deals with a wide range of issues that affect the environment not through a morally superior, or even rational condemnation of human abusive consumption of natural resources, but through a satirical, self-ironic, and self-implicating narrative that will remain relevant (for better or for worse) through many decades to come.

ENDNOTES

1 According to Jedediah Purdy, it was ecologist Eugene Stoermer who coined the term (After Nature 1). Crutzen later adapted and formalized the term in a short article published in Nature in 2002 (“Geology of Mankind”415-23).

2 A curious example of “non-fictional” literature related to issues of climate change is the best-selling book by Alan Wasserman, The World without Us (2007). In it the author describes life on planet Earth after humanity has disappeared. Wasserman’s thought experiment has been harshly criticized as a sensationalist and ineffective type of speculation. See Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman.

3 What Trexler calls “Anthropocene novels” are those that deal more specifically with atmospheric changes caused by global warming. Earlier novels anticipate the Earth’s temperature increase. A good example is J. G. Ballard’s The Drowned World (1962). Set in a semi-submerged London, Ballard’s novel attributes such change in climate to solar radiation. Trexler categorizes this novel as fallout or plague novel. According to the author, Ballard’s novel represents an intermediary step between the plague novels and the Anthropocene ones, as it sets a “stable archetype for subsequent fiction” (87).

4 This is the predominant reading of the novel. The best examples of criticism that ties the novel directly and solely to the historical and political era of the military dictatorship are Ginway’s Brazilian Science Fiction Fiction (127-136), Silva’s “Uma guerrilha literária,” and Jaramillo’s “Welcome to Hell.”

5 Margaret Atwood makes such a distinction in talking about her own work in comparison to other authors whom she considers writers of SF proper. See In Other Worlds 5.

6 The terms “climate fiction” or “cli-fi” have been used since the late 2000s to describe a specific subgenre of recent speculative or science fiction novels that deal with issues related to climate change. It is not possible to find reliable sources on exactly who and when it was first used.

7 Giovanni Arrighi reworks Karl Marx’s argument that capitalism is based on the perpetual accumulation of capital by adding that this accumulation is also, at least in part, purposeless. The notion of a purposeless accumulation was first proposed by Adam Smith.

8 For more on the symbolic meaning of the mega infrastructural projects of that era, see Beal (99-120). Some of the classic studies on the Brazilian military dictatorship are Thomas Skidmore’s The Politics of Military Rule,
A Collision of Disparate Historical Timescales in Ignácio de Loyola Brandão’s And Still the Earth


Christophe Bonneuil utilizes this terminology in order to categorize one of the strands of the current debate on the Anthropocene. According to the author, “tipping point” scholars are those who see human history as a series of violent acts, accompanied by disasters and assault on nature. See Bonneuil, “The Geological Turn.”

This mainstream nationalist narrative is pervasive in Brazilian symbolic production. Malcolm McNee describes it as “the enduring sense of an abundant, exuberant, and expansive nature in terms of the sense of national self, in many respects, is amply confirmed by the geographic scale, sheer volume of natural resources, and biotic diversity of the country, validating this first impression of Caminha and his shipmates.” (4).

Souza was in fact forced into retirement by the System.

In the Portuguese original, the sphere of power, or the state, is nicknamed “O esquema” (The Scheme). But Ellen Watson opted for “The System,” which conveys the idea, but loses the irony and humor of the original. The word scheme, both in Portuguese and in English also means conspiracy or ruse, which is the double entendre Brandão explored.

The Capitalocene strand of the current debate on the Anthropocene, also known as the eco‐capitalist view, is composed by scholars such as Jason Moore, Donna J. Haraway, Elmar Altvater among others. For a recent publication that represents their views, see Anthropocene or Capitalocene.

The discussion among the scholars of the Anthropocene is complex in its details and would not fit the scope of this general presentation. For a brief but thoroughly informative summary of the positions held within this area, see Bonneuil, “The Geological Turn.”

For more on these slogans see Skidmore 138, 160, 217.

In the aforementioned roundtable, the book is said to have sold more than one million copies in Brazil alone. This event marked the release of the 27th edition of Não verás Brazil. The novel has been translated in more than ten languages. See “Redes da criação: mesa Não verás país nenhum a realidade construída,” available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PBvHdKFM

“For instance, Salles’s “Palavra de escritor” and “O processo de criação em Não verás país nenhum.”

Krabbe’hoft’s “Ignácio de Loyola Brandão and the Fiction of Cognitive Estrangement,” and Causo’s “Science fiction during the Brazilian dictatorship.”

The label Macrohistory has been applied to philosophies of history that seek out long‐term trends or patterns in societies with separate trajectories in world history in order to determine whether or not certain processes are inherently cyclical regardless of specific social contexts. Macrohistory also concerns itself with future prognoses. For more on Macrohistory and on how it provides visions of future historical scenarios, see Inayatullah.

I am not sure, but it seems that the decree is not a facsimile of the original document.

I disagree with Ellen Watson’s translation of the date. She translated it as 1770, but the text’s arcaic spelling “fêfentza” indicates otherwise. If “f” is in fact “s,” the double “ff” indicates “ss,” which is equivalent to the modern spelling of the word “sessenta.” It cannot be “setenta” because the letter “t” is not represented by the “f” symbol but by the current “t.”

For an in‐depth analysis of the complex ways humans act in denial of environmental disaster would not make a difference.

The title of the lecture series Latour presented at the University of Edinburgh is “Facing Gaia: A New Inquiry at Natural Religion.” Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC3E6vdQEk

For a brief analysis of the precepts of this tradition and its shortcomings in regard to a broader comprehension of the Anthropocene, see Chakrabarty 201-207.

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The following essay explores the issues of idealism, ontology, and the fantastical in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges’ fascination with philosophical idealism began when he was introduced to philosophy as a child by his father, the thinker within this school who most influenced him being, as he admits, George Berkeley. Examining Borges’ attitude towards Berkeley’s radical idealism, the discussion focuses on its ontological dimension, demonstrating how Berkeley engages in a reductivist move in which ontology—in its Greek, Parmenidean sense—is replaced by epistemological processes in light of the dictum esse est percipi (“to be is to be perceived”). Within this framework, the question of the ontological status of the fantastical object in the Borgesian text is investigated, idealistic and fantastical objects being analyzed and compared in his short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” In a more general sense this comparison demonstrates that, considered from an ontological perspective, literary fantastical objects are not in fact idealistic objects but more closely resemble the paradoxical objects in Meinong’s theory, thus constituting what Todorov calls the “hesitation experienced by a person [reader] who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.”

KEY WORDS: Jorge Luis Borges, George Berkeley, Meinong, Ontology, Philosophical Idealism, the Fantastic.

There remains, of course, the problem of the material of some objects. (Borges 1964, n. 5)

Borges’ co-edited anthology (with Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo) entitled Antología de la Literatura Fantástica was first published in Buenos Aires in 1940 (Borges, Ocampo, and Bioy Casares). Containing a collection of fantastic stories, it constituted one of the milestones in the infiltration of the fantastic genre into South American literary discourse and its growth across the Latin American space (Duncan 16–46). This “dead genre,” as Todorov defined it in his classic work, in fact went on, to become one of the key contributors to the growth of Latin-American literature in the twentieth century. Although it is thus no coincidence that Borges’ name is closely associated with it, his idea of the genre appears to have differed quite radically from the dubious field of literary-writing strategies. The intrusion of the supernatural into reality that forms the crux of fantastical works in their diverse forms constitutes in his eyes a way of perceiving reality per se. Take, for example, the strange case of Bustos Domeq. As Monegal observes,

In his memoirs, Borges recounts a strange and amusing anecdote about his joint writing with his close friend Bioy Casares. During the 1940s, the two collaborated from time to time under the pen name Honorio Bustos Domeq—an anagram of their fathers’ names. In an interview, Borges described Domeq as an independent entity that erupts from the writing partnership and imposes itself onto reality: “[Domeq was] a fantastic author with his likes and dislikes, and a personal style that is meant to be ridiculous; but still, it is a style of his own, quite different from the kind of style I write when I try to create ridiculous characters.”... Thereafter, in his autobiographical essay, he accentuates Domeq’s individuality and independence: “In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing.” (1978, 366, 246)

A fantastical writer created by Borges and Bioy Casares, Bustos Domeq invades the life of Borges the writer of fantastic stories, via a Hofstadterian “strange loop” that destabilizes Borges’ sense of reality to the point of swiftly causing him to stop writing in Domeq’s name. The distinctive character of Borges’ works in relation to other Latin-American and European fantastical works, indeed, is a function of the stress he lays upon its ontological nature, this allowing him to engage in a philosophical inquiry into the ontological status of “true” reality.

The ontological issue of reality being up in the air in his eyes, he sets out to investigate it by philosophically exploring the fantastical literary genre. This blending of philosophy and the fantastical constitutes a deliberate ploy on his part, serving to convey his view of the unique role philosophy plays in human life. Borges reflects on this role in a conversation with Richard Burgin:

I think that people who have no philosophy live a poor kind of life, no? People who are too sure about reality and
about themselves. I think philosophy helps you to live... I think that philosophy may give the world a kind of haziness, but that haziness is all to the good... So that, in a sense, philosophy dissolves reality, but as reality is not always too pleasant, you will be helped by that dissolution. (142–143)

In his groundbreaking work on the subject, Todorov defines the fantastic as the “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). In other words, readers approach texts expecting them to conform to the reality with which they are familiar. When faced with something that appears impossible in that context, they are forced to question their own perception of the reality of the “real.” This “hesitation” is produced by four structural factors: a) the reader must assume that the figures live in a world similar to her own, recognizing it as realistic; b) he or she must choose between adopting a natural or “supernatural” explanation of the events that occur within it; c) he or she must dismiss symbolic or poetic license as accounting for the supernaturalism, agreeing to adopt a “honest” approach to the implausibilities of the plot. The acceptance of “natural” explanations lead to the text’s classification as “uncanny,” admission of “supernatural” explanations prompting its categorization as “marvelous”—only sustained hesitation preserving the fantastical effect; and d) he or she may identify with the figures in the text who experience the same sense of uncertainty.¹ According to Todorov, the fantastic thus occurs when an inexplicable incident violently interposes itself onto reality, demanding the reader’s attention and restless hesitation.

While Todorov focuses on the linguistic and narrative mechanisms that preserve this textual construct, Borges characteristically develops the philosophical dimension of the issue, addressing the ontological aspect of the fantastical invasion—namely, its impact on the fundamental substratum of reality. This philosophical development of the fantastical finds expression in Borges’ literary works in two forms. Firstly, he creates a supernatural construct that departs from the basic laws of reality—such as two parallel time frames (as in “The Other Death,” in which Pedro Damian’s fall in battle is both by decapitation as a coward and a hero’s death) or the freezing of a moment in time for the duration of a year (as in “The Secret Miracle”). More rarely, he introduces a fantastical object whose existence is logically or physically impossible into a rational depiction of reality. Thus, for example, the Aleph that Borges-the-protagonist sees in Daneri’s cell is a “small indescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished.”² Similar objects are the Book of Sand, which contains infinite number of pages, Shakespeare’s memory that passes from one person to another and Odin’s one-dimensional disk. These fantastical objects typically prompt the protagonists to reflect on their nature and form of existence, this contemplation (ex)posing the full weight of the ontological question of their relation to real existence and heightening the ontological haziness that threatens to dissolve reality (to use Borges’ words), created by the invasion of the supernatural.

For our present purposes, the fantastical object is of central importance for two reasons. Firstly, it constitutes a crossroads intersecting diverse aspects of Borges’ texts: philosophy (the issue of the essential nature of reality), literary representation (the nature and scope of the depiction of objects in the text), the boundaries of language (how can a supernatural object be described?), and poetics (the narrative devices that create the fantastical text). Secondly, it allows us to examine Borges’ unique contribution to the development of the philosophical aspects of the fantastical literary genre and elucidate the way in which he treats the ancient ontological question that has preoccupied philosophical minds since the days of Parmenides—the reality of the real. As I hope to show below, his discussion of the reciprocal relations between ontology, philosophy, and literature may add a significant and unique contribution to more general debates within literary theory, in particular those pertaining to the ontological status of literary fiction.³

One of the most prominent texts in which Borges directly addresses the ontological status of the fantastical object is the oddly-named story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1964, 3–18).⁴ Since its initial publication, this has become one of the flagships of Borges’ literary oeuvre in particular and the fantastical genre in general. An ontological clash between three types of objects—the physical—materialistic, the idealistic, and the fantastical—lying at its heart, it serves as a perfect example for our present ontological-literary discussion.

First published in SUR in 1940, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (henceforth “Tlön”) was also included in the Antología de la Literatura Fantástica, subsequently also making its way into his magnum opus Ficciones. In the prologue to the latter, Borges observes:

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance. To go on for five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes! A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a résumé, a commentary... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary books. Such are “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain,” “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim” (1962, 15–16)

“Tlön” is thus a short story belonging to the “fictional essay” genre Borges favoured so much that it constitutes one of the hallmarks of his oeuvre. Blending a theoretical-essay style with fiction—or, in more general terms, the language of Logos and the texture of myth: what Genette [1997] would identify as a blurring
of the border between the hypertext (a text that relates to another text) and the hypotext (the original text). More accurately, it is a hypertext that relates to an imaginary hypotext. This type of writing presaging the content of the story— the idea to publish a systematic encyclopedia about a fictitious planet—it constitutes an exemplary case of a perfect match between form and content, the fictional essay genre and completely original storyline.

The plot goes as follows. During a discussion of writing first-person narratives, Borges and Bioy Casares feel the pernicious presence of a mirror, causing the latter to recall a reference in The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia to the fact that “one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number or men” (1). Upon investigation, the said passage transpires not to exist in any of the volumes of the encyclopedia to which the two men have access. Bioy then brings the forty-sixth volume from his home—identical to that owned by the protagonist with the single exception that it possesses 927 pages rather than 921. The four extra pages deal with the entry “Uqbar”—a strip of land in Iraq or Asia Minor that does not actually exist. Thereafter, in the eleventh volume of the First Encyclopaedia of Tlön which Borges accidently discovers, the entry “Uqbar”—this brief description of the non-existent territory that appeared in a pirate edition of the Cyclopaedia—is replaced by a vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet’s entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody. (5)

This unknown planet is Tlön. Although this volume contains allusions to those that precede and follow it, these are not found. The postscript, written in 1947, resolves the conundrum of Tlön, being based on a manuscript accidentally discovered in 1941.

It transpires that at the beginning of the seventeenth century a “secret and benevolent society arose to invent a country.” Sometime later, its members realized that each generation would be insufficient for the systematic construction of a complete land, thus deciding that each would choose a disciple as his successor. Around 1824 in Memphis, TN, one of the members enlisted the “ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley” to their cause. Expanding its aims, he suggested inventing a whole planet and publishing a methodical encyclopedia about it. One hundred and twenty years later, an investigative journalist chanced upon the forty volumes of the First Encyclopaedia of Tlön—the emended version of the imaginary world called “Orbis Tertius” (Latin: Third World)—in one of the town’s libraries. This discovery has horrific consequences, the contact with Tlön and accommodation to its lifestyle causing the world to col-lapse: “Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels” (16).

The admixture of reality and imagination pervades all the strata of the story. It is the “true” detective tale of a fictional text (encyclopedia); a secret association invents an imaginary planet that in turn invades and destroys reality. This multilayered blending heightens and sharpens the fantastical effect, the reader “hesitating” between the natural explanation—the detective plot that revolves around the activities of the secret and benevolent society—and supernatural explanation of the presence of Tlön in reality. In fact, the roots of this commingling lie in the ontological features of certain objects in the tale.

Significantly, the story is divided into three parts. Although at first glance, this portioning is arbitrary, closer inspection reveals that the three segments represent three types of objects, each possessing a different ontological status. In this manner, the first part relates to the materialistic, seemingly-actual objects of Uqbar, the second to the idealistic objects of Tlön, and the postscript to fantastical objects. As a whole, the tale thus presents us with an ontological hierarchy of three kinds of objects that elucidates the status of the third—the fantastical. Let us closely survey this strange ontological hierarchy.

A fictitious strip of land in Iraq or Asia Minor, Uqbar is described in four modest pages at the end of the forty-sixth volume of several pirate editions of the Anglo-American Cyclopaedia. According to the protagonist, the entry is “very plausible, quite in keeping with the general tone of the work” (2). On a re-reading, however, “we discovered beneath its rigorous prose a fundamental vagueness,” its borders being determined by “neculous references points”—rivers, craters, and mountain ranges—and only fourteen of the toponyms being familiar. While some exist in reality and others do not, however, they are all physical objects that are possible entities in the world of fact. Uqbar is thus a pseudo-scientific representation of a fictitious strip of land, the existence of the objects within it being subject to the principle of verification employed by logical positivists or Popper’s rule of falsifiability. The presence of an imaginary piece of land in an encyclopedia seems to be no more than a prank or intellectual amusement, subordinated to a materialistic-positivist philosophic approach that identifies truth with the existence of raw material facts.

At this point, however, Borges inserts an aside that heralds the story’s ontological development. One of the bibliographical references that appears at the end of the entry is to a 1641 work by German theologian named Johannes Valentinus Andrea, who “in the early seventeenth-century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis—a community that others founded later, in imitation of what he had prefigured” (3). This ontological shift between the fictional and the real, which defies the materialist-positivist view, applies to certain objects on Tlön.

The eleventh volume of the First Encyclopaedia of Tlön forms an elaborate and methodical depiction of an unknown planet: “At first
it was believed that Tlön was a mere chaos, and irresponsible license of the imagination; now it is known that it is a cosmos and that the intimate laws which govern it have been formulated, at least provisionally” (6). Tlön differs fundamentally and essentially from Uqbar. While Uqbar is merely a strip of land in the known world, Tlön is the initial step towards the invention of a whole planet, an entirely separate realm from our existence. As we shall see below, Borges observes that this project is attributed to an “ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley”—an “obscure man of genius” who directed the work of the “secret society.” Informed by one of the members of the plans for the invention of this country, Buckley derides its modest proportions, suggesting that they be expanded to the documentation of a whole planet in a systematic encyclopedia.

Borges draws a direct line here between the idealist philosopher George Berkeley—a seventeenth-century member of the society—and Ezra Buckley, who launches the project in the eighteenth century. He also highlights the latter’s radical atheism, which forms a perfectly symmetrical counterpart to the (equally radical) theism of Bishop Berkeley. In a paradoxical assertion, he notes that “Buckley did not believe in God, but wanted to demonstrate to this non-existent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world” (13). As we shall see below, this form of atheism plays a major role in helping us understand Tlönian ontology.

The eleventh volume gives precise details of Tlönian language, literature, science, and culture. The cornerstone of Tlönian ontology is clear: in contrast to our world, which is dominated by materialism–positivism, Tlön is governed by philosophical idealism: “The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial” (6).

This strange characteristic is typical of Borges’ writings, whose penchant for this stream of thought is well known—as reflected, for example, in a celebrated essay: “Of the many doctrines registered by the history of philosophy, perhaps idealism is the oldest and most widespread.... Idealism is as ancient as metaphysical restlessness itself.” 44 Situating this view within the history of thought is not a simple task in light of the fact that it covers numerous perspectives—monism, theology, absolutism, and pluralism. The simplest way of defining it is negatively: idealism represents various philosophical methods whose common denominator is the premise that the foundation of reality is non-material. In other words, idealism is first and foremost anti-materialistic. According to Borges, “its most acute apologist, George Berkeley, flourished in the eighteenth century; contrary to what Schopenhauer declares... his merit cannot be the intuition of that doctrine but rather the arguments he conceived in order to reason it.” 45 One of the founders of the “secret and benevolent society,” Berkeley’s philosophy is in fact the shaping force and Weltanschauung of Tlön.

Berkeley (1685–1753) formulates the fundamental principles of his thought in section 3 of his The Principles of Human Knowledge:

Everyone will agree that our thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the imagination exist only in the mind. It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them—no matter how they are blended or combined together (that is, no matter what objects they constitute). You can know this intuitively [= ‘you can see this as immediately self-evident’] by attending to what is meant by the term ‘exist’ when it is applied to perceptible things. The table that I am writing on exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. Similarly,

‘there was an odour’—i.e. it was smelled;
‘there was a sound’—it was heard;
‘there was a colour or shape’—it was seen or felt.
This is all that I can understand by such expressions as these. There are those who speak of things that unlike spirits do not think and unlike ideas exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, to exist is to be perceived; so they couldn’t possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them. 3

The essence of existence being to be perceived (percipi) by something (mind, soul, spirit, or I myself), the foundation of Berkeley’s idealism lies in the assertion that the act of perception forms the grounds of existence. Developing this notion, Berkeley counters the platonic view that imagined concepts are “resemblances” or “copies” of objects outside the mind. 46 Nothing existing in and of itself without being perceived, this principle also dictates the concept of matter, “material substance” being rejected out of hand—the notion of ‘being’ (esse) being “the most abstract and incomprehensible of all” (section 17). If perceived from the Greek perspective of “inert, senseless substance in which extension, shape and motion actually exist,” matter thus contains within it a contradiction, thereby being reduced to a preconception (section 9). The possibility of imagining imperceptible objects in and of themselves is thus an impossibility, merely being the imagination of concepts without consideration of the role played by the perceiver (section 23). In short, as Berkeley succinctly observes in section 24:

It takes very little enquiry into our own thoughts to know for sure whether we can understand what is meant by ‘the absolute existence of perceptible objects outside the mind’. To me it is clear that those words mark out either a direct contradiction or else nothing at all.
Once the idea of matter has been eradicated, Berkeley proceeds to make a fundamental distinction between the passive "ideas" that are the product of the mind ("all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a spirit; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known") (section 6) and the spirits that form an "incorporeal active substance," thus serving to create ideas (section 26).  

This anti-materialist argument is buttressed by a theological claim. Noting that even those ancient philosophers who "maintained the being of a God, have thought matter to be uncreated and coeternal with God" (section 92), Berkeley asserts that the latter premise lies at the basis of skepticism, atheism, and irreligion: "I needn't tell the story of how great a friend material substance has been to atheists in all ages. All their monstrous systems depend on it so obviously and so necessarily that once this corner‐stone is removed the whole structure of atheism: collapses."

Berkeley's introduction of a theological apologetic into his idealistic construct is far more than a reflection of the merging of philosophy and theology that characterizes his thought. God in fact plays a central role in the foundation of reality in his philosophical system, in the well‐known variation on the "divine guarantee of the truth" theory espoused by medieval thinkers, as well as Spinoza, Descartes, and Leibnitz. For Berkeley, the continued existence of reality depends upon its perception in the thought of the "mighty spirit"—i.e., on the Spirit of God. If "being" is "being perceived", what guarantees the continued existence of reality if I shut my eyes? His answer is the omnipresent Spirit of God, this "wise and good agent" (section 107) being the "Author of nature" (section 147) that establishes nature as a constant reality governed by stable laws.

This assertion has far‐reaching implications. Firstly, it assumes an essential disparity between human perception, which can only create a precarious, unstable reality, and that of "another, more powerful spirit" (section 33) capable of creating a strong, stable reality:

- The (1) ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called 'real things'; and those (2) that are caused by the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly called 'ideas' or 'images' of things that they copy and represent. But our (1) sensations, however vivid and distinct they may be, are nevertheless ideas; that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as (2) the ideas that mind itself makes. The (1) ideas of sense are agreed to have more reality in them—i.e. to be more strong, orderly, and coherent—than ideas made by the mind; but this doesn't show that they exist outside the mind. (section 33)

The "ideas imprinted on the senses," the consequence of actual reality, are real things independent of our assumption that they exist outside the spirits that perceive them. They may be called "external with regard to their origin" because they are not "generated from within by the mind itself, but imprinted from outside by a spirit other than the one that perceives them" (section 90). In other words, "being" is being perceived and "reality" is nature as it is perceived by God.

Here emerges the second—purely theological—pillar of Berkeley's thought. Dependence upon the perception of God's Spirit means that reality as a whole is no more than a divine theophany: "... everything we see, hear, feel, or in any way perceive by sense is a sign or effect of the power of God; as is our perception of the motions that are produced by men" (section 148).

Berkeley's philosophical idealism thus transpires to rest on a number of premises like stones comprising an arch. The keystone is the ontological principle that "being" is "being perceived" by a spirit, existence thus being a function of the act of perception rather than existing as in the form of metaphysical substantiation. This anti-materialist orientation negates the existence of matter (what Kant later called the "thing-in-itself" ( Ding an sich)) and the Greek notion of the metaphysical "primal matter" ( Ὕλη). Ideas perceived and activated by a spirit (i.e., all the things in the world) are diametrically opposed to "perceptive substance," which is the active, creative source of ideas. Reality as a stable system organized and governed by laws and sensory data both being the outcome of the activity of God's "mighty spirit," an ontological disparity exists between the sensory data imprinted externally and the inner products of the human spirit, such as imagination and memory. Nature as a whole constituting a sign and consequence of God's ability, Berkeley's philosophy can be understood as a "theophanic idealism."

Let us now reexamine Tlön in light of Berkeley's philosophy. Borges leaves no room for doubt regarding the nature of the planet's reality:

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction. This dictum is entirely correct in its application to the earth, but entirely false in Tlön. The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. (6)

The planet obeys the law of Berkeleyan idealism, the Encyclopedia of Tlön detailing its idealist worldview. Its languages contain no nouns, being based on verbs in its southern hemisphere and adverbs in its northern hemisphere. Its literature is studded with "ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs" (7). Its culture is unsurprisingly dominated by a single discipline—psychology—to which all others are subject, every philosophical system a priori being perceived to be a mere "dialectical game." Nothing existing on it apart from the products of consciousness, the planet's metaphysicians thus do not seek "for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding"
(8). Needless to say, materialism is regarded as an arbitrary method that leads to unfounded paradoxes, such as that of Zeno. All these can be perceived as an amusing Gedankenexperiment—the development *ad absurdum* of the workings of a civilization governed by Berkeley’s radical idealism.

Precisely at this point, however, a rather strange ontology makes its appearance, the *Encyclopedia of Tlön* passing from the Tlönian view of reality to a description of existence on the planet. Here, it becomes apparent that Berkeley’s idealism has influenced the very ontological nature of certain objects—the *hronir*. Arriving at the heart of his ontological discussion, Borges states:

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hronir* and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer. Until recently, the *hronir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. It seems unbelievable that their methodical production dates back scarcely a hundred years, but this is what the Eleventh Volume tells us. (11)

The ontological irruption in which idealism shapes reality is itself an idealistic move, the principle of “being perceived” fashioning existence. Tlön represents not just the possibility of the existence of an idealistic civilization but the actual reality of such a civilization. The *hronir* embody the latter, constituting the duplication of lost items that perfectly matches the expectations of the searcher. In other words, the seeker remembers something and during his search for it engages in an ontological projection of his expectations and memories of reality. Hereby, a secondary object is created, which duplicates the original, this existing in the planet’s reality.

Significantly, the *hronir* possess an ontological rather than merely psychological status, embodying Berkeley’s fundamental principle, according to which esse is percipi. The recent systematic efforts at their “methodical production” include that undertaken by the head warden of one of the prisons on the planet. The inmates being told that certain tombs existed in an ancient river bed and promised freedom to “whoever might make an important discovery,” they were shown photographs of what they were to find in the months prior to the excavation. After a series of unfruitful attempts, they finally “unearthed—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay urns and the moldy and mutilated torso of a king whose chest bore an inscription which it has not yet been possible to decipher. Thus was discovered the unreliability of witnesses who knew of the experimental nature of the search ... Mass investigations produce contradictory objects” (12).

The production of objects on the basis of the expectation or memory of those who search for them is fraught with ontological instability due to the fact that the principle of fluidity of mental states is projected onto the ontological status of the created items. This fluidity is of great importance to the science of archaeology, for example, archaeologists being able to employ it to confirm every contradictory theory, the *hronir* making possible the “interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future” (12). Nor is it implausible that the *hronir* should be created of themselves, objects duplicating one another up to endless degrees. Second and third-degree objects exaggerating the aberrations of the original (*exageran las aberraciones del inicial*), however, the *hronir* thus form a type of object that combines two idealistic principles: Berkeley’s *percipi* (as the product of expectation or memory) and platonic mimesis (representation, copy), in which the duplication is always imperfect and ontologically inferior to the original.

Tlön also contains another ontological type of object: “Stranger and more pure than any *hronir* is, at times, the *ur*: the object produced through suggestion, educated by hope (*la cosa producida por sugestión, el objeto educido por la esperanza*)” (12)—the golden mask being a prime example. While the *hronir* are produced by expectation or memory, the *ur* is created via an autonomous and introvertive move of autosuggestion, sheer hope projecting it onto reality. It is thus “stranger and more pure” than the *hronir*—stranger because its source is completely internal, deriving from the depths of conceptual reality alone, with no connection to external reality; purer, because in idealistic terms it is the product of the activity of the spirit alone. The *hronir* and *ur* thus constitute two types of Berkeleyan idealistic objects, the first created from expectation, the second from hope, the first duplicating an existing object, the second produced solely by the spirit. Together, they impose an ontological presence on Tlönian existence, thereby constituting, as we observed above, an ontological irruption into the realistic description of the planet.

At the end of the first section, Borges asserts that all these objects—whether originating from the exterior (the *hronir*) or interior (the *ur*)—are ontologically unstable and fluid:

> Things became duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten. A classic example is the doorway which survived so long [as] it was visited by a beggar and disappeared at his death. At times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater. (12)

On what grounds does this ontological fluidity rest? At first glance, Borges develops Berkeley’s fundamental philosophical principle *ad absurdum* here. If existence consists of “being perceived by the spirit,” the continued activity of the spirit in time constantly determines the existence of idealistic objects. This may represent a Buddhist variation on Berkeley’s idealism. An alternative understanding,
buried deep within the story plot, however, relates to the theological dimension of Berkeley's philosophy.

As we saw above, Berkeley's thought may be identified as "theophanic idealism." God's mighty Spirit that constantly perceives reality serving as the guarantee of its stability, the "ideas of sense" human beings experience possess "more reality"—i.e., are stronger, more orderly, and more coherent—than ideas made by the human mind (section 33). At the same time, however, Tlön was invented by the ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley, a sworn atheist who "did not believe in God, but he wanted to demonstrate to this nonexistent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world." (13).

The theological tension between Berkeley and Buckley—the former's radical theism and the latter's radical atheism—might suggest at first glance that Tlön embodies an atheistic variation on Berkeley's philosophy, revolving solely around the principle of "esse is percipi," without any divine guarantee of existence. If all that exists is human consciousness, idealistic objects will exist, blur, and fade away in accordance with the stream of human consciousness. This theological interpretation might also operate in the reverse direction, however, the planet constituting an example par excellence of the disparity between the activity of the human and divine spirits. As we noted above, in section 33 of the Principles of Human Knowledge Berkeley stresses the ontological hierarchy between the products of the human spirit (which constitute "ideas or images of things") and the externally-produced ideas "imprinted on the senses" (which, possessing "more reality" because guaranteed by the mighty Spirit of the "author of nature," are stronger, more orderly, and more coherent). If we pursue this line of interpretation, Tlön's highly-realistic design forms a stable ontological ground for the ontological deviance of human idealistic objects—both the external source that duplicates existing objects (the horron) and the internal source that imposes objects on reality (the ur). Both dichotomous understandings are possible theologially, this theological "hesitation" (which the text itself appears not to resolve) forming one of the hallmarks of the power of Borges' writings and what I have called elsewhere his "religious agnosticism" (Mualem 2015).

If we survey the ontological nature of Tlönian objects, they comprise items whose existence derives from their being perceived by the human mind, this being true not only of the horron and ur but also the imaginary planet as a whole as conceived by a secret and buried deep within the story plot, however, relates to the theological dimension of Berkeley's philosophy.

The realistic design of the story nonetheless remains firmly stable up until this point. The objects we have encountered so far do not threaten reality. In Uqbar, they are merely possible objects of a fictitious strip of land, whose existence is true or false according to the principle of verification/falsification. On Tlön, they are idealistic objects described within the framework of its immense "thought experiment" or a form of mischievous intellectual amusement on an imaginary planet found between the pages of the eleventh volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. When we come to the postscript, however, we are confronted with ontological objects of a completely different sort that invade the realistic context of the story and shake its foundations. Unlike the possible objects of Uqbar and the idealistic objects of Tlön, those of Orbis Tertius are essentially fantastical.

The 1947 postscript added to the 1940 story breaks the linear timeline, the time-mingling threatening for the first time the tale's highly realistic, detective nature. In a lecture delivered in Montevideo, Borges defines time warps as one of the characteristics of fantastical literature. Herein, the story sheds its realistic skin, revealing its fantastical coat. The postscript brings us face to face with the enormous project conceived by Ezra Buckley of publishing a methodical encyclopedia of the fictitious planet. The forty volumes of the Orbis Tertius encyclopedia are discovered—fortuitously or by design—in a library in Memphis, TN, the imaginary planet thus finding its way into human culture and memory, eventually proving to be a violently-destructive influence:

"Ontology and Metaphysics: The Fantastical Object in Borges' Fictions"

The disintegration may be explained in two ways. From a socio-historical perspective, it represents a cultural process in which "the symmetry with the appearance of order" works its magic on human thought. From a philosophical perspective, the Encyclopedia of Tlön is entirely a product of the human mind and thus an essentially idealistic phenomenon. The imaginary planet's domination of human reality in the story consequently signifies the yielding of materialism-positivism to the enchantment of Berkeleyan idealism. A series of troublesome events—the appearance in diverse places of certain objects in Tlön—shuffles the cards, however, opening the door for an ontological interpretation, and thence a fantastical fashioning of affairs. Let us examine the ontological watershed more closely:

Manuals, anthologies, summaries, literal versions, authorized re-editions and pirated editions of the Greatest Work of Man flooded and still flood the earth. Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield... The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels. (16)

In the not-too-distant future, when someone will undoubtedly discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia, the world will collapse entirely: "The world will be Tlön" (ibid).

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It happened in an apartment on Laprida Street, facing a high and light balcony which looked out toward the sunset. Princess Faucigny Lucinge had received her silverware from Pointiers. From the vast depths of a box embellished with foreign stamps, delicate immobile objects emerged: silver from Utrecht and Paris covered with hard heraldic fauna, and a samovar. Amongst them—with the perceptible and tenuous tremor of a sleeping bird—a compass vibrated mysteriously. The princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle longed for magnetic north; its metal case was concave in shape; the letters around its edge corresponded to one of the alphabets of Tlön. Such was the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of reality (Tal fue la primera intrusión del mundo fantastico en el mundo real). (14)

The appearance of a Tlönian object is indeed strange and troubling, representing the violent intrusion of a supernatural event into reality that makes the reader “hesitate” over its true nature. The pre-requisites for the fantastic Todorov adduces are apparently present here: the reader identifies reality as similar to the world in which she lives, “hesitates” between a natural and supernatural explanation, and identifies with the narrating protagonist’s ontological uncertainty. An ontological investigation of the intruding object, however, evinces that to all intents and purposes it is real, its primary qualities (weight, volume, length, breadth), secondary attributes (colour, form), and magnetism (the needle turning north) all obeying the laws of physics. Only the Tlönian script and language are foreign. This is thus a linguistic rather than ontological event.

The compass can also be explained in terms of the continuation of the plot—the plan made by the Tlönian society to produce an encyclopedia of Orbis Tertius, “a world which is not too incompatible with the real world. The dissemination of objects from Tlön over different countries would complement this plan...” (16). A natural and rational account can thus be given of the appearance of the compass such that the fantastical object collapses and the ontological hesitation dissolves. Todorov calls this type of phenomenon “uncanny” (following Freud’s unheimlich)—a mysterious event that, while prompting a sense of unease, can ultimately be given a natural-factual explanation. The appearance of the compass thus does not signify the occurrence of a genuine fantastic event.

The latter takes the form of a second object, to which the protagonist is made witness by a “stroke of chance” when passing through Cuchilla Negra. The night he and his companion spent there was interrupted by the drunken ravings of their neighbour whom, upon arising in the morning, they found lying dead in the corridor:

In his delirium a few coins had fallen from his belt, along with a cone of bright metal, the size of a die. In vain a boy tried to pick up this cone. A man was scarcely able to raise it from the ground. I held it in my hand for a few minutes; I remember that its weight was intolerable and that after it was removed, the feeling of oppressiveness remained. I also remember the exact circle it pressed into my palm. The sensation of a very small and at the same time extremely heavy object produced a disagreeable impression of repugnance and fear. These small, very heavy cones (made from a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions of Tlön. (15)

While the natural account the narrator subsequently gives of this occurrence—the plan to “disseminate objects from Tlön over different countries”—is sufficient in the case of the compass, it does not suffice with regard to the cones. The fact that the cones serve a ritual purpose bestows upon them a metaphysical quality, the supernatural weight in relation to their size and material not being explicable naturally or rationally. Moreover, the fact that they are made of material from an imaginary planet cannot be accounted for in logical terms. As Borges observes in a footnote: “There remains, of course, the problem of the material of some objects.” Here, fiction violently invades reality, idealism the material.

The protagonist’s encounter with the cones is thus an intrusive fantastic event that subverts the story’s realistic frame. Although the fantastical occurrence is not possible logically, it happens in front of the eyes of the reader, who accepts the protagonist’s testimony. The fantastical foundation of the incident is purely ontological, relating to the supernatural material of which the cones are made. This is the fantastical event par excellence as defined by Borges in his Montevideo lecture—the “contamination” of reality by the imaginary. The violent intrusion of the fantastical incident thus creates the text’s fantastical effect and generates the reader’s restless, undetermined fantastical “hesitation.”

The story thus sets before us an array of diverse types of objects in hierarchical order ascending from the real to the fantastical: a) the various material objects of Uqbar, which are physically possible; b) the hronir and ur of Tlön, which possess a Berkeleyan idealistic status, their existence depending on the fact of being perceived by the human spirit independent of any need of divine intervention for their stability and thus marked by “ontological fluidity”; c) the Tlönian compass—an “uncanny” event with a natural explanation; and finally d) the fantastical objects of Orbis Tertius—the conescum-images whose weight and material are entirely supernatural and logically paradoxical, their weight not matching their size and their ore deriving from a fictitious planet. Not being possible objects in the real world, they are intrusions from an illogical, supernatural source.

Here, we should recall the reference to Johannes Valentinus Andrea Borges weaves into the text. Author of one of the bibliographical sources of Uqbar, the early-seventeenth-century German theologian described the imaginary society of Rosae Crucis, later to be founded in accordance with his model. At first glance, the fantastical cone of Orbis Tertius brings to mind this society, both being
created as imaginary entities that then take on real life. Ontologically speaking, however, they are very different objects. The Rosae Crucis is an imaginary society that later came to life, thus essentially constituting a group of possible objects. The cones, on the other hand, derive from a material that is impossible within the realistic framework of the story. This comparison sharpens the ontological incongruity of the fantastical object.

The hierarchy of objects in the story outlined above allows us to evince the distinctive nature of the fantastical object. It is neither a possible object in the world nor a purely idealistic object, an imaginary product of the spirit. Nor is it a pseudo-fantastical object that can be explained rationally on the basis of mental or causal processes. The ontological incongruence of the cones in fact derives from a fundamental logical contradiction: 1) It forms part of the reality of a realistic-materialist-positivist plot; and 2) it possesses at least one aspect that contravenes the basic laws of existence. This contradiction is impossible logically as well as physically. As the Aleph in the story of that name comprises a point in space that contains space in its entirety—a part that includes the whole to which it belongs—is an a priori logical contradiction of space, so the Tlönian cones, which are made of an imaginary material, constitute what Parmenides refers to as nihil fit ex nihil.19

According to Heidegger’s formulation, the appearance of the fantastical object in the protagonist’s realistic reality is an ereignis (event; literally: an occurrence taking place in front of our eyes) comprising the appearance of an impossible ontological entity. This constitutes the ontological source of the reader’s “hesitation”: how can this be a realistic event (that corresponds to his/her world) that at the same time is also logically impossible? In the case of the cones, the incongruence relates to the heart of ontology. They are neither “what-is”—“material causality” in Aristotle’s phrase (being imaginary), nor “what-is-not” (being present in reality, imprinting their weight, for example, on the narrator-protagonist’s palm). They thus comprise a third ontological state that is neither what-is nor what-is-not—along the lines of Plato’s objects belonging to the world of becoming that lie between the Parmenidean infinite existence (the perfect what-is) and nothingness: “But if there be anything which is of such a nature as to be and not to be, that will have a place intermediate between pure being and the absolute negation of being” (Republic 5).

These are the things that form and pass away that we know in our world—blocks of wood that turn to ash when burnt, the child who is born and dies. Although this “becoming world” is what Parmenides negates as an “illusion,” Plato’s objects therein do not in fact create a logical incongruence between simultaneous existence and non-existence, existing at a certain point in time (the child’s birth) and not-existing at another point (her death in old age). The fantastical third state—the simultaneous existence of the possible and impossible—is thus something else. We may elucidate its precise ontological nature via Alexius Meinong’s Gegenstandstheorie (1904).

In his theory of objects, Meinong discusses the ontological and semantic status of both existing and non-existing objects. Within this framework, he presents his notorious “principle of independence.” This rests on two premises: a) that every object possesses a “set of essential qualities” (Sosein) independent of its existence (Sein) or non-existence (Nichtsein) (Mg). Or as Ernst Mally elegantly states: “Objects with Nichtsein (without Sein) have Sosein” (Rapaport 156). From this perspective, an object’s nature (its set of essential qualities) is not conditional upon its ontological status—that is, on the issue of its existence or non-existence; and b) that “not every object has Being” (M2). There are thus “objects of which it is true that there are not such” (Meinong 2:490). Put more simply, there are objects that do not exist. Meinong’s principle of independence thus maintains that no object is dependent upon its ontological status. The nature of objects being independent of the question of their existence, in a certain sense there are some objects that do not exist.

Meinong heightens this logical paradoxicality by stressing that the principle of independence applies “not only to objects which do not exist in fact but also to objects which could not exist because they are impossible. Not only is the much heralded gold mountain made of gold, but the round-square is as surely round as it is square” (quoted in Chisolm 60 [italics added]). It thus also applies to objects whose existence is logically impossible because they are inherently contradictory, such as the round-square. Within this framework, Meinong posits the existence of what he calls a third ontological mode—namely, the Quasisein. As Rapaport notes:

Meinong considers for a while a third ‘degree’ of Sein, weaker than existence and subsistence, which he calls ‘Quasisein’. He introduces it as a way out of a version of the problem of negative existential: if ‘A doesn’t exist’ is true, then since ‘A doesn’t exist’ is about A, there is something that this assertion which it is about, and so A has some sort of being after all. (157)

Meinong immediately retracted his radical argument that the “principle of independence” apply to impossible objects, also rescinding his proposal that a third ontological state exists between what-is and what-is-not, replacing the concept of the Quasisein with that of the Aussensein. Rather than maintaining the existence of an intermediate ontological state, he thus proceeds to argue that the quality of existence is simply “external” to the essence of an object per se—the pure object: “Neither being [Sein] nor non-being [Nichtsein] can be situated essentially in the object in itself.” In this way, he believed, the paradox of the existence of logically-impossible objects (such as a three-sided square) could be avoided.

Meinong’s rejection of the existence of the Quasisein was based on the claim that it allows for the existence of all objects, possible and impossible. This precluding any opposite state (such as truth being negated by a lie or existence by non-existence), it be-
comes in his view utterly meaningless.\footnote{1} While this may be a logically-required move on his part, for our present purposes the Quasisein is of great importance in the literary context. In our effort to conceptually adapt Meinong’s theory to literary theory (without claiming complete correspondence between them, of course), we may say that Meinong’s “third ontological mode,” the Quasisein, may shed light on the question of the ontological status of fantastical objects in the text.\footnote{2}

As we have seen, the tension of the fantastical is created by the appearance of an impossible object in a realistic tale—i.e., from the strain between (1) the clear presence or occurrence of an ontological event and (2) the evident logically-paradoxical form of its nature. In ontological terms, the fantastical object belongs neither to the category of the what-is (being impossible) nor to that of the what-is-not (because it is actually present, constituting an ontological occurrence), the reader thus remaining uncertain and confused regarding the enchantment of the fantastical effect. He or she must therefore take the third road of Quasisein, wherein the realistic text contains objects of which it is true to say that they do not exist. Put more generally, we may say that the fantastical object possesses a Quasisein nature in the framework of the realistic text, imposing a quasi-sein entity on ontological reality (sein). The fantastical effect of the text therefore derives from the reader’s ontological “hesitation” in the face of an impossible object that appears right before his or her eyes.

In section 6.54 of his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Wittgenstein unforgettably states that

\begin{quote}
My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)\footnote{3}
\end{quote}

Climbing beyond Borges’ stories, we may use them to elucidate the question of the ontological status of the fantastical object as a Quasisein event.

\section*{Notes}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \footnote{1} The fantastic thus differs from the genre of “fantasy,” the former only containing a single unrealistic event vs. the latter’s subversion of reality as a whole.
\item \footnote{2} http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf.
\item \footnote{3} Cf. plato.stanford.edu/entries/fiction.
\item \footnote{4} Page numbers here follow the internet edition: http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/0066/borges.pdf.
\item \footnote{5} It is tempting to regard “Tlön” as a simulacrum according to the post-modern definition of the latter given by Baudrillard—i.e., a representation “bears no connection to any reality whatsoever”: see https://web.archive.org/web/20040209024621/http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html. As we shall see below, from the perspective of the idealistic philosophy that dominates the story, this interpretation is untenable.
\item \footnote{7} For a survey of philosophical idealism, see Dunham, Grant, and Watson.
\item \footnote{8} “A New Refutation of Time,” 282. Borges’ affinities with Berkeley’s idealism are firm and consistent, evident as early as his essay “Berkeley’s Crossroads,” published in Inquisitions in 1925, several years prior to any of his fictional works: see Borges 1966, 182–183.
\item \footnote{9} http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/berkeley1771.pdf (p. 10). Small dots enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional *bullets*, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought.
\item \footnote{10} “But,” you say, “though the ideas don’t exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, and these things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance.’ I answer that the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea; a colour or shape can’t be like anything but another colour or shape” (section 8).
\item \footnote{11} “A spirit is an active being. It is simple, in the sense that it doesn’t have parts. When thought of as something that perceives ideas, it is called ‘the understanding’, and when thought of as producing ideas or doing things with them, it is called ‘the will’” (section 27).
\item \footnote{12} In order to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of materialism on Tlön, Borges elaborates on the “sophism” of the nine copper coins that caused such a scandal on the planet: “On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday’s rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality—i.e., the continuity—of the nine coins which were recovered. It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed—at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men—at every moment of those three periods” (g).
\item \footnote{13} Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad.
\item \footnote{14} From a Buddhist perspective, it might be said that the existence of idealistic objects on Tlön comprises a dynamic and ephemeral form of pratītyasamutpāda—the “dependent origination” of things on the axis of time.
\item \footnote{15} This lecture never being published in its original oral form, the only remaining record of it is summaries produced by those who heard it. In it, Borges adduced four signature features of the fantastical: a) the story’s reflection on itself, which creates an infinite effect of a shifting reflection; b) time warps, which break past-present-future linearity; c) “contamination”
\end{enumerate}
In a rare political critique (made in 1940 in a nationalist-infused Argentina), Borges observes in "Tlön": "Ten years ago any symmetry with a resemblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?" (16).

"Ontology and Metaphysics: The Fantastical Object in Borges' Fictions"


Bad Education

Debra A. Castillo

In this article I study the U.S. 2005 documentary film, *The Devil's Miner*, co-produced by Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani. Like many other internationally produced documentary films of this sort, it combines an ethnographic view of its subject with a mission of critique, in this case, the denunciation of child labor in the extremely dangerous and physically exhausting environment of the Cerro Rico mine in Potosí. The general message to the viewer is an emotionally-laden appeal to support children, an inarguable good. The resolution falls back on cultural approaches directed toward the future, specifically, toward keeping children in school, and increasing formal educational possibilities. There is a way in which this universal panacea misses an important point bluntly and correctly outlined by Saskia Sassen, when she argues that economies relying on a significant pool drawn from the laboring precariat tend to be based on a shared understanding that the nation is afflicted with a surplus population (too many migrants, too many children, etc), and for that very reason there is tacit permission to render a significant category of workers temporary and disposable. Indeed, the economy requires this body of workers, and in this context education—while an evident good for the small numbers of children who achieve it—does not address the fundamental underlying conjunction of needs: for workers on the one hand, for survival on the other. To propose education as the solution, then, seems an unintended distraction from a difficult challenge posed by globalized economic systems. In Bolivia, the children's union UNATSBO has taken a different approach, arguing for the rights of children as workers.

**KEYWORDS:** documentary, UNATSBO, Potosí, *Devil's Miner*, precariat, Kief Davidson, Richard Ladkani, globalization

We see children carrying loads, working in shops, selling small items (or themselves) on the streets and understand (or think we understand) that there are specific geographies associated with this phenomenon. Child labor is generally associated (deflected onto) specific Southern locations on the globe, and associated with nefarious breakdowns of presumably shared values of family and social order. In the best of cases, we recur to what Sassen calls the "counter-geographies" of globalized labor exploitation and the conceptual frameworks we use to make sense of (or ignore) these phenomena. What I want to discuss here is the way the working child crystalizes a series of questions—often implicitly or explicitly displaced across borders into other countries and alternative geographies—about social responsibility and the shape we imagine for our national futures, often through sensationalist displacement onto little-known (by the North) geographies. For purposes of the discussion here, I study the U.S. 2005 documentary film, *The Devil's Miner*, co-produced by Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani in association with Latino Public Broadcasting, Independent Television Service (ITVS), and Public Broadcasting Service, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Like many other internationally produced documentary films of this sort, it combines an ethnographic view of its subject with a mission of critique, in this case, the denunciation of child labor in an extremely dangerous and physically exhausting environment.

Frequently framed in the context of progress towards the millennium goals, national survey results from many countries as well as the findings of reputable international organizations like UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO) have all pointed in the same alarming direction: despite multiplying programs and efforts aimed at alleviating poverty, child labor rates and risks continue to rise throughout the world. Thus, as of 2012, 40% of the nations in the world are still considered to be in the category of extreme risk in this respect (Maplecroft). Reflecting on this study, Fox business analyst Elizabeth McDonald notes that “Children are either forced by governments into labor, or governments ignore companies that forcibly employ them, in Angola, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand and Uzbekistan, among others.”

I am interested in this formulation (“forced by governments... or governments ignore companies”) not only because it indicts governments as violators of their own national labor laws, while also assuming that rights-based talk applies universally to all cultures around the world, but also because it does not take into account the many children who do not work for those large companies alluded to in McDonald’s comment: the ones that governments presumably cannot ignore, and whose violations they nonetheless studiously disregard. For many children, survival needs may push them into other, noncorporate, more marginal locations ranging from self-employment on the streets or in the homes of more affluent
members of society, or work in small businesses. Bolivia is a case in point: nearly one tenth of the population, somewhere between 800,000 and a million children and adolescents, work (“Poderoso lobby”), and in that country, the children working in the old silver mines (the focus of Devil’s Miner) do not work for big companies; in general they work with families on small concessions (“Digging”). In marginal jobs like these, workers are, to use Guy Standing’s distinction, “denizens” rather than “citizens”; they belong to a growing class he calls the precariat, where documentation or citizenship is irrelevant, and all workers irrespective of age or legal status might as well be undocumented border crossers.

I am not an economist or labor activist, of course, and I want to look at the way this issue is refracted in cultural production, and how this particular film, and this documentary subgenre more generally, falls into a familiar arc that runs from denunciation of injustice to resolution through education. The Devil’s Miner is a highly-regarded documentary film about child miners in Bolivia. It is also a film that highlights boundary conditions of all sorts: between the town of Potosí and the Cerro Rico mine, between formal schooling and apprenticeship as a miner, between dominant society and indigenous practices (though not overtly developed in the film, this subtext is evident in the halting, accented Spanish, the use of the Quechua language by several informants, and by rich allusions to an indigenous cultural substratum). Alongside these concerns are more spiritually constructed boundaries: sky and underground, Catholicism and indigenous beliefs, God and the Devil. The insistence on the child as the point-of-view figure in the film represents a temporal boundary condition as well as an efficient point of entry for international empathy; the general message to the viewer is an emotionally-laden appeal to support children, an inarguable good. In this project, as in others like it, the precarious child trapped in an awful situation evokes the (implicitly western) audience’s pathos at the revelation of talent without agency, of potential on the cusp of being lost or wasted. And while the legal status of the child worker has recently changed in Bolivia, the film continues to circulate in Northern classrooms and tourist sites targeting visitors to Potosí with the same discussion guide as 2006, perhaps because it so neatly fits our Northern expectations of the global South.

Children provide an ideal point of entry in the cinema of censure other senses as well, since they are less likely to bring national politics or national identities into play. In this sense, “the child” becomes something like a universal signifier. Interestingly enough, this unanchored social understanding aligns perfectly with national ideology. In general terms, because of their protected status, children are defined most often as conceptually outside any national identity project except insofar as their future patriotic potential may be referenced (as, for instance, in curricular proposals). Their voices are presumed to be subsumed under those of their adult parents and guardians. As children, they cannot exercise citizenship in any meaningful way; they cannot legally work, or vote, or serve in the armed forces, although in many countries, many children do all of these things.

In their commentaries on the making of this documentary, the filmmakers describe a their trip to Bolivia and their decision to do a project on Cerro Rico. After seeing so many children working as miners, they decided to focus their film through the voice and perspective of a child, and to do so without a voiceover narrator; their challenge, then, was to find a child who could carry the story. After interviewing ten families, they were introduced to Basilio Vargas, who “captivated them with his positive energy, intelligence, and articulate speech.” From the sixty hours of material they shot, the filmmakers stitched together a story about the precarious existence of these miners, who are proud of their work, although they know it is terrible and deadly, anchoring it through the narrative arc of this adolescent’s story.

For the analyst, the thinking child is accessible partly in her memories of her own past (almost by definition a very different sort of past) and our presumably shared understanding about goals and prospects for the future. When the project is denunciation, which it is in this film as in so many others, the resolution almost universally falls back on cultural approaches directed toward the future, specifically, toward keeping children in school, and increasing formal educational possibilities. This future, obviously, reflects the past of the educated spectator/commentator, and while it would be very odd indeed to argue against education, there is a way in which this universal panacea misses an important point bluntly and correctly outlined by Saskia Sassen. She argues that economies relying on a significant pool drawn from the laboring precariat tend to be based on a shared understanding that the nation is afflicted with a surplus population (too many migrants, too many children, etc), and for that very reason there is tacit permission to render a significant category of workers temporary and disposable (“Savage” 26). Indeed, the economy requires this body of workers, and in this context education—while an evident good for the small numbers of children who achieve it—does not address the fundamental underlying conjunction of needs: for workers on the one hand, for survival on the other.

To propose education as the solution, then, seems an unintended distraction from a difficult challenge posed by globalized economic systems. Simply put, there is no possibility of eliminating child labor without better education programs (though the content of those programs would be a matter of considerable debate), and yet education alone is not enough to solve the problem. When we engage the logic of boundaries to analyze this conjunction, what geographical (or counter-geographical) locations are most meaningful or revelatory? What historical/cultural trajectory will make this precarious story (this story from the precariat) legible, either in Bolivia or in the international film circuit?

The Devil’s Miner is advertised with the tagline “the story of a child’s survival.” It focuses on fourteen-year old Basilio, whose family—including his mother, his twelve-year-old brother, Ber-
Basilio, thus, serves as a synecdoche of an exploitative system of labor (rather than an exploitative company), in which national policy implicitly ignores excess population (poor, indigenous), for whom the question of survival is at the very heart of their individual dilemmas. Their survival is not, however, a national priority. He dreams of education as a way to escape, but in the meantime, he has to feed his family, all of whom agree that he is near the end of his life.) and Braulio, the foreman in the larger mine. These men teach Basilio the basics of the miners’ work, as well as the lore around “el Tío”, the devil of the film’s title. Where Catholic mass involves the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; on the mountain above a llama is sacrificed, and its blood is spread on the mine opening and the miners’ faces as a tribute to el Tío. Thus, education in the city below focuses on abstractions related to life and God’s goodness; in the mountain above, sacrifice (of llamas and of miners) is literal and el Tío is a far harsher deity.

One of the goals of ITVS is educational; their documentary films are often used in US schools and in community education projects. Thus, the organization helpfully provides a discussion guide for this film, including background on the film itself, on Bolivia, Potosí and Cerro Rico, as well as suggestions for further reading and for taking action. The discussion questions are divided into four sets: “general,” “childhood,” “poverty,” “religion.” Here are the ones on childhood:

- In your view, what is a child’s responsibility to his or her family? At what age is it acceptable to ask a child to contribute financially? Why?

These questions are too easy a target for facile deconstruction, and seem oddly out of joint with a local reality where child labor laws exist, but do not match the presumed norm of ITVS viewers. Likewise, in this particular context, child labor is widely culturally accepted, partly because this labor prevails in marginal situations of poverty and extreme need. What I want to specifically trace here, though, is the presumption of underlying shared values about childhood, and specifically about the role of education, in a country where one third of the children are laborers.

From its very title, The Devil’s Miner sets up an expectation of a discussion framed in terms of good and evil. While Vanessa plays in the background, too young to be caught up in this brutal reality, Basilio and Bernardino are constructed almost as a vacuum that everyone around them rushes in to fill. There is good education and good spiritual practice; there is also the reverse, the bad education that gets the most screen time in the film, and that is clearly the most titillating to the ethnographic eye. The representatives of good education are the usual suspects: the teachers in the public school, the priest. Good education involves learning about the solar system and about Jesus Christ’s plans for humanity. On the other hand, there are the mentors in the mine, young men like Saturnino Ortega (who, at approximately 35 years old is suffering from silicosis, looks much older than his years, and is nearing the end of his life) and Braulio, the foreman in the larger mine. These men teach Basilio the basics of the miners’ work, as well as the lore around “el Tío”, the devil of the film’s title. Where Catholic mass involves the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; on the mountain above a llama is sacrificed, and its blood is spread on the mine opening and the miners’ faces as a tribute to el Tío. Thus, education in the city below focuses on abstractions related to life and God’s goodness; in the mountain above, sacrifice (of llamas and of miners) is literal and el Tío is a far harsher deity.

There is a Christian cross outside every mine, and miners cross themselves before entering. Inside, in every mine opening, there is a statue of a very different god, an anthropomorphic figure often graced with horns, glass-shard teeth, and an enormous erection: el Tío. Before beginning work, the miners make offerings to el Tío: coca leaves, cigarettes, alcohol, and—on special occasions—llama blood. Saturnino, in one of the few explicit descriptions comparing el Tío to the Christian concept of the Devil, comments: “afuera, nosotros creemos en Dios...que es el Salvador... Pero entre la mina llegamos, las cosas cambian. Es el mundo de Satanás, dentro de la tierra. Entonces, en esa parte tenemos que creer en Satanás, en el Diablo.” Other commentary throughout the film, however, makes it clear that el Tío is called “el diablo” primarily for the benefit of outsiders. The miners in general do not identify el Tío with the Catholic Devil. Likewise, anthropologists who have studied the phenom-
environment. Learning about el Tío is as crucial to safety in the mines as

the intensified mining of the colonial period gradually changed the miners’ relation to this deity (Salazar-Soler).

The lore about el Tío is passed on orally, along with other instructions about mining safety. Saturnino, a senior miner and father figure in the beginning of the film, teaches Basilio, and in an important scene early in the film, Basilio, explicitly described as a father figure for his siblings, teaches his younger brother, Bernardino: “nunca debes de dejar de creer en el Tío. Porque si lo odias, no ofreces más ofrendas, él también te va a castigar. Hasta te puede matar….Mata al minero… Lo mata y su alma se lo come.” Bernardino admits he is afraid. Basilio reassures him: “no tienes que tener miedo al Tío…. Tienes que tener fe en el Tío…para que te de merced, para que te cuide de los accidentes.” Here, Basilio is already exercising in some sense the role that he has imagined for himself as his dream for the future: as the head of a family, but also as a man who has finished his high school education and can become a teacher in some other society, one that for the moment is more imagined than real.

The child and el Tío are the symbolic heart of the film, its most spectacular elements, and both of them, in the viewers’ perspective, look back toward a premodern past: calling to mind the innocence of the child on the one hand, and on the other, the past of humanity, when such gods held sway. Each of these two images is defined in the first instance by affective potential in a presumed moral universe. The documentary counterposes what from the outside looks like superstition (belief in el Tío deriving from prehispanic indigenous spiritual traditions) to what looks like modern science (studying astronomy, Basilio’s ambition to become a teacher and Bernardino’s hope to study civil engineering). To the filmmakers’ credit, they nuance their story.

Basilio knows the importance of formal schooling, to expand his imagination, but also, more pragmatically, so that some day he can leave the mine for a beautiful place where he will have salaried employment at an easier and safer job. Meanwhile, as he says, the immediate obligation to buy uniforms and to have a particular haircut in order to be admitted to classroom “son las reglas más terribles.” These rules are common in mines in pre-Columbian times, though the intensified mining of the colonial period gradually changed the miners’ relation to this deity (Salazar-Soler).

Up on the mountain, both Saturnino and Braulio highlight their job as teaching the young miners what they need to know in order to survive, for as long as they can survive in such an unforgiving environment. Learning about el Tío is as crucial to safety in the mines as knowing how to count explosions or identify poisonous gas. Like the people in the town, who send their children to school and then out to play, the miners wish children could stay home, be safe. The good parent/good teacher loves children and would never abuse them; nevertheless, the young miners have to understand very clearly the risks of Cerro Rico and the measures they must take to counteract danger. As Saturnino says, “a los chicos, yo los he enseñado…todo desde un principio…con calma, no de golpes.” These more experienced miners are saddened that necessity puts so many children in the mines, flinging “su cuerpo al mismo fuego que nosotros.” Yet, their role as instructors to these apprentice workers is crucial, and they see value in their work, both as teachers and as laborers. Braulio adds: “aunque sabemos que vivimos pocos años, aunque sabemos que sacrificamos nuestra vida por la familia. A pesar de todo eso, los mineros somos orgullosos porque somos mineros.” In the context of the film, this pride is made visually evident at carnival time, when the miners cross the physical, ethnic, and class boundaries that condemn them to invisibility and abjection in Potosí. They dance their way down the mountain into the city, using their tools as percussive instruments, with a choreography based on how they work in the mines.

Intercut with images from the mines are shorter scenes from the Potosí classrooms, driving home the message about the boys’ double education. In each case, the Potosí classroom features abstract western thought, while the mines offer practical knowledge and a tit-for-tat understanding of spirituality. The first classroom scene shows Basilio learning about the solar system, contrasting the highly symbolic gesture of gazing at the stars with the claustrophobic darkness of the mine. In the second classroom scene, about two-thirds of the way through the film, the teacher writes on the blackboard: “contemplando nuestra realidad.” Once again, the viewer is poised to contrast two realities; that of dangerous work and an early death, against the anticipated discussion in the classroom of other perspectives on reality. For a U.S. audience where the separation of church and state would suggest a historical or political response to the study of “our reality,” the teacher’s framing in the Potosí classroom is surprising. “Dios nos devuelve nuestra dignidad,” says the teacher, so her key question is, “¿Cómo viven Uds. dignamente? ¿Qué deben hacer?” These questions focusing on a dignified life, albeit coming from a very different world, echo Braulio’s observation about the miner’s pride in his work even though his life is short. Basilio’s answer to his Potosí teacher, like that of his classmates, comes from the city rather than the miner reality, and sounds rote: “siendo yo mismo y creer en Dios.”

The film is entirely character driven, hence the charge—to contemplate reality, to be oneself, to believe in God—needs to be taken seriously. Up to this point, I have been following the filmmakers’ lead and focusing on the third element in this sequence: the relationship to God/Devil and the doubled belief system that supports traditional spiritual practices in the Cerro Rico. The teacher’s own call to contemplate reality is, in fact, immediately directed through
the film’s editing process into the contemplation of God, reinforcing this emphasis. Likewise, the mandate to be oneself, curiously, is deflected back onto the image of a child whose fundamental core is precisely defined by this belief. There is a certain obduracy to this. Basilio’s answer is clichéd; what about his immediate or imagined reality gives him cues on how to “be myself”? What selfhood is a child (or a presumed child) allowed? And what belief system supports this construction of a self? Basilio’s current reality, as a child miner, is harsh almost beyond the viewer’s imagining; his projected future as a teacher, or Bernardino’s as a civil engineer, sounds as unreachable as the stars and as imprecise as the boys’ references to the desired geography for that future life (they want to live and work in the beautiful not-here of other countries—La Paz or Santa Cruz or even Cochabamba, says Bernardino; Europe, says Basilio).

Yet of course, being oneself is in the final analysis intimately tied to the contemplation of reality, and this is where the film falls short. In order for the documentary to maintain the focus on the child, Basilio must be portrayed as having a child’s dreams, and a child’s relation to the institutions of power, whether church, school, or work. In this way, the film can become an exposé, uncovering the invisible labor of the child who occupies the most precarious of all positions in the precariat, while also speaking in general terms about issues of value in a presumed moral universe where the future holds opportunities for advancement. The child, seen as an abstraction, retains the possibility for hope for the future while revealing the harshness involved in contemplating local reality in the present. In this moral universe, invisibility and the inability to exercise the rights of citizenship can be remedied by education, of the proper sort. The child, then, eventually will become an adult who can contemplate a different reality from that of an early death in the mines.

Davidson and Ladkani end the film at this point, with a close up of Basilio’s face set against a brooding sky, fading to a glorious sunset and the text: “there are currently about 800 children working in the tunnels of Cerro Rico. Most will never leave the mines.”10 “We are, of course, primed for a happy ending for the Vargas family, something the film denies us, but the website and the DVD provide. A year after the film’s release, Davidson noted in an interview that “Basilio, Bernardino and Vanessa are in school full time and not working in the mines….As for Basilio, he has learned how to use the Internet and we correspond regularly via e-mail and chat programs.”

This rescue through education sounds a little too pat, too expected, too focused on the individual child we have learned to care about, while ignoring the structural issue.11 The ILO warns that “Children cannot be withdrawn from labour in the mining sector until adequate alternative sources of support for families are in place.” (“Digging”). In the case of Basilio’s family, according to Davidson’s 2006 interview, the German aid society Kindernothilfe “helped the Vargas family relocate off the mountain and open a shop to sell kitchen utensils as an alternative income source,” thus outlining a particular small enterprise solution for this family. However, a 2010 website follow-up hints at the kind of failure all too common in small and marginal businesses. The blogger says that Basilio has since moved to another mine, hoping for better pay, and has been lost to view (Daniel).12 This too is a familiar trope, where well-meaning educational assistance, in failing to address the underlying problems, serves only as a momentary stopgap remedy. This is a point that Sonia Faliero also illustrates in her article on child labor in India. Focused through the story of an eleven-year old head of household in Bihar, the article, “Philanthropy is Not Enough,” tells of how an earlier report on orphan Meena Devi sparked international support for her and her two siblings, one older, one younger, along with an offer to pay for their education:

> The free hot meal is the reason Meena goes to school. But her teachers routinely skip school, three days a week. When teachers don’t come, the school stays shut, and there’s no meal. A well-funded, well-intentioned program created to educate and feed poor children fails on both counts: Meena not only learns nothing, she also goes hungry.

> But it’s the Manjhis’ [Meena’s aunt and uncle] choices that have had the greatest impact on Meena…Government inefficiency has left the Manjhis poor and hungry, so they have taken control of [her brother]14-year-old Anil’s earnings. His salary of less than a $1 a day is paltry even by Indian standards. But for the Manjhis, it was still too much to risk losing. And so they refused to let Anil and his siblings leave for school.

It’s not just education that is the panacea, but rather strategic, effective educational programs in the context of social reform to support families. There is another niggling question as well. Documentary film footage, like all ethnographically-tinged interviews of this sort, is always situated and contextual. It is impossible to know to what degree Basilio or Bernardino’s aspirations were shaped by dialogue with the westerners who interviewed them during the course of the sixty hours of filming.

However, the path of resolution through education is such a common trope in western reactions to reports about child labor that it begs for a closer look. I suspect that a great deal of its attractiveness for the international audience is that an appeal in favor of education in a film directed to an educational context speaks directly to the consumer demographic. More importantly, it retains for that audience the child’s projected passivity and innocence; he is still a node of affective potential, acted upon but not an actor, not yet a self.

But of course, we know that Basilio already occupies an adult role, and despite his physical appearance, at fourteen years old is exactly at the tipping point for child labor laws, which at the time of the filming presumably protected children between four and fourteen in Bolivia. Guy Standing has a more pessimistic view than the
makers of this film, and asks us to take a harder look at the way globalization has been changing labor relations in general. In this respect, the child is not the exception, but the tip of an iceberg. Standing argues that “the precariat is at the centre of the turmoil around multiculturalism and personal identities. A defining feature of all denizens is absence of rights. Citizenship is about the right to possess an identity, a sense of knowing who one is and with whom one has shared values and aspirations. The precariat has no secure identity” (158). In a word: to use the language of Basilio’s Potosí classroom, for people like him there is no self to be, nor will there be a stable identity for anyone in the precariat, at least under current labor practices. The Devil’s Miner focuses on the child, and the tug between good and bad education, where good education is mostly projected outside the arena of the film and bad education is all too graphically articulated. As it happens, Bolivian children have been in the forefront of world activism, coming forward with a third solution of their own, that also involves education, though of a very different sort, and an assertion of the dignity of the individual self. It is a solution that involves children organizing as a labor union, taking up the claim to their rights as workers and as citizens, and demanding an accounting from the government. It involves expressions of pride and demands for respect. It includes teaching and learning from each other without adult supervision, and confronting/threatening (lobbying/negotiating) with companies and government officials. It looks like the nightmare of adolescent rebellion. It looks like bad education.

It is not even hinted at in Davidson and Ladkani’s film or any of the website supporting materials, although the organization’s local chapter—which included 600 of the estimated 1000 child workers in Cerro Rico during the time this film was made—sponsors weekly meetings in Potosí, and has had significant visibility through its marches, demonstrations, and other public actions. An article by Sara Shahriari in The Guardian begins this way:

Rodrigo Medrano Calle is a Bolivian labour leader who meets and lobbies top government officials for his constituency’s rights. That’s not surprising in a country where pay is often low, working conditions harsh and unions play a powerful role in society. What’s unusual is that Rodrigo is just 14 years old, and his union’s members are all children.

This is concise, sensational writing from a major, respected news organ, and creates the hook for the western audience by the very unexpectedness of the last sentence. Medrano Calle’s organization is called UNATSO (Unión de niños y adolescentes trabajadores de Bolivia, often called by the simpler acronym NAT). It was founded in Sucre in 2003 as a national child worker’s union, and now has expanded throughout the country and has gone on to create chapters in Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Peru. It is not an NGO, nor is it western-affiliated or sponsored, although it does have a modest Facebook profile and has achieved some international funding in recent years, as their marches and demonstrations have attracted European attention. The union currently has about 15,000 registered members, all young people between the ages of five and seventeen (Morsolin). Among the people NAT has lobbied directly is Bolivian president Evo Morales, who met with union leaders in a historic April 12, 2012 event, and formally received from them their legal proposal for a children’s bill of rights.

Of course, NAT lobbies for better educational opportunities for their constituents as well as access to guaranteed health care. The core of their demands, however, is focused on achieving concrete measures of “dignificación” as workers. It is precisely this core concept of dignity—something that noncoincidentally is evoked over and over again by all the “educators” in The Devil’s Miner—that becomes the sticking point. Dignity is founded in a sense of self as workers with rights, a concept that in formal education is deferred for the projected future of the fully-formed identity, since it is something that defines the adult citizen, as opposed to the child or the denizen of the precariat’s shadow economy. NAT’s demands are pragmatic ones, but also have implications for how we collectively imagine the role of children, how we see them participating actively in a struggle over the responsibility to bring about a desired future, whether national or international in scope, and what that future implies about our present circumstances and the hierarchies within the countergéoographies of globalization (see, eg, Sassen “Women” 503-4).

The government’s most typical response to the child workers’ demands has been that it cannot give children rights since the practice of child labor is illegal. Moreover, like every other recognized nation on Earth, the Bolivian government has subscribed to the millennium goals of achieving universal primary education, seen as one of the significant benchmarks of development, and something that the wide acceptance of child labor makes very difficult. Yandira Pérez, one of the participants in the meeting with the president, described the goals of this high level meeting as breaking through this legal impasse: “Hemos propuesto que se apruebe una ley de protección para menores de 12 años que trabajan, está prohibido si, pero trabajan por necesidad, y ellos tienen que tener un salario justo y un seguro de salud.” In other words, Pérez, like other NAT leaders, recognizes the law, but argues that it is in conflict with accepted practice; the goal of the union is entirely pragmatic—to find a way to formally acknowledge children as workers. In his response, Morales recognized the knottiness of the issue, commenting that for children to help out in the family is not technically labor exploitation, while other forms of child labor are illegal and often highly exploitative. He also acknowledged that family need and the law do not always coincide, and he praised the maturity of the NAT leaders: “ellos que trabajan tienen más conciencia social,” a tacit recognition of the their status (Morsolin). Two years later, in July 2014, the Bolivian Cámara de Diputados approved Law 321 which creates a legal
opportunity for self supporting children as young as ten years old to work legally ("Bolivia").

In reflecting on *The Devil's Miner* against the background of NAT, we realize that the issue of dignity threads through both discussions. It is the first and most important of NAT’s demands, the one from which everything else derives. Taking the two formulations together, we conjugate local with international understandings, the former tied to rights, the latter to affect. The film circles around the question of dignity, while always deferring it; in the schoolroom it apparently has something to do with belief in God and care for the self. For the filmmakers, the child’s selfhood and dignity are projected into a future time (adulthood) and a different geographical space (Europe, or at least Cochabamba). Likewise, the adult members of the mining precariat and their claims to dignity through sacrifice resonate discordantly against an economic structure that implicitly positions them as disposable elements from an overpopulated third world environment. For NAT, in contrast, dignity means pragmatic legal action to counteract abusive labor practices that had been allowed to continue precisely because they were already unregulatable due to their illegality.

By the same token, “dignity” taps into a different affective nexus than the competing concept of “survival,” and the terms play out differently in Bolivian and international media coverage. Grossberg’s recent book on the future of cultural studies is helpful here: “We need to begin to ask how the ‘media’ themselves are produced, in the contemporary conjuncture. What are the mechanisms that produce ‘the media’ as having a particular kind of embedded disembeddedness, and as particular kinds of mediating, affective apparatuses?” (221). One of the most striking things about the film, when taken in the context of NAT, is the leaching away of avenues for meaningful change for anyone in the mining communities. Viewer responses on imdb or the film’s own website puzzle at the mother’s passivity, the miners’ lack of agency; they highlight crying buckets over the situation of the three children and being deeply affected by the film’s dark poetry, the stark beauty of the mountain where the very concept of survival is deeply ironic.

In contrast, the media depictions of NAT leaders like Rodrigo Medrano Calle or Yandira Pérez, two young people of exactly the same age as Basilio Vargas in the film, describe young people who seem to be breathing a different kind of oxygen. While the precariat is not disappearing any time soon, frankly, I am more enthusiastic about the possibilities outlined by Medrano Calle and his organization, if only because I’d rather cheer for someone than weep over them.

NOTES

1 This was also the year (2009) that Len Morris and Robin Romano released their film, "Stolen Childhoods," another highly recognized film on child labor around the world.

2 Signed by all 193 United Nations members in 2000, the goals’ the target date is 2015. Progress has been very uneven.

3 McDonald’s partial list does not include Bangladesh, the world’s highest abuser of laboring children between the ages of 5-14. It is striking that Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are all on the list of the world’s ten worst offenders according to the ILO (“Global Employment Trends”). More recently, Sonia Faleiro, in a *New York Times* editorial, wrote that “India, according to UNICEF, now has more child laborers under 14 than any other country.”

4 In the background of this trip is the uncomfortable sense that the filmmakers are following the now familiar tourist route outlined by Regina Harrison, in which—for a modest fee—adventure tourists from the west are guided into the hazardous mines, where they are introduced to el Tío, as well as given a glimpse of the harsh working conditions.

5 This point is made very clearly in the 2010 ILO report, “Eliminating Child Labor in Bolivia: The Role of Education.”

6 In this respect, “Stolen Childhoods” is more chillingly overt in its politics. The trailer features US senator Tom Harkin (Iowa) who describes child labor as “the breeding ground for Osama bin Laden’s army and future terrorists.”

7 Basilio was fourteen years old at the time of the filming, though he looks younger to American eyes, and the scenes in the Potosí classroom look like elementary, rather than secondary education. The filmmakers’ insistence that this is the story of a child (rather than, say, the story of a young adult) is fundamental to the atmosphere they develop. Children, stereotypically, are valued; adolescents are problems to be controlled and contained.

8 The existence of this capsule explanation at the opening of the film is one easy cue that the film is intended for an international audience, since a national one would clearly already be well aware of this history.

9 Posted pictures and Potosí websites highlight images of el Tío, clearly one of the major tourist attractions in the region at this time, a phenomenon Regina Harrison also discusses in her documentary, *Mined to Death*.

10 Other reports, including those from the ILO, suggest the number of child miners is about 5000 in total, and UNICEF cites a total of 750,000 child workers between 5-17 in Bolivia, about 1/3 of all Bolivian children in that age group.

11 A blog commenter, who interviewed miners at Cerro Rico in 2010 says, “Another point: they told me that all the miners from Potosí were hoping from some help after the movie was made, but nothing happened. This left a quite bitter taste in their mouth” (Daniel).

12 There is another update on the boys in the Wikipedia article on the film, which I consulted in October 2016. It claims that as of 2014 Basilio has been working as a tour guide in the mines, while also working there part time as a miner and studying tourism on the side, and that the younger brother, Bernardo is married and works in the mines fulltime while also (improbably, given the work hours) studying in the evenings. The link for this attribution is broken, however.

13 The Potosí branch is called CONNAT’SOP (Consejo de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados de Potosí), and among its accomplishments are successful negotiations to achieve pay raises for children who sell newspapers on the streets in Potosí.
Bad Education


Harrison, Regina. ”Mined to Death.” Berkeley Media, 2006.


Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas Has the Last Word

Translation by Stacey Van Dahm

When we think today about Cuban literature in the United States, especially that originally written in Spanish, Reinaldo Arenas emerges as its most successful representative. The objective of this essay is to study the origin and the consequences of Arenas' success and especially to analyze the limitations of the interpretation of his work resulting from that success. The most visible consequence of this interpretation has been to privilege his autobiography, Antes que anochezca (Before Night Falls), and to emphasize in it the author's victimhood and, thus, to establish an image of the author and his work that has affinity with the multicultural discourses that prevail in the North American academy when one aims to study the so-called subaltern cultures. I propose to emphasize in Arenas' own autobiography and in El color del verano (The Color of Summer)—a novel that functions as a parallel text to the former—the elements that demonstrate a clear resistance to the victimhood that is attributed to Arenas for the sake of adapting him to predetermined agendas. There are two elements I mark as the most subversive in the face of this interpretation: his ferocious satire against almost everything and his no less aggressive representation of his sexuality. Next, I explain why satire and sexuality in these texts simultaneously contradict the predominant reading of Arenas in the North American academy and are keys for confronting another much more complex and fruitful reading of his work, a reading I will attempt to quickly sketch. Finally, I describe how Arenas, in writing these final texts, was complicit in the ambiguity found in certain readings of his work. This complicity—according to my suspicions—responds to Arenas' need to assure the posthumous success of his work in the context of the academy and the liberal North American culture. To conclude, I endeavor to briefly summarize the dilemmas that the North American reception of Arenas' posthumous work represents for Cuban literature that is produced in the United States.

* Translator's note: I have added the English title of translations of Arenas' and other major works. Quoted passages from Arenas' novels have been taken from the English translations done by Dolores M. Koch or Andrew Hurley. After first mention, all titles appear in English only. I have translated quotations from secondary critical sources myself unless a readily available English translation exists. This article by Enrique del Risco is published with the permission of Editorial Aduana Vieja, which owns the world rights for Guayaba Sweet: Literatura Cubana en Estados Unidos.

disturbing final photographs that accompany the book dramatize his text in a way almost impossible by other means. The morbid compassion towards the doomed author, once he was dead, would do the rest. Now deceased, his image permanently fixed in the final photograph, Arenas would never be able to alter the representation that would introduce and canonize him as a writer-martyr-homosexual.

We may agree nevertheless that even though these circumstances would be enough to explain the public attention given to Arenas’ posthumous book, it would be insufficient to explain the enthusiasm of the North American academy. We will try to imagine the academy less sensitive to the mise en scène arranged by a moribund author than a housewife is in front of her daily soap opera.\(^2\) We will concede the benefit of imagining the academy more analytical and less suggestable. If not the blood, what distinguishes Arenas’ autobiography from his earlier texts? In my search for an answer, I have found two possibilities: genre and tone. The combination of a somber and at times pathetic tone with the choice of the autobiographical genre is the key. We may venture that due to this combination Arenas has risen to the academic altar with an advantageous martyr’s halo.

**EUtOGEtY OF THE VICTIM**

Some years ago, the appearance of a book questioning the claims made by Rigoberta Menchú in her biography, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (I, *Rigoberta Menchú*), caused a capital commotion. The biography reads like an article of faith in North American universities and the Nobel Peace Prize has validated it (perhaps more than its defense of the indigenous people of Guatemala). Pressed to deny or confirm the accusations of the book, Menchú spoke for the cameras with enlightening frankness: “No one is going to take away my victimhood!”

In order to fully understand this sentence it is necessary to understand the political value of victimhood, its recuperative capacity and the special space that it occupies within North American multicultural discourse. If I must choose a way of saying it, though brief and undoubtedly clumsy, I would affirm that within the predominant multicultural framework of North American universities, minorities take their place, preeminently, as victims (or, perhaps, as equivalents to what in his time represented Rousseau’s noble savage: an example in nature of social harmony prior to the emergence of private property). The calculation that equates minority with victim and reserves for him a space for his voice to be heard does not manage to conceal the character of subordination that is conferred to the minority-victim from the centers of what we will call, to abbreviate, the “good conscience of the West”. The dynamic of the victim is, as Nietzsche would say about what he calls “slave-morality,” a dynamic condemned to action as reaction, without possibilities of action based on one’s own initiative. Perhaps representations of these minorities, as in Menchú herself, do not ignore this condition, but at the same time they prefer securing their victimization to losing the position gained.

As a victim, Reinaldo Arenas finally acceded to a position from which he had been banished since his exit from Cuba in 1980. Arenas’ exclusion from the editorial and Western academic world had, according to him, political and ideological roots,\(^3\) but these would not be enough to explain the posthumous re-entry of the writer into those same circuits. It is certain that Arenas was marginalized as an anti-Castroist writer (after having been considered—by pure geographical conventionalism—a representative writer of the Cuban Revolutionary novel)\(^4\) and has returned as gay author, as victim.

The most evident sample of a “victimized” reading of Arenas is precisely the cinematographic version of *Before Night Falls*. *Before Night Falls* is striking for its filmic realization of the pathetic tone of the work that inspires it, that is, up to the point at which it adulterates the original plot. The most notorious is the passage presenting Arenas’ first imprisonment. While in the book Arenas acknowledges explicitly that he had had sexual relations with some adolescents, this detail was passed over in the film. It was obvious how counterproductive it would be to the success of the presentation of martyr-Arenas, someone who, being condemned in his country for the ‘crime’ of being homosexual and “hostile to the revolution,” had committed an act typified in North American legislation as the “corruption of minors” (curiously, Arenas was not convicted for this offense thanks to the fact that the age of consent in Cuba is only 16). Equally unfaithful to Arenas’ work is the film’s exclusion of that aggressive and impudent laughter that runs through almost all of his texts even, at times, his autobiography. To deny him that laughter, like denying him the imaginary ferocity of his “hallucinatory world,” commits the double sin of refusing to offer the complete and rich nature of the biography and its context and not taking advantage of its powerful creative world.

Curiously, the Cuban exile community remained fairly content with the film. As aware as Rigoberta Menchú of the symbolic profitability of victimization, the exile community, even the most conservative sector, who had never sympathized with the scandalous and unplaceable homosexual that Arenas was, was grateful that the author had been restored to them as a simple martyr. Arenas and his posthumous fame had sensitized North American public opinion more than decades of repeated denunciations had.

Thus a pact was made between the political convenience of the exile community and the political correctness of the North American academy and culture. Both had accommodated the director of *Before Night Falls*. Nevertheless, though faithful enough to Arenas’ autobiography, Schnabel was consciously unfaithful to the work and the life of his subject. Dedicated to presenting Arenas as the most credible version of a martyr that his biography permitted, the director adorned it with all the attributes of the victim, when in reality the great victim of this version of his life was Reinaldo Arenas’ humor.
LIFE IN LAUGHTER

When death was a remote possibility for him, Reinaldo Arenas stated in an interview: “I would want to be remembered not as a writer in the conventional sense of the word, but more as a kind of mischievous goblin—a type of spirit trickster” (Valero 337). In the farewell letter that accompanied the text of Before Night Falls Arenas said: “You are the heirs of all my terrors, but also of my hope that Cuba will soon be free. I am satisfied to have contributed, though in a very small way, to the triumph of this freedom” (Arenas 1993, 327). The man who for 10 years desired to be remembered as a goblin, now at death’s door, takes leave as a patriotic fighter for his country’s liberty. Furthermore, he wanted to give his death political utility by making Fidel Castro responsible for it. For Reinaldo Arenas, editorial and cinematographic deification has been a basic political fact. The author is displayed like a corpse to be used for two agendas that, in the absence of Reinaldo Arenas, struggled to coincide.

This is less about respecting the author’s intention than it is addressing the literature’s intention, an intention that is, at the same time, quite slippery. Gay and exile academic readings of Arenas have a certain logic that excludes all possible laughter because his laughter dangerously undermines his condition as victim. A victim that tirelessly mocks everything and everyone is, precisely because of this, less moving. A victim who laughs is suspected of not being one. Laughter raises suspicions about the veracity of the pain, even when dealing with a cruel and bitter laughter like Arenas’. And there is reason for the suspicion. Beyond the intentions of the author himself, the laughter that recurs in his texts, including the autobiography, prevails on us to take delight too much of the time in the terrible, especially when the one affected is the author himself. This laughter takes the focus away from the tension about a story that, because of its content, would gravitate fatally into the tragic.

Arenas was aware of laughter’s literary and political power. He tells us that The Color of Summer is “a grotesque and satirical (and therefore realistic) portrait of an aging tyranny and of the tyrant himself” (Arenas 2000, 228). Arenas holds the conviction, shared by many, that the grotesque and the satirical presuppose a distortion in which there is more literary reality. Commenting on the clandestine success of his satirical tongue twisters in 1970s Havana, he tells us:

One of the most nefarious characteristics of tyrannies is that they take everything too seriously and destroy all sense of humor. Historically, Cubans have found escape from reality through satire and mockery, but with the coming of Fidel Castro the sense of humor gradually disappeared until it became illegal. With it the Cuban people lost one of their few means of survival; by taking away their laughter, the Revolution took away from them their deepest sense of the nature of things. Yes, dictatorships are prudish, pompous, and utterly dreary (Arenas 1993, 239).

Persecution of laughter by a political sovereignty is for Arenas an infallible indicator of its power. Following Arenas’ reasoning, laughter helps us to survive. But what survival is referred to here? Apparently the text deals with a life beyond the one imposed by political and economic exigencies, an alternative to the closed game of the discourse of power. The symbolic capacity to extricate oneself from political power resides in laughter. It calls attention, on the other hand, to the fact that the most hilarious moments of a novel like The Color of Summer may be exactly those in which power is manifested with most crudity. I think for example of the chapters titled, “A Tour of Inspection” and “The Death of Virgilio Piñera”. In the first, Fifo, the tyrant that governs the island, kills almost all of his advisors and escorts at the smallest sign of contradiction while touring the island by helicopter. In the chapter about the death of Piñera, a group of agents intent on killing the writer by any means possible finally succeed by forcing him to view a painting of a giant vagina. In spite of hyperbole, there is something terribly real in those bloody caprices that, nevertheless, continues to make us laugh: an attempt to surpass through laughter that thing that overwhelms us, that exceeds our capacity for confrontation and indignation, our rationality.

Those dictatorships, “prudish, pompous, and utterly dreary,” of which Arenas speaks need gravity and asceticism to better instill the group of fixed ideas in which their power is based, so that the dictatorship can maintain the image that it has of itself and establish its meaning. “...Ascetic procedures and lifestyles are a method of freeing those ideas from competition with all other ideas, of making them ‘unforgettable’” (Nietzsche 38). In his work, Arenas makes abundant use of the elements that historically have demonstrated magnificent capacity to erode fixed ideas: laughter and sex.

“By taking away their laughter, the Revolution took away from the people their deepest sense of the nature of things,” says Arenas. What is this deep sense that disappears with laughter? What profound knowledge, according to Arenas, elicits laughter? If one notes the anguish that underlies or haunts Arenas’ work, his profound nihilism and his childish confidence in the idea that only literature gives meaning to his life, we can see in Arenas’ laughter the certainty that life does not have any meaning other than the one we attribute to it. Arenas himself said that “with humor you evoke reality in a more disrespectful manner and therefore can come closer to it without the distancing effect of that is typical of all seriousness. All rhetoric implies certain useless formalities that humor interrupts and challenges as it gives us a more human reality” (Soto 152).’

Note that, contrary to the traditional conception of humor as distancing, Arenas formulates it as closeness, a closeness that at the same time that it offers us the object in detail, it also hinders the balanced and distanced view that necessarily ignores detail. “The price of objectivity is the loss of closeness,” Solterdijk reminds us from the other side of the problem (1987, 140).

One of the darkest scenes in the autobiography as well as the film adaptation, Arenas’ imprisonment at el Morro, had already been covered by the author in an important chronology told years earlier:
He returns, then, to the "drafty" el Morro prison and spends a year locked up in one of its caves. There he comes to the conclusion that he is condemned to write all he has lived (Cantando en el pozo [Singing from the Well] y Otra vez el mar [Farewell to the Sea]), or to live that which he has written: El mundo alucinante [Hallucinations]. By the cruelty of chance, in 1966 Arenas [in good part of this chronology Arenas refers to himself in third person] had written the imaginary and real biography of a Mexican friar who, persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition, is conducted to Havana’s el Morro prison. After having been fugitive from the law for a long time Arenas, now captured, sits in el Morro in the same cells where 150 years before Fray Servando Teresa de Mier y Guerra had been (Valero 16).

On describing the persecution that not only he but also his manuscripts suffered (remember that on two occasions he suffered the loss of successive manuscripts of the novel Farewell to the Sea), he speaks of the “police officials’ eagerness to read his works, works that apparently they found extremely affable but which were never returned” (Ibid. 15). In these fragments, recycled as much in The Color of Summer as in Before Night Falls, the use of irony subverts that which would make him a victim. He transforms his persecutors into admirers of his writing and his imprisonment into a work of literature rather than political power. Thus, in the story he constructs for himself a freedom that he had not been able to enjoy in his life. He deflates the suffering that his persecutors inflicted upon him, transferring the power to his literature.

This is not the end of Arenas’ devictimization strategies, his attempts to recover his motivation in the face of reality. (In Arenas, autonomy not only means constructing a different reality, an escape, it also means responding to and undermining the supposed coherency and weight of the transformative discursive power that the world imposes upon him.) Nothing escapes his savage and spiteful mockery: those who represent Cuban political power or his own friends, confused at times in Arenas’ writing and paranoia with the figure of the informer. In Arenas’ obsessive world nobody is exempt from being a real or potential traitor. In a collection of phrases that he offers in his novel he tells us that “friends are more dangerous than enemies because they can get closer to you” (Arenas 2000, 167), an idea that he repeats in a poem even more forcefully: “the best informer is always there, your best friend”’ (Arenas 2001, 205). In the world of The Color of Summer the presumption of innocence has disappeared. The conclusion seems to be that in hell, everyone is already guilty. Just as the conventional separation between victim and executioner is dissolved, so is the distinction between good and evil. In few Cuban literary works is that basic moral distinction as blurred as it is in Arenas.” But this dissolution of the ethical boundaries liberates both the victims and the executioners. Each of whom is only responsible for himself, not having any other limits than those he assumes for himself.

ARENAS, A GAY WRITER?

In spite of the protagonist of homosexuality, above all in his last works, Arenas never intended to idealize his sexual preferences. There is no trace of gay consciousness, gay solidarity, nor gay pride; quite the opposite. Homosexuality appears in his work like a type of fall, a curse redeemed by the beauty and enjoyment that transforms Arenas and his friends into martyrs of pleasure. His vision of homosexuality, developed in a machista atmosphere like Cuba’s, is uncomfortable for actual queer theory as it is practiced in the North American academy. Francisco Soto, a diligent Arenas scholar warns: “Arenas’ representation of homosexuality cannot be considered ‘positive’ in the way that much of contemporary Anglo-American gay literature strives to celebrate homosexual identity and represent ideal gay relationships based on mutual respect and equality” (Soto 2003, 35). In fact, Arenas not only does not share this ideal of gay relations based on respect and equality, but he openly criticizes an atmosphere that makes him feel like the (unnoble) savage. “Homosexual militancy has gained considerable rights for free-world gays. But what has been lost is the wonderful feeling of meeting heterosexual or bisexual men who would get pleasure from possessing another man and who would not, in turn, have to be possessed” (Arenas 1993, 108). Can anyone, who like Arenas has been despised for his whole life by his own family, his society, and his state, avoid self-loathing? Nevertheless, Arenas manages to avoid the position of inferiority that they want to impose on him with his theory that all men are effectively or potentially homosexuals. The traditional popular Cuban division between active homosexuals (maricones) and passive ones (bugarones)” is deactivated by Arenas in the chapter of The Color of Summer titled, appropriately, “HM, top, seeking same…”:

In all his long erotic wanderings through the world, he, the supermacho top, had always thought he was screwing another top. But imagine his surprise to realize that all those supposed tops were really just a bunch of pansy faggots, because they would allow their butts to be stuffed by other tops—tops, in turn, who weren’t really tops because they would allow their butts to be stuffed by other tops, and so on, ad infinitum. In fact, ad nauseam. Because to his horror, the old bull macho had finally realized that the world had contained no men at all—there was nothing but pansy faggots (Arenas 2000, 57-58).

Whatever the designation, in Arenas’ work, sex carries out a liberatory function equal to laughter, a function onto which Arenas imposes a political character as can be appreciated in this passage:

In spite of everything, youth in the sixties managed to conspire, not against the regime but in favor of life. We still had clandestine meetings at the beaches, at some-
body’s house, or we simply enjoyed a night of love with a passing recruit, a female scholarship student, or some desperate young man looking for a way to escape the repression (Arenas 1993, 91).""

Reinaldo Arenas seems to understand that to reduce homosexuals to simple victims, however brutal the repression they suffered, would be just that, a reduction. Sex acts as a liberator in many senses with its capacity to put the oppressors and the oppressed in intimate contact. Homosexual sex in Arenas’ texts displaces and softens the ideological, social, political, cultural, and sexual limits. The oppressors are in reality repressed homosexuals. There are many scenes in which the most ferocious authority figures appear as sexually attractive beings before whom the homosexual characters can scarcely contain themselves.10

More than exalting the homosexual condition, Arenas celebrates its liberatory function. His homosexuality is valuable to him insofar as he has dared to follow his instincts in spite of social hostility. According to a delirious lecture given by one of his characters from The Color of Summer, at some point:

We have lost all meaning in life because we have lost paradise, and we have lost paradise because pleasure has been condemned. But pleasure—persecuted, executed, condemned, exploited to exhaustion, and almost vanished from the world—still had its armies: clandestine, silent armies, always in imminent danger of defeat but utterly unwilling to renounce life. Which is defined by giving pleasure to others. “These armies,” boomed the voice of the queen of Holland . . . “are made up of queers, faggots, fairies, and other species of homosexuals all over the world. These are the greatest heroes of all time, those who truly have the dream of paradise and hold to it unflinchingly, those who at all costs attempt to recover their—and our—paradises lost” (355-6).

Narrating his experiences in prison, Arenas recounts the history of Cara de Buey, who was killed by another prisoner who caught de Buey masturbating while watching him (Arenas 1993, 194). This makes Arenas say: “...sexual pleasure often exacts a high price; sooner or later we pay with years of sorrow for every moment of pleasure. It is not God’s vengeance but that of the Devil, the enemy of everything beautiful. Beauty has always been dangerous. Martí said that everyone who is the bearer of light remains alone; I would say that anyone who takes part in certain acts of beauty is eventually destroyed” (Arenas 1993, 194). By identifying himself—a writer persecuted in his own country, terminally ill with AIDS in exile—with the masturbator who has paid for his pleasure with his life, Arenas is touching on one of the bases of his critical and literary impulse. Whether he intends it or not, Arenas has evolved into a writer who is truly cursed and not just for the most narrowly defined Cuban can-

ons. He does not deal with the “polite” homosexual who requests the normalization of his sexual condition in society, but with someone who shows us the narrowness of our moral conventions as an impediment to the search for pleasure and beauty. Sloterdijk has said in his book, Critique of Cynical Reason, that “aesthetic amorality is only a prelude to life demanding its sensual rights practically” (Sloterdijk 1987, 108). We come to understand then the meaning of Arenas’ corrosive laughter and of his voracious sexuality as they appear in his literature: a battle to the end to force the ethical limits in the search for beauty and pleasure.

THE NECESSITY OF LIBERTY

The intensive use of laughter and sex serves Arenas as a means of liberation. It is helpful to ask, liberation from what and for what? What is this “deepest sense” that Arenas attempts to reveal with his literature? What is his secret personal utopia? Among the reasons that Arenas gives for writing, some are as conventional as describing a world that otherwise would be lost, “fragmented and dispersed as it is in the memories of those who knew it” (Arenas 2000, 228) or as “a way of being with my friends when I was no longer among them” (Arenas 1993, 173). Nevertheless, when describing the noise in prison he tells us in Before Night Falls: “Ever since my childhood, noise has always been inflicted upon me; all my writing has been done against the background of other people’s noise” (Ibid. 178). We can translate this “noise” as the common place of vulgarity, insult, violence, repression, stupidity or the simple lack of imagination which Arenas tried to confront with his own voice, a literary voice that could transport him from those common places to the most intimate of his paradises.

Perhaps the best description that Reinaldo Arenas gives of the flight and the liberty that writing represented for him is when talking of another exiled writer, José Martí:

Therefore, being here, outside of the place both loved and hated, outside of prison, from which we had to flee just to continue feeling human, feeling free, we are not completely free, because in exile our souls and imaginations are still there. But there, one can only be free as a deserter, that is, as a fugitive – always on the verge of being captured – a rebel inhabitant of the landscape of our childhood, of that enchanted forest which, being magic and unique (our very own), calls us, and also (by magic) betrays us (Arenas 2002, 63).

The treason of that enchanted forest, of the landscape of his youth, suddenly a paradisical space of impossible return, lies precisely in the fact that he cannot inhabit it again. In the face of the vanishing landscape of his childhood Arenas has erected his literary oeuvre to include that landscape and magnify it. In Before Night Falls he re-casts the lost paradise in which he was free—even to search for the
meaning of life: “I think the splendor of my childhood was unique because it was absolute poverty but also absolute freedom; out in the open, surrounded by trees, animals, apparitions, and people who were indifferent toward me. My existence was not even justified, nobody cared” (Arenas 1993, 5). This calls attention to the radical contrast between the childhood paradise described by Arenas and his literary simulation of it: while in the first he is satisfied with his social invisibility, in the literature, once innocence is lost, he seeks a way to make himself visible at all costs. As a result, Arenas’ personal paradise is in a way very similar to its biblical model: a place where sex does not make him feel guilty.

There is no truth to the theory, held by some, about the sexual innocence of peasants. In the country, sexual energy generally overcomes all prejudice, repression, and punishment. That force, the force of nature, dominates. In the country, I think, it is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man. Physical desire overpowers whatever feelings of machismo our fathers take upon themselves to instill in us (Ibid. 19).

When Arenas said that he had to write The Color of Summer in order to restore meaning to his life, it was something more than the plaintiveness of someone facing terminal illness. That novel was the missing piece from a pentagon that he had been working on for two decades. With it he could bring to a close the most ambitious literary plan conceived by a Cuban novelist. And the plan consisted of recounting different moments of his life in Cuba including an imaginary future (El asalto / The Assault). His paradises and personal utopias are not definitive in any case. The successive biographical passages that his literature invents and exalts—his wild sexual excursions of the 60s, Lenin park, the ‘window’ into Santa Clara, etc.—are a response to his most intimate demands. Since it was no longer possible to recover his childhood landscapes, he would transform his fundamental experience into a type of inverted epic, heartbreak and mocking at the same time. Heartbreak because of the anguish of the work and the uncertainty about the result. Mocking because of the profound certainty of how futile it is to try to find a meaning for his existence. Either he does not find meaning or that meaning is usually devastating. Moreover, the enchanted forest can only exist as a memory, as consciousness of his loss. The transaction in laughter is produced upon noticing the ridiculousness of any search for meaning, similar to the frustration of the supermacho top who “had always thought he was screwing another top” only to discover in the end that in the world there are “nothing but pansy faggots.”

At the end of his prologue to Before Night Falls Arenas recounts how, fearing that he may not live long enough to finish his plan, he made this supplication to a photograph of Virgilio Piñera in his house: “Listen to what I have to tell you: I need three more years of life to finish my work, which is my vengeance against most of the human race” (Ibid. xvii). And he managed to fulfill his ominous petition. Except for a couple of friends, his lover, and his literary mentors Lezama and Virgilio Piñera, almost no one escapes from the most destructive machine of insult that Cuban literature has known. Thus we can understand better Arenas’ savage and bitter laughter. Laughter of one who recognizes that he is the owner of a destiny that will come to an end. Laughter of one who, attacking all of humanity, believes himself freed from sadness and passive victimhood: a laughter that shows more sovereignty than hatred.

HE WHO CAME TO SCREAM

Richard Rorty has written that “to fail as a poet—and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being—is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself” (Rorty 28). Arenas not only did not accept the descriptions or labels with which state security agents and cultural functionaries branded him: a poor, queer writer and counterrevolutionary. [One civil servant/critic calls him a “forsaken little peasant” in order later to say that “the tragedy of Arenas’ life resided in the fact that he most certainly did not choose his own path and that his path was drawn up against the grain of history” (Ubieta 5)]. Arenas also anticipated the ways the Cuban exile community and the North American academy and film industry would describe him (gay writer, “martyred victim of Fidel Castro’s revolution”) (Hillson 1).

The refusal of these labels would seem to contradict the somber tone and certain passages of Before Night Falls (and especially the farewell letter) that cry out for the reader’s compassion. Those who see in that tone Arenas’ crucial perspective or his state of mind as he approaches death ought to take into account this detail—Arenas himself says in the prologue: “I finished my autobiography after leaving the hospital . . . and continued working on The Color of Summer (Arenas 1993, xiii). Or it may be that the rabidly playful novel was written at the same time as the autobiography and was completed afterward. The decision to work with such different tones in texts written almost in unison is not consistent with the tone of the autobiography being due to a special state of mind, but rather to a conscious and premeditated decision.

On the eve of his death Reinaldo Arenas had a devastating vista before him. Even abstracting the nearness of his death (something already abstracted enough) he must have seen how his literary world, created against all types of obstacles, remained at the margin of public attention. The curse lobbed by Ángel Rama seemed fulfilled. (“Reinaldo Arenas al ostracismo” was the title of Ángel Rama’s article that greeted the author upon his arrival in exile to the United States). Arenas declared that he had come to scream. But being able to scream did not ensure that he would be heard. He probably said to himself then that if he had not garnered attention with his literature then he would do it with his life and with his death. The autobiography and the letter would be part of that plan and political persecution and sex the central motifs of his memoirs.¹¹
Jorge Brioso notes that after having lived his whole life in a phantasmagorical relation to his texts, Arenas wanted with the autobiography to assure himself that his work would once again find a place to belong. Hence, says Brioso, he insists various times that the manuscripts of all his work can be consulted in Princeton’s Firestone library (“along with The Romant of the Rose, the writings of Blanco White and . . . the account settlements for Bette Davis’s work”) (Valero 21). For Arenas, the archive that keeps Arenas’ manuscripts at Princeton would come to be the triumphant reversal of another archive also evoked in his texts: the one holding his manuscripts confiscated by the Cuban state security, an archive that the writer trusted was still preserving his texts. The choice of tone in the autobiography seeks to dramatize his literary farewell and to make himself credible as the author of his work and the protagonist of his biography. This journey through the same scenes already housed in the novels that comprise the pentagony is apparently an attempt to distinguish the biographical origins of his work from its fictional result. But it is certain that he achieves exactly the opposite: on discovering the biographical charge of the pentagony without renouncing the imaginative excess, Before Night Falls manages to confound, perhaps forever, the borders between the life and work of Reinaldo Arenas. But the tone, I insist, is what is decisive. The tone seeks (and manages) to transmit a gravity to his work which, he suspects, never will be taken seriously. In this manner Arenas aims to convert Before Night Falls into the prologue of all his work, during his most efficient publicity campaign. And to top it off, in order to increase the mystery, at his own request the manuscript of the autobiography cannot be consulted until 2010.

The condition of Arenas as a victim of Castrismo or of homophobia and moral, aesthetic and political conservatism, as much in Cuba as in exile, is not enough to explain his literature. Nonetheless his literature could be explained, though only in part, as rebellion against the values that attempt to spurn him as a person and writer. This explains in part his decision to emphasize all those motifs and themes in place of those which have been diminished. The most categorical definition of all Arenas’ work appears in a passage of The Color of Summer: “...my books constitute a single enormous whole in which the characters die, are reborn, appear, disappear, travel through time—always mocking, always suffering as we ourselves have mocked and suffered. All of my characters form a single mocking, despairing spirit, the spirit of my work, which is also, perhaps the spirit of our country” (Arenas 2000, 315). And so that no doubts would remain about the mocking nature of his spirit he finishes the paragraph like this: “As for my play Abdala, [in reality Martí’s text], don’t publish it, for heaven’s sake—I really don’t like it; it’s a sin of my youth” (Arenas 2000, 315).

Some years ago, Carlos Victoria, one of the most important contemporary Cuban writers (and one of the least recognized) published a piece on the discouraging condition (I was going to write “situation” but I stopped myself—the temporality that this word suggests could be deceptive) of Cuban writers in exile in North America. Victoria, a companion in exile and of the same generation as Arenas and the founder of the Mariel journal, chronicled the repetition of the same editorial neglect faced by the successive waves of exiled writers, as if there were an inimitable curse. With time even the few signs that might suggest a change (editorials, journals and contests) would fade away as if they had never existed. Victoria confesses with bitterness:

Something else that occurs with us... is that the eagerness of being part of something has never materialized. In exile in the United States we have been “outsiders,” to use the English term. Our dissatisfaction has not allowed us to join any political movement, despite the fact that almost all of us hate the regime in Cuba. And this same dissatisfaction, woven into our texts and making evident the faults, not only of Cuba, but also of the United States, has made us suspicious in the eyes of the people that should most take us into account: our own compatriots in a country that never will be ours, despite the fact that many of us carry passports bearing the deceptive stamp of North American citizens (Victoria 72).

Arenas, as we have seen, managed to get himself the biggest possible piece of this “political and geographical curse,” at least posthumously. He has integrated himself into the liberal North American culture and the political pantheon of Cuban exile at the cost of being read very partially and, no less formidable, of not being able to take advantage of or refuse that fame due to the insurmountable circumstance of being dead. His example, the most successful up to this point, is like a dead-end road. Something has blocked Cuban exile literature from being integrated into the current of “Latino culture” that exists within the United States. The political and cultural singularity of the “Cuban case” has made it extremely difficult for the best Cuban exile writers to enter into the niches that multicultural discourse offers them.

Richard Rorty in his book, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity tells us that “only the poets can truly appreciate contingency,” understanding poets as the true creators, beyond the genre that they cultivate (Rorty 28). Arenas’ contingency included his North American experience, and both The Color of Summer and Before Night Falls should be understood as reaction and resistance to the discourse in which his work would be assimilated and encased. Arenas knew that the future of his work depended upon its passage through the North American academy, the same one ordered to preserve his manuscripts. The autobiography represents his acceptance of this ultimate contingency, working in a system that, even though it accepts and exalts Arenas’ homosexual condition, does not seem to understand the necessity of liberty (to use an expression agreeable to the writer) that motivated his life and his work. Multicultural discourse, imposed with the intention of resisting the “universalist” vision as an instrument of the West’s hegemonic culture, has repro-
duced the hegemonic vices of that universalism. It has been sup-
pplemented by innumerable categories and subcategories of subaltern
discourses that keep responding, even though now with more dis-
cretion, to a hegemonic vision in which each category has been as-
signed beforehand to a group of functions with very little variation.
In their most well-equipped versions this conception becomes inca-
pable of appreciating the contingency of a body of work like Arenas’
and frequently ends up simplifying and reducing it to a simple rep-
resentation of its own discourse.

Nevertheless, with his autobiography Arenas has managed to
break with the indifference facing a writer so unclassifiable as him-
self. Though at the risk of over simplification, it is certain that his
autobiography has tested and will continue testing the limits of this
discourse. For Arenas, to accept his own contingency would end up
being much more than proclaiming himself a gay, anti-Castro, exile,
Latino, victimized writer. As Before Night Falls expressly announces,
Arenas had in mind the exigencies of that recently consolidated dis-
course, just to rebel against it as he had done before with the official
discourse of Castrismo or exile. His recent acclaim has as much mer-
it as danger. The Cuban writers in the United States have in Reinaldo
Arenas new temptations to overcome: that of accepting the misun-
derstanding that this victimist reading mollifies, or the temptation
taking advantage of Arenas’ canonization in order to similarly fall
back on this position.

NOTES

1 The real Arenas did not maintain too many illusions in respect to the
academy. In one of his incessant diatribes against North American intellec-
tuals he says that “it’s impossible to tell whether they are progressives or
reactionaries—they’re quite simply fools, and therefore tools of the most
sinister forces” (Arenas 2000, 226).

2 “When I left Cuba my novels were being used as assigned texts at New
York University, and when I adopted a radical position against the Castro
dictatorship, Haydée Vitale [Rívera], professor of literature, started to drop
my books from the curriculum until not one of them remained. She did the
same with all the other Cuban writers in exile (…). This has happened to me
at many universities in the United States and in other parts of the world.
Ironically, while I was in jail and could not leave Cuba, my chances of being
published were better because I was not allowed to speak out, and foreign
publishing companies with leftist leanings would support a writer living in

3 Even so one cannot say that Arenas despises in an absolute sense the
possibilities of being victim. “Hell is other people,” Sartre’s famous state-
ment, is openly contradicted by Arenas, who says that “hell is not other
people (as a resentful toad once said); it is ourselves” (Arenas 2000, 169).
A variant of this statement could be one of the slogans of his autobiogra-
phy: “the others are the victims”. The compassion that he does not wish for
himself he solicits for many of the tragic characters that appear in the pages
that he dedicates, for example, to his captivity in el Morro. But for Arenas
the value of victimhood is not just in stimulating the reader’s compassion.
At some point he refers to victimization as a path to a higher power, made
possible, he says, by totalitarian experience. “The hope of humanity lies
precisely in those who have suffered the most. Thus, the hope of the next
century obviously lies in the victims of Communism; thanks to the appren-
ticeship of suffering that they have served, those victims will (or should)
be those in charge of constructing a world that it is possible to live in” (Arenas
2000, 226).

those turning in reports were Clara Mortera, tossing in a report on Teo-
doro, and Teodoro, with his report on Clara. A group of sailors were lodg-
ing charges against a group of bull macho tops, and a priest was bringing
a complaint against a beggar—a whole book of charges, and written in just
a week. Accusations were brought against a bridge and an almond tree.
Hundreds of poets turned in manuscripts of self-denunciatory verses.

Housewives accused themselves of wasting imported butter. Teenagers,
hiding their long hair under enormous caps, denounced longhairs. Officially
licensed whores brought complaints against freelancers.” [Later Arenas’
alter ego, la Tétrica Mofeta, will discover that his own mother informed on

5 This unsettling of the limits comes with Arenas’ verification of the
ubiquity of evil. For Arenas there is no absolutely reliable decree that dis-
tributes and separates good from evil. To be a victim does not guarantee
goodness. To the contrary, “suffering degrades us; pleasure corrupts us”
(Arenas 2000, 167), he says in one of his maxims in The Color of Summer,
and the treasonous behavior of some of his closest homosexual friends
seems to confirm it. Nevertheless, the final distinction between victim and
executioner serves to practice his idea of goodness: not to denounce. In-
terrogated about his counterrevolutionary accomplices, Arenas gives the
names of State Security agents but remains silent about those close to him
who have betrayed him. “Of course, I could have added the names of Pepe
Malas, Hiram Prado, and of my aunt, but I did not do so; after all, one had
to recognize that they were also victims of the system” (Arenas 1993, 233).

6 The high point of these scenes, in which the homosexuals seduce the
policemen and soldiers, occurs when, in the middle of the erotic moment,
the very idea of authority is suspended, or as in some cases, the roles are
reversed (as when Arenas discovers with surprise that his virile lover prefers
to take the passive role in the love act). In the chapter, “Buses or Turtles?” at
the end of the sexual encounter between the Tétrica Mofeta and a police-
man, the policeman, after ejaculating twelve times, manages to “recover
his revolutionary morality—and his pistol” and tries to imprison the Tétrica
(Arenas 2000, 89).

7 Without doubt Arenas tries to graft a political meaning onto his life, a
meaning from which his own text frequently takes leave. Arenas attempts
to demonstrate his political discord with the ‘revolutionary’ regime practi-
cally from the start. Everything seems to indicate that before he became
aware of the unsalvageable breach that opened between him and the Cu-
ban regime, it, along with the official cultural sector, had already detected
his aesthetic and sexual dissonance and interpreted it as a threat. A process
similar to that described by Milan Kundera in The Joke: marginalizing and
neutralizing your future critics when they are not even past the phase of
ridicule. Every totalitarian system knows that the most corrosive criticism
that can be made of it starts with not taking the system seriously. The wis-

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dom of totalitarian power is based on the ability to detect a threat before the real carriers of the threat recognize it themselves. And on its vulgarity, because totalitarian power is incapable of distinguishing an unruly poet from a professional terrorist: both fall within the category of threat.

Translator’s notes
*Del Risco mis-cited this as from a different Soto publication. I have corrected this in the Works Cited. In this case, Soto handled translation of Arenas’ responses during an interview.
**Del Risco’s use of “active” and “passive” merit clarification here. Conventionally, maricón designates one who is receptive or takes the passive role in homosexual sex. Bugarrón designates the one who penetrates or takes the macho or active role. Here, Del Risco indicates the way these two are often understood socially: the maricón is actively seen as a homosexual, a queer, where the bugarron may not be; he may be seen as a macho who passively engages in homosexual sex. See Tomás Almaguer, “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior.” The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin. Routledge, 1993. 355-73.
*** This was cited in the original as “Arenas 1999, 117,” referring to El color del verano. In fact, the original passage is found in Antes que anochezca 1992, 116-7. Here the translation is taken from Before Night Falls 1993, 91.

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Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas Has the Last Word

Translator’s Afterword

Reinaldo Arenas has become one of the most well-known Cuban authors in the world. His novels seduce readers with a surprising blend of sensuality, satire, and hyperbole, and they will continue to signal to readers the redemptive power of beauty well beyond the ebb and flow of academic arguments about the author’s importance to various literary canons. But his work is also compelling because as a Cuban exile in the U.S. during the Cold War period, Arenas landed within the sticky web of nationalist (Cuban and U.S.) discourses of the day. I was drawn to Arenas for both his literary valor and the possibility his perspective offered for critiquing U.S. nationalism. Like Kate Mehuron and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and others,1 I found promise in Arenas’ transnational positionality as he mobilized and negotiated Cuban and U.S. discourses around gender, sexuality, and belonging. It is in this context of looking not just at Arenas’ writing, but also at the social and national discourses with which he had to contend in the 1980s, that Enrique Del Risco’s 2003 essay,2 here translated as, “Strategic Rebellions: Reinaldo Arenas Has the Last Word,” conspicuously addresses the academic discourses and pressures that also impinged on Arenas. Del Risco argues that the multicultural discourses prevalent in the academy of the period appropriated Arenas as a victim, allotting him recognition at the expense of his true voice and a full appreciation of his literature. Thus, even today, Del Risco’s perspective demands that scholars become self-critical in how they read and represent Arenas and other authors, and he cautions other Latin American writers to write from the heart, not for the academy.

Born in 1943, in the Oriente Province of Cuba, Reinaldo Arenas has become well known, in part because of the highly autobiographical nature of his novels, especially his Pentagony:3 Singing from the Well (1987), The Palace of the White Skunks (1990), The Color of Summer (2000), Farewell to the Sea (1986), and The Assault (1994). The author grew up in his maternal grandfather’s house, a life bounded by poverty and the rules of a machista society, but tempered by freedom to roam the rural countryside and experiment with his imagined worlds. The revolution was a particularly formative moment for Arenas because it drew him away from rural life to the city of Holguín and eventually Havana. He left his family to join the rebels only to find that the liberation won by Castro was not for him, a writer and an intellectual bent on pursuing beauty through literature and homoeroticism. After the revolution Arenas experienced early successes as a writer but also ever increasing persecution as he spent time with ostracized Cuban writers like Virgilio Piñera and Lezama Lima, gay intellectuals persecuted for their criticism of the regime and their disregard for the dictates of the “New Man” of the revolution. Eventually, Arenas’ writing, some of which had been smuggled out of the country for publication, drew censorship, and he was imprisoned in El Morro from 1974 to 1976. Once released, Arenas spent the next four years unable to publish and tirelessly evading surveillance to finally escape Cuba in the 1980 Mariel boat exodus. Arenas’ life in the United States, celebratory at times, was also filled with anger and sorrow, particularly as portrayed in his autobiography, Before Night Falls (trans. Dolores Koch 1993). His writing was no longer as well received as it had been in the prior decade. At the same time, he kept his ‘stateless’ status and lived always on the margins—not a citizen, not the kind of Cuban intellectual some U.S. scholars desired, not the kind of exile a conservative Cuban-American community would accept, at times impoverished, and forever longing for a return to a Cuba that no longer existed. His letters to life-long friends, Jorge and Margarita Camacho (Cartas... 2010), demonstrate the tragedy of his fractured belonging and exiliic loss. He continually wished to move to Europe to join them, to find a more reliable connection and home, but his political position—self-chosen but also assigned—and his desire to complete his oeuvre before being overcome by AIDS, kept him in the U.S. until his death in 1990.

This brief biography, containing so many of the key elements of the author’s life we find in other publications, now feels like déjà vu for many Arenas scholars and readers. And this familiarity gestures to the very point Del Risco makes when he argues that our knowledge of Arenas has been filtered through a particular set of lenses established by “the North American academy” and the popular biopic, Before Night Falls (2000), by Julian Schnabel. The film, del Risco suggests, reinforces the North American academy’s framing of Arenas as a victim to be recuperated as the “subaltern” of multiculturalism and given life by that academy. Invoking the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, Del Risco argues that “within the predominant multicultural framework of North American universities minorities take their place, preeminently, as victims” (??). He suggests that this guarantees for them a certain position within this space of cultural power, a position purchased through acceptance of subordination “conferred to the minority-victim from the centers” (??). Where this perspective will certainly meet resistance, it offers us a view into academic and intellectual thought of the 90s, a discursive space that merits consideration.

I find, similarly, that the film perpetuates a martyr-like image of the author through artistic and commercial representations that contributed to a contradictory U.S. anti-communist discourses. The film’s success depends upon framing Arenas such that the persecution he faced in Cuba for his homosexuality becomes more central to his exile than the censorship that plagued him. This takes the film on a course that garners mainstream acceptance of homosexuality, defined in strictly U.S. cultural terms, at the cost of embedding the terms of this freedom in the binary discourses of the Cold War period that conflate the concepts of democracy and anti-communism.
In so doing, the film underscores the ways that nationalist discourse shapes subjectivity. The film embraces Arenas while overlooking U.S. homophobia, with its history of persecution of homosexuals under “democracy,” and it limits homosexual desire to the national and cultural confines of U.S. identity politics, defying, if inadvertently, Arenas’ artistic endeavor to articulate desires and artistic beauty that thrive outside of nationalist discourses and may serve to undermine them. Regardless of which discursive forces drive this framing, a key point is that the aesthetic value of Arenas’ writing gets lost in readers’ obsessive sympathizing.

Beyond this appropriation and victimization that Del Risco links to multiculturalism and I link to anti-communism, Del Risco’s most provocative point is that Arenas might have strategically placed emphasis in his autobiography on his sexual and political persecution, also choosing to bookend his memoir with a letter to the press defaming Fidel Castro, in order to gain this tenuous position in an academy that seemed determined to shut him out. Del Risco challenges us to consider this framing as part of Arenas’ own rebelliousness. Whatever the case, these political and narrative maneuvers belie the actual nuance and complexity of Arenas’ final texts, and their laughter, Del Risco suggests, and they repel the kind of reading these works deserve. The victimization framing Arenas the literary figure and the author risks missing that Arenas’ biting and dark humor was central to his literary vision. Del Risco offers as one example the chapter of The Color of Summer, “A Tour of Inspection,” in which Fifo, the dictator, simply kills off his escorts and aids, one-by-one, whenever they might contradict him in the slightest. The tragic side of this humor—Arenas mocks the death of innocents forced to pander to the leader’s ego for their survival—marries unbearable feelings of anger and injustice to produce, of all things, laughter. Laughter arises all the more poignantly for its unlikely but inevitable appearance in this moment. And, as Del Risco points out, this is in keeping with Arenas’ belief that humor is a form of survival and a force that undermines oppressive power systems.

Laughter is important to Del Risco, too. Also an immigrant and writer from Cuba, Del Risco shares with Arenas a penchant for satire and humor. While Del Risco is situated in New York University’s Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures, his intellectual and artistic presence far exceeds the academy. Called a writer and historian, Del Risco says that he writes so that his voice and perspective cannot be (mis)represented by another (“La obligación de ver...”). He writes with a sense of humor, irony, sensitivity, and authenticity. Del Risco enjoys the salon-style engagement of intellectuals and artists discussing political and intellectual concerns, reading literary excerpts, and enjoying the community of like-minded individuals as seen in videos, interviews, and recordings, especially on his blog, Enrisco, which focuses largely on Latin American and Cuban issues. Since 2015, Del Risco has been a member of the Academia de la Historia de Cuba en el Exilio (the Academy of Cuban History in Exile) recently taking charge of the group’s digital publications as the Secretary of Publications and Social Networks. One recent publication, Enrisco para presidente (Sudaquia editores 2014), is a provocative compilation of writings demonstrating the author’s sardonic humor and wit. For example, he opens the text with a section titled, “Cuba AD (Antes del Divertículo),” referring to the period before the significant change in Cuban leadership when Fidel Castro had to, at long last, step down from his position as leader because he was ill with diverticulitis.

My translation of “Strategic Rebellions” is intended for English-speaking and reading scholars and students who recognize the importance of Arenian scholarship in Spanish, of which there is an ever-increasing amount. My aim is to bring this piece of literary criticism to that audience, while recognizing that translation always only approaches its original. I bring to my own work a level of familiarity with Cuban cultural frameworks, with Arenas and Arenaian scholarship, and with academic discourse that serves as a basis for this task of writing-translating. With all of this in mind, I have used the published English translations of Arenas’ works for titles and quotes included here where possible. For example, Del Risco’s first footnote cites El color del verano (1999). I took the corresponding passage from The Color of Summer (trans. Andrew Hurley, 2000). I draw on these official translations both because these works are readily available to English-speaking audiences, and to honor that translation work so assiduously completed by Andrew Hurley and Dolores Koch. For other quotations from secondary critical sources translated to English here, I selected existing English texts or translations where available, and translated to English myself when unavailable. These sources are updated in the Works Cited list to correspond with these choices. Finally, I have added footnotes, indicated with asterisks to distinguish them from the author’s own notes, to contextualize cultural terms and clarify sources.

In sum, in “Strategic Rebellions...” Del Risco offers a reading of Arenas’ final works that goes against the grain of the criticism that abounded in 1990s. For audiences new to Arenas or less familiar with the post/Cold War era, this work serves as a view into discourses of the day. Where the highly politicized nature of that period continues to evolve, it is worth noting that Arenas’ request to keep the materials for his autobiography sealed in Princeton’s Firestone library archives until 2010 have not been honored. Or, it may be better to say, they have been exceedingly honored. Arenas, concerned about the implications of his writing for friends in Cuba, wanted the manuscripts protected until the death of Fidel Castro. For both the manuscript and the Cuban leader, the date has been postponed until further notice. We can look forward to how those manuscripts might bring yet another perspective to the splendid irony of Arenas’ literary vision.
NOTES


3 Here, given by the titles of the English translations by Andrew Hurley.


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We Should Make a Documentary About 513: 
*after Terrance Hayes*

*by Noel Quiñones*

And here is all we'll need: a sack of white rice, a dead woman, and a pillow. Or something you can pray over and over, again, we'll need an unused Sunday with an altar set up in the house. A floral dress with white trim covered in grease, adobosweat, and great grandkids hands. We'll need to play 513 at the Lotto, her numbers, but not actually go to the bodega. We'll title it her name or Abuela or something the dominos on Crescent Ave remember. We'll need to listen to Grandma Zaida for once, sit in her apartment, try to deny Espírituismo followed us across the ocean. We'll need my father, of course, saying he's been dreaming of Abuela every night since Thursday. Sees an entire kitchen of strangers eating Sancocho, Bacalao, sopa de mariscos. And still he shames her for her hospitality, a shame of family blood. We'll need the same pound of long grain white rice she has bought for decades.

We'll need to believe. One day she found it for $5.13 and played those numbers until she died. Why else would she be haunting him? She needs to.
Plebiscite

by Noel Quiñones

PAPELETA OFICIAL
OFFICIAL BALLOT

CONSULTA
PLEBISCITE

CONSULTA SOBRE EL ESTATUS POLÍTICO DE PUERTO RICO
PLEBISCITE ON PUERTO RICO POLITICAL STATUS

Instrucciones: Marque la opción de su preferencia. La papeleta con más de una (1) opción marcada en esta sección no será contabilizada.

Instructions: Mark your option of preference. Those ballots which disagree in this section shall not be tallied.

¿Está usted de acuerdo con mantener la condición política territorial actual?

Do you agree that Puerto Rico should continue to have its present form of colonial status?

Sí/Yes  Sí/Yes

Instrucciones: Irrespectivamente de su contestación a la primera pregunta, conteste cuál de las siguientes opciones no territoriales usted prefiera.

Instructions: Regardless of your disagreement in the first question, please mark which of the following types of slavery would you prefer.

La consulta con más de una (1) opción marcada en esta sección no será contabilizada.

Those ballots which beg for freedom in this Section shall not be tallied.

Estadidad:

Prefiero que Puerto Rico sea un estado de Estados Unidos de América, para que todos los ciudadanos americanos residentes en Puerto Rico tengan iguales, derechos, beneficios y responsabilidades que los demás ciudadanos de los estados de la Unión, incluyendo derecho a la plena representación en el Congreso y participación en las elecciones presidenciales, y que se requiera al Congreso Federal que promulgue la legislación necesaria para iniciar la transición hacia la nación independiente de Puerto Rico. Si está de acuerdo marque aquí:

Statehood, response:

Puerto Rico does not deserve to be admitted as a state of the United States of America. All United States citizens residing in Puerto Rico must know by now they are not worth the dirt beneath the rights, benefits, and responsibilities enjoyed by all other citizens of the states of the Union. They are entitled to full silence in Congress, will always be a shadow in the Presidential elections, and the United States Congress does not write Statehood legislation for foreign beggars. You agree.

Independencia:

Prefiero que Puerto Rico sea una nación soberana y totalmente independiente de Estados Unidos y que se requiera al Congreso Federal que promulgue la legislación necesaria para iniciar la transición hacia la nación independiente de Puerto Rico. Si está de acuerdo marque aquí:

Independence, response:

Puerto Rico, what would you do without us? Do you know how heavy independence weighs on an island? Do you recall how we sunk you without any water? Have you not looked across the Mona Passage? Asked the Caribbean how independence likes its hurricanes; they are a gift. We show up when we want to "help". We remember July 25th, Spain presented you as an offering. We drank ravenous. We are not full. You are the saddest kind of island, afraid of your own water. Don’t you agree?

Estado Libre Asociado Soberano:

Prefiero que Puerto Rico adopte un estatus fuera de la Cláusula Territorial de la Constitución de Estados Unidos, que reconozca la soberanía del Pueblo de Puerto Rico. El Estado Libre Asociado Soberano se basaría en una asociación política libre y voluntaria, cuyos términos específicos se acuerden entre Estados Unidos y Puerto Rico como naciones soberanas. Dicho acuerdo dispondría el alcance de los poderes jurisdiccionales que el pueblo de Puerto Rico autorice dejar en menos de Estados Unidos y retendría los restantes poderes o autoridades jurisdiccionales. Si está de acuerdo marque aquí:

Sovereign Free Associated State, response:

Puerto Rico should adopt a status outside of the Territory Clause of the Constitution of the United States that recognizes the sovereignty of the People of Puerto Rico. There is nothing outside of a chokehold. There is nothing free and voluntary about flesh desiring another’s subservience. Would you confer jurisdictional powers and authorities to a dog? Especially one trained so well it makes its own bed in my house and calls it a country. You agree.
Melissa Castillo-Garsow is a PhD Candidate in American Studies and African American Studies at Yale University completing a dissertation about Mexican migration to New York City. As the author and editor of three books, four book chapters and seven peer reviewed articles, Melissa introduces new ways of looking at migration, ethnicity, race and gender in the US via both scholarly and creative interventions in the fields of Latin@, Latin American, American and African American Studies. Her dissertation, "A Mexican State of Mind: New York City and the New Borderlands of Culture" establishes a much needed dialogue between African American and Borderlands studies by considering the recent history of Mexican migration to New York within the context of a much longer history of black and brown laboring bodies.

Melissa is the co-editor with Jason Nichols of La Verdad: An International Dialogue on Hip Hop Latinidades, recently published with Ohio State University’s Global Latino/a Studies, as well as the editor of a forthcoming anthology, Manteca!: An Anthology of Afro-Latin@ Poets with Arte Público Press. Most recently, Melissa completed guest editing a special issue of the Words. Beats & Life: The International Journal of Hip Hop Culture about Hip Hop in Brazil, after which she was appointed the journal’s newest Managing Editor. With this position, she looks forward to continuing to facilitate a discussion about hip hop’s global reach and development with scholars, writers and artists around the world.

A highly sought after fiction writer and poet, her first novel, Pure Bronx, was released by Augustus Publishing in Fall 2013 and her first volume of poetry Coatlicue Eats the Apple was published in 2016 by VerseSeven. Melissa has been invited to present her scholarly and creative work around the world including Seoul National University, Jadavpur University (Kolkata, India), Swarthmore University and University of Chicago.

Limonada

by Melissa Castillo-Garsow

"Take one pint of water, add a half pound of sugar, the juice of eight lemons, the zest of half lemon. Pour the water into one, then to another several times. Strain through a clean napkin. Grandmother. The alchemist. You spun gold out of this hard life."

1. EARTH

I tried to make a home out of you
in spite of the tradition
of men and my blood
but your past and my future merged
what a fucking curse.

when i sat in the dark
trying to answer that
one question that haunts
me – that quality I cant see.

Why am I so unlovable?

i sit in the dark more and more
now that all the family im left
is the family i chose
and i don't trust myself to
choose anything and probably shouldn't.

I tried to make a home of you

and i would have done anything
to hear you say
soy orgulloso de ti
not estoy
soy
so i knew it wasn’t
just a phase
but instead you said
the opposite
“Vergüenza”
“Desastre”
“Tragedia”

i would have come to you papá
i still love you papa
i thought maybe you might be a little proud papá
but papá, i really
want to love myself
one day.

What are you hiding?
Show me you scars
I won’t walk away.

Stop.

This subject
is not
the subject
i am a subject
the subject
am not & never
an object -

in the darkness i watch history
arabesque into the street
leg perfectly extended
arms graciously curved in flight
only to collide
into head on highway traffic.

this subject is the family
im surviving
the life i am living –
most days i don’t know what i am doing
why i am still living
why i was born a dreamer
to a family of destroyers
but the only person i seem to destroy
is myself.

Grief sedated by orgasm.
Orgasm heightened by grief.

Grief is burning this house down.
Build another

Burn it down
Start again
Wash away the foundation.
Build a bridge
Be the bridge
Be new bridges

I burned the house down
Built another
Burned it down again
I seek no favor-
unrelenting in this curse called love
Permanent as my errors
and my pride
and the ashes of this house
built out of disappointment
I burnt –
And if you would only know me
You’d know I do not mix
Love w/ pity
Pity is for dogs
And women who are bridges cannot be contained.

Women like her cannot be contained.

Women like me will not be contained.

2. WATER

I struck her that is this is why she needed to write poems, to have
something left behind her even after she was gone, something that
showed that she had observed in a way that one else had and no one
else would after her.4

Drowning in resurrection
Voyage through death
to surveillance upon these shores5
a ghost looking for ghosts
in the gallery they meet, mingle
disturb and bother
disappear & reappear
hanging on sea air
but the work reverberates6
Because she tried to be softer,

prettier, less awake.

because I needed to know
are you cheating on her?
are you disrespecting me?
Why are we so unlovable?

Healing starts at the wound
but this wound cannot be found
hidden & everywhere
not because I forgive you
not because I forgot you
I’ll never forgive
never forget
you are still the love of my life
and I hate that.

So I’m stuck in this risky business
the torturer became my remedy

talking back
moving up
object to subject
empty to overflowing
silence to thundering

transferred deported
it’s not that passage
it’s modern passage
people stacked like fruit baskets
containers like legos
a border turned trailer
trash trailers bringing
forgotten answers to containment en desierto.

Voyage through death
to surveillance upon these shores
Yemaya stood on that shore
Yemaya blew that wire fence down
The sea cannot be fenced
I cannot be fenced.

It’s more than a 1950 mile wound
it is an open wound
that splits my soul
that splits this country
that makes him look
and want to see me
across that border.

Stop.
This pussy is not yours
for the taking.

you can look now
im letting you look now
look now
see me
watch me
watch me

watch me walk away.


3. FIRE

Life handed me lemons. I jumped back in the public eye and squirted lemon juice in it.

155th
stop.
my heart
still stops
i gasp
see his suit
red power tie
that tie made
to trick me
entice me
tie me

down

Stop.
I tell my mind -
155th
stop.
It’s over
stop.
I imagined him
stop.

It’s been 294 days
293 nights
that I still can’t
sleep through

breath through
write down
from all those times -

Stop.
155th
stop.
You passed that
stop.
You’re safe
stop.
I tell my mind -
155th
stop.
It’s over
stop.
I imagined -

Stop.

I am no longer in denial
I am no longer grieving.

You should have known i was fire. 

Maybe this is where the uber driver comes in
because that last drive
was the last time
I could pretend I still loved you
dressed in that sparkling silver dress
the girl finally invited to the ball
I looked over and knew it was over
that some moments
were not for me
that I would never be that girl...

No enlightenment
Fuck growth
Definitely, Fuck cheating.
You’re not a cheater
You’re a destroyer
an annihilator
You’re a lit match
and I
Gasoline.
disappointed by another man
not at all surprised to be disappointed
by another man,
regretting the day
I let another man
disappoint.

So I kept the poem
Fuck the ball
I’m not a grower -
kill plants like I kill relationships –

I’m that wild girl
that would rather
love poetry
that girl that picks up the bat
Breaks the bat
    Breaks the bones
    Is the bones.

In poetry
my hips grind
to the bass bawse beat
In poetry
my hips grind
you & me
in fire
my hips grind
you into dust
dust to dust
That too,
Is a form of worship
and today,
I reserve my workshop
for Oshun
dancing over Brooklyn
bright yellow
breaking hearts
breaking beats
unleashing water everywhere
She goes.

I worship her
with a baseball bat
to your lemon tree
picnic
to enjoy the wreckage.

skipping home,
I whisper
the danger is
the danger is
the danger is me.

How did you not know i was fire?

These hip that have never been captured
that go where they want to go
that do what they want to do
mighty hips
magic hips³

My hips grind
Maiz & canela
en molcajete
My hips grind
love & anger
over men.

V. AIR

The greatest lie ever told about love is that it sets you free.¹¹

I have been a woman
too long
I am a woman
who is not
white
I am also a woman
who is afraid
afraid of being
unoriginal
of being
invisible
afraid of knowing what dishonesty
smells like –

US dumping trash in Mexican waters.

So between you & me
between the world & bey
this is between me & bey
this is between bey & black women
this is between me & black women
because we forgot about Maud¹⁵ again.
And we’re forgetting about Rekia & Bettie & Korryn & Jessica &
Kisha, Laronda, India, Kisha Michael, Sahlah, Janet, Marquesha, Alexia

#Saytheirnames

I say their names
here
because we’ve already lost the names
of the Mexican women
that built this country.

When did braceros become men?
When Chicanos become men?
When did Pachucos lose their dance partners?
When did police victims become men?

Healing begins with the wound
but it also begins with a million girls

black & brown girls
raising arms
raising bats
Chanting:

You are strong. You are terrifying. You are so much more than Jay-Z.
Your beauty is not simply something to behold
but something

We. Could. Do.

So when a black man says
Happy Birthday
Happy New Year
to 18-year-old refugees
- they would be refugees -
but they’re too poor
too dark
too mestizo
too broken
from The Beast

When another man
betray
send them on birthdays
to murder capitals
rounds them up
like the murders
they fled
send them back
on their birthdays
when 18 is a death sentence

I understand a hot sauce bat to a fire hydrant.
I grab my hot sauce bat to break down

A wall
my people
will never pay for.

But I am also a woman who wants a bat
named catharsis.
catharsis meaning clarification.

Clarification:

I am a tidal wave.
Bey is a tidal wave.

This poem is a tidal wave
Crashing
over

Manhatitlan."
NOTES

1 Quoted from Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album.
2 Quoted from Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album.
3 Quoted from Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album.
4 Adapted from Edwidge Danticat’s Krik Krak, 1995.
5 Adapted from Robert Hayden “Middle Passage”, 1962.
6 Reference to Derrida in Ghost Dance, 1983.
7 Quoted from Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album.
8 Quoted from Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album.
9 Adapted from Robert Hayden “Middle Passage”, 1962.
10 Quoted from Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, 1987.
11 Eminem “Bad Meets Evil”
12 Adapted from rupi kaur.
13 Adapted from Lucille Clifton "Homage to my Hips”
14 Quote from Zadie Smith
14 Reference to Maud Martha, by Gwendolyn Brooks.
Creating Social Justice: A Conversation with Julia Álvarez

Rebeca Moreno-Orama

The Dominican-American writer, Julia Álvarez is one of the most prominent female voices in contemporary American and Hispanic Caribbean literature. Recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious National Medal of Arts given by president Barack Obama in 2013, Álvarez is the author of bestsellers such as *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* (1991) and *In The Time of the Butterflies* (1994), which was adapted into a feature film in 2001. More recent titles by her include the novel *Return to Sender* (2009) and the nonfiction book *A Wedding in Haiti* (2012), although her work extends to poetry, essays, and children’s books as well.

In her prolific career, Álvarez has dedicated herself to the exploration of crucial issues related to social justice, including the representation of marginalized identities in dominant cultures, the odds confronted by immigrants, and the process of constructing bridges of tolerance between privilege and unprivileged groups in society. Her commitment to building a more egalitarian world is materialized not only in her literary work but also in her efforts as a social activist. For years she has been advocating for the rights of Latino migrant workers in Vermont’s farms, and she is also one of the founders of *Borders of Light*, a human rights collective created in 2012 to promote hope and justice along the convoluted border between Dominican Republic and Haiti.

In this interview, Julia Álvarez shares her insights on the power of storytelling to overturn political injustices, such as the one suffered by the Dominican people, and in particular by the Mirabal sisters, under General Rafael Trujillo’s thirty-one years of dictatorship. The writer also offers a compelling vision of community engagement through the creation of a literary space in which issues affecting the Latino population in the United States can be explored. Álvarez reveals the importance of the imagination in envisioning a distinct narrative space where the effects of NAFTA on undocumented Mexican farmer workers or the challenges faced by the children of undocumented immigrants are brought to life through the singularity of her characters. She particularly stresses her commitment to creating a multiplicity of voices and approaches in order to provoke an independent but well-rounded discussion of the conflicting perspectives on these issues.

Moreover, Álvarez reveals her current literary and social projects, one of which is her active role in criticizing “The Sentence”. On September 23, 2013 the Dominican tribunal passed ruling TC/0168/13, revoking the citizenship of thousands who were born in the Dominican Republic because they were descendants of “undocumented” Haitian parents. The decision affecting anyone born in 1929 or later suddenly left stateless a significant part of the population on the Caribbean island. Álvarez comments on how “The Sentence” split Dominican public opinion, and on how the prejudice brought up by the ruling is a consequence of Trujillo’s legacy. As she has done extensively in her novels, Álvarez points out the urgency of inverting the racial stereotypes used against Haitians. Specifically, she emphasizes the need to rethink the significance of the Haitian massacre of 1937 in order to reverse the intolerance established afterwards. Ultimately, this conversation shows how Julia Álvarez is creating a new sense of social justice through her work as both an artist and activist.
**Middlebury, VT summer 2016**

Rebeca Moreno-Orama: In *The Time of the Butterflies* (1994), you recounted that your family arrived in the US in the 1960s, because your father was forced to leave the country because he was an opponent of Trujillo's regime. Do you consider your novel a space in which Trujillo's dictatorship is finally brought to trial?

**JA:** That is an interesting question, because you know during the time of Trujillo everything was timed in terms of "La era de Trujillo". Tenth year of the era of Trujillo, when he had been in ten years, twenty years, twenty-five years. And that's why instead of "La era de Trujillo", it's "El tiempo de las mariposas". I wanted to wrench that time from the dictatorship and give it to the people who were not able to live fully realized lives because of the oppression; they're known as "la generación perdida". And I also wanted—because you know we always hear of the males in the dictatorship and the underground and the "Ches" and the "Castros" and so many other male figures, and I thought, there is a whole population of females that were also a part of the anti-regime. In this case, they were also the inspiration because when they killed the Mirabal sisters—all the historians say two things brought down the regime: when the Catholic Church finally stood up against Trujillo—well not all of it, some of the hierarchy were still blessing him—and when he murdered the Mirabal sisters.

**RM:** Do you believe that the assassination of the Mirabal system was a turning point?

**JA:** It was a turning point, people said if he can do this, to these—I mean, they had all the star quality, PR quality: they were beautiful, they were young, they were mothers, they were wives—all the iconic things in our culture, and he violated that. And he had been taking little girls, and he was a ladies' man, and he had been taking people's land and properties but this was like the ultimate violation. And I think that not only taking the Trujillo regime to task, but the Trujillo regime that persists in the mentality of the people. Because that scene at the end where she says "Was it for this?" the sacrifice of the butterflies—because you killed the dictator, but the dictatorship, that is the mentality that allowed that to happen, persists—and we see that, because the Haitian Massacre of 1937, and everybody said: "pero eso fue Trujillo, Trujillo, Trujillo." Now we are killing them, not with bayonets and machetes, we are killing them cleanly with legal pronouncements. And this is the thing, that that mentality persists. That's why we have *Border of Lights*, that group we started.

*Border of Lights* is an effort of bringing to light the fact that is a massacre that is never been addressed properly or redressed by the Dominican government. In fact we are repeating it, as I said, legally now, legally. With—"tapando el sol con el dedo", with the idea that it is an immigration problem—these are not immigrants.

**RM:** No, we are talking about thousands of people that were born in the Dominican Republic of Haitian descent.

**JA:** And they have been there, many of them with their families, since 1929. So, it is not just bringing the dictatorship to task, but bringing our history, bringing us to see it. Chekhov, a wonderful writer that I love, says: "The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state it correctly." You are not ostensibly preaching—because you say, it is your way to bring it to the society, not with an argument, but with a story.

**RM:** What does storytelling mean to you?

**JA:** For me, storytelling is my activism. Because I believe that when people enter deeply into a story, and connect with the characters, they become the other. I mean and I really believe—it is a slower process, and it is under the radar, it is not proclaiming, so it just seems it escapes notice in some ways. You never leave a book that has touched you as the same person that entered it. Some adjustments have been made, some perceptions have been gained. And I have to believe that over time this creates a groundswell of transformation. There is a wonderful poem by Seamus Heaney called "The Cure at Troy" and in it, there is a stanza that I love that goes: "History says, don't hope / On this side of the grave / But then, once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up / And hope and history rhyme." History says don't hope. But poetry, our arts, our stories, can bring about slowly a tidal wave—and "hope and history rhyme." I love that, you know.

**RM:** Here in Vermont, you are very well known, not only as a resident writer here at Middlebury College but as a defender of the rights of local Latino migrant population. Do you consider yourself a politically engaged writer? How do you feel about that notion?

**JA:** In our cultures, we had so many dictatorships. People don't realize because they know Holocaust and things like that as happening in Europe, but during the second half of the last century if not before, Latin America was full of these kinds of regimes and dictatorships. And as an artist, whether you did it through indirect means of magical realism, that makes it sound like it is about some imaginary thing, or however you did it, I think writers in many of our countries, in Latin America and in Europe don't have the luxury of being apolitical. I think that any literature or art that sinks below a certain level of awareness doesn't really serve us as a human family. I am not saying that a writer has to be ostensibly political and in your face, that
can sometimes destroy the story, because you have to have such a light touch, it is such a gossamer thing. it is such a bubble, and you come at it too hard with agendas or polemics or propaganda, and you are somewhere else. It is still a valid way of expression and protest, but it is not the way that I work and that I believe works for me, anyhow. But you have to have a certain level of awareness of your own time and what is going on, because if you are in the middle of Nazi Germany and you are writing poems about the flowers and you know that are not somehow connected to that reality, how can you provide people with sustenance for their souls? You are providing sustenance for their escapism, but you are not helping them live fuller, more integrated lives. I really think that there has to be a level of awareness. We are products of history too. We plumb down into the human soul so we can read somebody like Gilgamesh, the oldest work known, from two thousand years back and we can relate to Enkidu and Gilgamesh because they have gone to the soul—but they are within the context of a time. There is an affliction in the kingdom; there is a situation, which is being addressed. I think it is an important thing. When you asked me—I always think of my art as a pebble in my shoe, and I don’t go putting a pebble in my shoe. Who would be so crazy as to do that? But something comes to your door. Here I was in the Latino-compromised state of Vermont—really, there were hardly any Latinos—and all of a sudden, I am getting calls from farmers, and I am getting calls from schools, and I am getting calls from the hospital, because they don’t have Spanish language speakers, and we got a Mexican migrant worker here.

RM: When does this start happening?

JA: About ten years ago. It was after the 2001 census, when there were still like only 2,500 Latinos in all of Vermont. Come to find out there were 500 Latinos just in this county; undocumented Mexican migrant workers now doing all of the milking in all of the farms. They were bringing their girlfriends and their wives, and their kids were showing up at school, and the teachers didn’t know how to deal with this population, and they knew through my husband, who is now retired but was a physician,—and they would say: “Hey, Dr. Eichner’s wife, she knows some Spanish.”

RM: Did this experience influence the writing of Return to Sender (2009)?

JA: I got called a lot and I would go to schools especially. That is when I wrote that book, Return to Sender, because I realized that most of our workers in this county came from Chiapas, and they were corn farmers, and they came here after NAFTA flooded the market with cheap corn subsidized by the government, they could not survive as farmers. They were coming to Vermont, to small farms that were closing up because the farmers here cannot survive as farmers either. Because they are against the big corporate agro-business, dairy agro-businesses, they cannot find somebody that will work. And when you are a farmer, you have to work 365 days a year, most of them don’t have health insurance, most of them were losing their farms, and this was cheap labor, but what would happen is they would come, they would live on the farm—they could not go wandering around because instantly they were spotted, this is not a diverse population—and they built relationships with the farmers and their wives and their families. But the irony is that we are in the same position, but from different sides of the border: farmers in trouble. I went to the schools and I saw all these kids of migrant workers who were there, and they were traumatized because they were afraid, they had been told to be careful, they didn’t know when they might get deported. They were scared; they didn’t know what was going on.

RM: And this was a new Spanish-speaking community in Vermont, right?

JA: Yes, but in the schools they were with farmers’ kids. And those farmers’ kids didn’t realize—they thought of themselves as really good Americans, and here their parents were telling them, “You must not talk about this, these people can be deported.” Deported? They had never heard of those things except when they read about Nazi Germany and people being hauled away. So they were both two really confused populations, and I thought, “Only a story can help us understand what is happening to us.” And that’s why I wrote Return to Sender. I didn’t set out “Oh, there’s a problem here, I need to address it;” somebody came knocking at my door and said “Would you come and translate? Would you come to the open-door clinic and volunteer—” because that’s the free clinic in town “—we’re getting these people and we can’t talk to them.” I ended up showing up there, and that’s the pebble in my shoe, you know. Something happens in the life.

RM: How would you describe that “something” that inspires your writing?

JA: Something that troubles me, that puzzles me, which I don’t understand. And for me, as well as I hope my reader, writing is a way to bring it—to try to understand it, and I don’t mean just with my mind but with my emotions, with my soul, with my integrated self. I have to write the story that helps me to understand that predicament. And that’s why it’s two points of view. That book [Return to sender] is not just the Mexican migrant—first I just wanted to make it, and be an advocate for the Mexican migrant community and I thought: “No, there’s this other story, and this other story—”.

RM: In your recent writing, A Wedding in Haiti (2012) and in the article published in The New York Times: “Driving the Seam of Hispaniola” (2014), it seems that you are exploring the idea of a harmonious relationship between Haitians and Dominicans. Do you believe there is a gap or a contradiction between daily life in the Dominican
Republic and the cultural policies of the Dominican government? Because when we read you, it seems as if the borderlines are not static, or not even blocked.

JA: This is the story that is not getting out. People now want me to be on their show and comment on the situation, but we have been talking about this for years, and nobody paid attention. Now there is a titillating, crisis, and everybody wonders their wants to get in there and say something and to create—even if you are reacting against that dominant discourse, not the dominant population but the dominant discourse, if you are just responding and reacting to them, you are still in their paradigm. You go to the border—we do Border of Lights, and it is so moving to see the people historically—there is a story of integration and mutual survival together; that sort of dialogue about the Haitian as the other, I mean that was especially exacerbated by Trujillo. It was a way to divide and conquer, and also to kind of erase his own Haitian background and his own racial mix. The dominant population, it is a mixed population. Even white people have mixed people in their families.

RM: Isn’t the racial background something that historically we have been struggling with in the Hispanic Caribbean?

JA: Right, right, and in Latin America too, with the identity of the indigenous, and the Spanish and the racial background. That does not exactly happen at the border. One of the projects we did in the central parks of both, the Jimaní and the Dajabón, was about postcards that said “1937—what does that mean to you?” It was amazing how many people wrote: “Hasta compadres somos”. In other words, we are integrated. One of the people that is a big part of it, Eduardo Paulino, he teaches at the CUNY system, is coming out with a book, which is called Dividing Hispaniola. It is about the history of the border, and how permeable it’s always been. And how families were intermarried, how suddenly by a signature, because of some treaty in Europe you’d find out that you were in French territory not in Spanish territory, or in Haitian territory not in the Dominican Republic. There is an unwritten history that is not about the massacre, but that does need to be addressed.

This other story that does not get out needs to be told. That is, again, the reason for A Wedding in Haiti: what happens when you enter the territory of the enemy that you were raised to think of as, “el cuco”. When I wouldn’t eat my supper it was "el cuco haitiano te va a llevar y allá se comen a los niños dominicanos, se los comen!". You grew up with this fear, and then once you come to the States and you learn the history you see that that’s not so, that that was fear mongering, but then you learn about 1937 and you feel this shame. My fear in going to Haiti was not the “cuco layer”, it was the layer of “I didn’t want them to know that I was Dominican, that my country had done something like that in the past.” That shamed me. I was afraid because I thought that if I were a Haitian, I would hate me. I had to address all those layers in myself. It’s a journey not just into a wedding—and the wedding is between countries, not just between bride and groom—but it is also a journey into those layers in which we are culturally brainwashed.

RM: Would you say that is has been a history of demonizing the other?

JA: Exactly. I talk to some of my relatives, I mean some very conservative members of the family, and they will say if I talk about the massacre: “Sí, pero ellos nos invadieron en mil ochocientos cuatro” and I will say: “When are we going to stop?” How far—and what about when Columbus came and murdered all the indigenous? Why don’t we go there? I mean, we’ve got to address the past; we’ve got to create a future that rids us of that paradigm.

RM: Considering what is going on in the Dominican Republic with the Haitian immigrants, do you believe that literature can play an important role in confronting that past and its injustices?

JA: At a certain layer, because “el problema es que” Dominicans, and I hate to make generalizations, don’t have a reading culture. It is still an oral culture. I think the ways, which would be most effective there, would be if you can write some “bachatas”, some rap songs, and some “merengues”; if you could enter that bloodstream and address it from the point of view of the culture itself. But I am a hybrid, I am a mixture, and I have entered another reality. What my literature can do, and how my literature can address that, is through, I really think, the power of diaspora. I have seen it. Look at Junot Díaz. I mean, that there is a way in which you can write the story, first of all, so that Dominican Americans, Haitian Americans growing up in this country that would not have an access, that is no longer their culture, and the mainstream culture here is not going to tell their stories, so you are seeing those people who then go back. I really believe if we hadn’t had a diaspora to really rise up against what is going on, it would have been a lot easier to get this through. Because the people that I know there, they are intellectuals and artists, they are so over-voiced, they are so in siege, and they have to live that reality day by day. They can lose their jobs. I have a lot more flexibility and tenderness towards the people there. It is easier to be a big mouth from here.

I think the diaspora is key. And you know what, what is that thing that happened after the murder in that journal in Paris, “I am Charlie”—we’re all diaspora, all of us, because we live in a culture of connectivity. So we get the seeds and the cross-fertilization and the hybridity that comes from entering and being a part of other realities. We travel a lot more. If you educate, if you look at it as though you are educating the human family, then you are creating change at a level that is amazing.

The first year we did Border of Lights—was beautiful, we marched to the border, there were responding lights—we sang, we read poems, there was a service—The second year, people came
out of their houses. "¿Qué es lo que está pasando?" “Ah, sí, vengan, vengan!” We massed on that border. It was huge. We were singing and holding up lights, we created a border of lights. The next year was right after the sentence, in September. The officials would say: “Estopas muy caliente, no les podemos dar permiso para que marchen a la frontera. We can’t let you go there.” However, we are the diaspora and we have a lot of young people, and they know the technology. They created an online vigil. What happened then is throughout the world.

The young people spread it through social media, they were on Facebook, and people could light a candle. A group of us, about twelve of us, went quietly to the border, and we lit our lights, and of course it was just twelve of us, and we took a photo that was then posted, and then people would say: “We’re with you there!” Riverside, New York. “We’re with you there,” Madrid, Spain. And we were so you won’t let us have a march? Here we are. We are global now. That’s even more dangerous!

This is the way these young people, this Dominican American diaspora, young generation, is thinking with tools that were unavailable, and they are able to do this. There is a wonderful phrase by Rebecca Solnit: “We must change the imagination of change.” We just can’t think that the way to change something is to react to something because you are just the opposite of it; you have to change the imagination of change.

People say to me: “What do you think of the movie In the Time of the Butterflies (2001)?” I always say: “Well, I thought I made the movie with language, and I have a hard time seeing it sort of flattened out that way.” But one thing is that everybody comes up to me in the Dominican Republic to say: “Ay, a mí me encantó En el tiempo de las mariposas”. “¿Lo leiste?” “Ah, no, vi la película.” That is our oral culture, the way it got spread.

RM: Do you travel back and forth to the Dominican Republic?

JA: Yes, we were just there with my two granddaughters, volunteering for a week at a camp.

RM: How often do you go?

JA: Well, when my parents were still alive, and they only died three years ago, one of them and then two years another, I would go about six, seven times a year because they both had Alzheimer’s and I was very involved in their care. Now less so, but still, it’s always going to be my other country. I think of myself as a citizen more of the world anymore. But we come from different tribes and root systems, and that is definitely one. When someone said: “Well gosh, I thought you were getting off all these boards you are on. Why are you getting onto the Mariposa Foundation one?” and I said: “Because these other boards can get people. You know, there is—this board, Shilburne Farms, which does environmental education; they can get a zillion people. But how many Dominicans, and Dominican women, have the capacity and the visibility to begin to transform something there? If we don’t do it, who is going to do it?

RM: Do you have a heroine or another prominent female figure from the Dominican Republic or any other place—you mentioned being a citizen of the world—which you want to write about?

JA: I’m working now on a lot of poetry. Every time that I need to clear my head, and need to connect deeply with what I’m put on this earth to do, --in the time left me, with the resources and whatever talent is left me—I ask myself: “what is the work that I still need to do?” The culture turns to you and they say, your publisher, your agent: “When are you going to write another book like In the Time of the Butterflies?” and I say: “You know, if I wrote another book like In the Time of the Butterflies, I would be betraying my readership. I would be just repeating something that works.” My job is to listen, closely, and to learn what it is that is the song that I can do, the story that I can tell. And when that happens, I find that returning to poetry returns me to the very deep root, that place where mystery stirs. Seamus Heaney came here and gave a talk, and he said: “Poetry is about putting into words what can’t be put into words.” I think of poetry as like pushing out, if you think of it with that—I hate to use the Western cowboy metaphor—but the scouts went out to discover the territory, and then afterwards came the wagon trains with the wives and the kids and the towns were built and the schools and the hospitals—and that’s novels. The wagon train is the novel. The scout is the poet; going out and pushing against the edge.

I’m working on poems. I’m also really interested in memory, in the past. I am thinking of immigrants a lot, these days—how much we lose of people when they are immigrants and they lose their language. They are in a foreign language, in a world where they don’t have access to the ability to express themselves. What happens to those selves? That is very much, for me, the generation of my parents, all the things that we lost of them in English. It is not just a language, it is a rhythm, and it is a way of being. What happens to that self? Where do you put it? On top of that you have the antagonism of people saying you should banish it if you want to be a part of this world, learn English, leave Spanish behind, what happens to the closeted self, that doesn’t get integrated into your everyday life?