



Latin American Literary Review

VOLUME 48 / NUMBER 95 2021

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Ricardo Piglia's *Plata quemada*: The Queer *Pietà*

Herbert J. Brant

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

ABSTRACT: This study explores Piglia's fictionalization of the "real" 1965 crime story that serves as the base for his 1997 novel, *Plata quemada*, and in particular, the author's choice to invent a homoerotic relationship between the two main characters, Dorda and Brignone. Piglia's decision can be viewed as a daring attempt at "fake news" inspired by historic events. But more significantly, the invention of an emotional and physical relationship between the two protagonists serves a powerful structural function in the novel. By means of this relationship, Piglia is able to elaborate a modern-day Argentine tragedy that elicits a cathartic reaction in the reader. And while the title of the novel may highlight the climactic act of rebellious socio-economic nihilism, the novel as a whole demands a co-equal high point that culminates in the radically subversive, emotionally charged image of Dorda cradling the dying Brignone, Piglia's queer *pietà*.

KEYWORDS: Argentine novel, Ricardo Piglia, Queer Studies, tragedy.

In 2014, Uruguayan journalist Leonardo Haberkorn's published his book, *Liberaj: La verdadera historia del caso Plata quemada*, with the declared intention to reveal the "truth" of the historical incidents that serve as the basis of Ricardo Piglia's extraordinary 1997 novel. Haberkorn states, "No quería *inventarles* a los pistoleros de San Fernando un pasado, como había hecho Piglia. No quería *crearles* una historia familiar, una manera de hablar, *imaginarles* un carácter, *transformarlos* en arquetipos de delinquentes, hacerlos putos, drogadictos, malhablados. Quería acercarme a la verdad" (*Liberaj* 17; emphasis added). Ironically, instead of discrediting the Argentine author's novelization of the events by revealing the historical facts of both the case and its actors, Haberkorn's book may have had a paradoxical effect, one that inspires greater admiration for Piglia's widely acclaimed work of fiction. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia once again reveals the magic behind post-modern literary texts when he, as Gutiérrez González puts it, "levanta el telón para un nuevo enfrentamiento entre el texto novelesco y la realidad externa" (116). My goal in this study is to explore the implications of one of Piglia's principal fictionalizations (or *falsificaciones* in the Borgesian sense) of the real-world story, focusing specifically on the author's decision to construct a modern-day Latin-American tragedy that spotlights a fictionalized homoerotic relationship between two of the main characters—a decision that I view as key to understanding this highly complex and artistically daring version of "fake news" which has its origin in a shocking sequence of events that took place in 1965.¹

At the start, it is important to emphasize that any discussion of *Plata quemada* is more complicated than it might seem, and consequently, some clarification is in order. In addition to the novelized version of events, there is also a highly successful film based on the novel, and given the fundamental differences between the genres,

critical analysis is somewhat neatly divided between studies that examine Piglia's written text, and those that scrutinize Piñeyro's 2000 film. Of course, as Haberkorn's book illustrates, the existence of artefacts that document the historical events compounds the issue, creating a complicated layering of versions: media reports > novel > film. The names of characters alone can cause enormous confusion, and scholars must take note of the source text(s) under consideration. To be clear, then, this study focuses principally on Piglia's 1997 published work of fiction, and references to other textual forms will be explicitly noted.

Given Ricardo Piglia's stature as one of Argentina's most significant 20th-century writers, the bibliography of published critical studies is understandably rich, but few scholars have made the sensational homoerotic content in the novel their central object of attention. A few early studies, however, explore at length the queer relationship of Dorda ("el Gaucho Rubio") and Brignone ("el Nene"), the main characters.² Foster, who specifically analyzes the cinematic version of the novel, notes that the historical and cultural context of the fictionalized events depicted situates the story at a time when such relationships were not commonly visible nor rarely openly acknowledged, and that the sexual nature of the outlaws' relationship in Piglia's novel stands out all the more for its unusual prominence in the story. Archbold examines the specific links in the novel between masculinity, (homo)sexuality, and violence in the novel and how these links demonstrate the deeply-rooted dominance of hetero-patriarchal norms in Argentine society. Premat, in his recent study on the novel, also explores the sexuality of the main characters, situating it within the larger trope of the "mirroring" or, more precisely stated, the *inversion* that he sees as functioning as an organizing principle in Piglia's retelling of the events. But

it seems to me that there is a basic element regarding the queer relationship between the protagonists that still needs more careful elucidation: what happens when, in Piglia's version of the story, the author manufactures a tale of homoerotic desire and sexuality as the emotional anchor for a story inspired by historical facts? Why might he invent a relationship that may or may not have any basis in reality, when the characters in the work of fiction are based on real people? What purposes would that invention serve?

Were the novel written earlier in the 20th Century, one might respond that Piglia uses the homoerotic relationship as a tool to reinforce the negative stereotype that men who love other men are violently anti-social, culturally poisonous, and essentially criminal. But considering the tone of the narration, the sympathy inspired by the background story of childhood sexual abuse, and the affecting images of heroic devotion between the two men, it is clear that the narration of their emotional and physical relationship should be perceived as a compelling deconstruction of the culturally potent image of homosexuals as cowardly, weak, effeminate, and untrustworthy. I find that the invention of a queer relationship—and specifically the deep psychological and intense emotional attachment between the two main characters—, serves a powerful structural and thematic purpose.³ By means of the same-sex relationship, Piglia is able to join together the two fundamental themes of the novel into a satisfyingly coherent whole: his radical political message, illustrated by the robbery and the episode in which the characters burn what remains of the stolen money, and his socially revolutionary message that the passion between two men may be imagined as having an equal emotional intensity and spiritual significance as the love between a man and a woman. And while the title of the novel may highlight the climactic act of socio-economic nihilism, the novel's trajectory demands a finale that culminates in what Balderston calls the "ravishing tenderness" (407) in the subversive, emotionally devastating image of Dorda cradling the dying Brignone, Piglia's literary sculpting of a queer *pietà*.

The Planeta edition of Piglia's *Plata quemada* prominently places a statement on the back cover of the book that appears in the novel's epilogue: "Esta novela cuenta una historia real" (*Plata* 245). It is worth noting that the author does not use the word "true", but rather he affirms that it is a "real story." Nonetheless, this sentence—and the spellbinding power it has over readers when they believe that they have voyeuristic access to the lives of real people and real events—forms one of the bases of a series of legal problems for its author. Piglia had been taken to court on more than one occasion because of this novel, due principally to its clever blurring of the line between fact and fiction, and the essentially different purposes and structures that form the foundation for the journalistic reporting of facts, on the one hand, and the creation of literary texts on the other. The most problematic issues for Piglia have stemmed from lawsuits by living people connected to the historical case, and their claims are based on the legal question of a person's right to privacy against an artist's creative freedom of expression.

The first complainant is a surviving person on whom one of the fictional characters is based, Blanca Galeano, who sued "por daños y perjuicios, por violación al derecho a la intimidad, honor, privacidad, daño moral y usurpación de nombre" (Abraham 123); the second is Claudia Dorda, the daughter of Roberto Dorda, the man on whom the character of Dorda ("el Gaucho Rubio") is based. As may be easily imagined, one aspect of the legal problems for Piglia stems from his choice either to use the real names of the people involved or to change them only slightly when he incorporated them into his fictional text. In the case of the two main protagonists, Piglia did, in fact, change the first names of the fictional characters from those of the real people who inspired them: Roberto Dorda was changed to Marcos or Marquitos Dorda (*Plata* 218), and Marcelo Brignone became Franco Brignone (*Plata* 91) in the novel. Blanca Galeano, however, was singled out as one of the few people whose fictional character retains the real person's unaltered name.

Although the lawsuits failed in court (see Ferrari), Piglia's cunning blend of fact and fiction still continues to frustrate and confuse various sectors of the reading public. Haberkorn's caustic response to Piglia's novel—in print, in recorded interviews, and on his website blog—combines clarification of the events depicted in the novel as elucidated by news stories published at the time, along with information on his research into the "truth" about the characters by means of interviews conducted with members of the families of the real-life people portrayed in Piglia's novel. In spite of Haberkorn's suggestions of plagiarism, and what he views as ethical violations of journalistic integrity, i.e., the novelist's failure to report "the truth" with precision, Piglia's masterly skill at writing from the fertile borderline between fiction and history has successfully confounded Haberkorn, and has ultimately led him to view the novel as a sort of "hoax": a novel that takes the technique of Capote's modernist *In Cold Blood* and amplifies the effect to create a post-modern, "post-truth" manifesto. Significantly, Haberkorn is careful not to accuse Piglia directly, but he does make his point clear when he says, "Cuando leo una obra de ficción me gusta que la haya escrito el escritor. Y, en uno y otro caso, cuando hay citas me gusta que se sepa de quién son, de dónde fueron tomadas, dónde empiezan y dónde terminan. Y que vengan con comillas. Por favor" ("Piglia"). Simply put, Haberkorn's indignation betrays his ignorance of Piglia's sophisticated and elaborate use of a classic Brechtian estrangement effect ("Verfremdungseffekt") that distances his novel from mere reportage of historical facts: the novel's constantly shifting narrative voice, best described as a "narración coral" (Unda Henríquez 110). The author decenters and defamiliarizes the narrative voice as a way to create the effect of a "tensión entre voces distintas, relatos dispares, que se repiten, difieren entre sí, se contradicen, cuentan fragmentos de sus historias, introducen modos de pensar..." (Premat 319). The result is a text with a "proliferación de historias y perspectivas de la realidad dentro del texto" (Gutiérrez González 118). Again, paradoxically, Haberkorn actually strengthens the critical appraisal that although Piglia's richly textured fiction may indeed

fail as journalism (see Calero), it succeeds admirably as a superb work of fiction. Piglia stretches the boundaries and expands the possibilities of narrative point of view by incorporating snippets of journalistic reports as one part of the "selva de voces" that make up the novel's narration.

Following the model of Bertold Brecht, one of the most impactful influences on Piglia's writing, the author constructs a fiction that succeeds in producing an estranged experience for the reader. Piglia makes it abundantly clear that the reality of the supposed "real story" has been altered, even distorted, as a way to draw attention to the act of narration, and to invite a more critical experience of the text on the part of the reader. As Page insightfully remarks, Piglia's novel "moves beyond the immediate scandal of the events it relates to investigate the politics of crime and of narrative in general," thereby establishing an "explicit link between aesthetic organization and ethical judgement..." and revealing the "possible social dimensions of narrativity" (30). As a result, the ethical quality of Piglia's text supersedes Haberkorn's demands that the novel attempt to recreate the reality of the known facts at the expense of illuminating the socio-political situation that underlies the remarkable events of 1965: the tortured relationship between crime and capitalism, crime and "bourgeois legality", crime and the power of the state (Page 36).

In order to jolt readers out of their complacency and to foreground the social critique that forms the heart of Piglia's novel, startling embellishments become essential in the telling of this story. The coverage supplied by the mass media does not shed light on what modern capitalist societies must keep concealed at all costs—the integrated system that maintains its supremacy—and so Piglia's fictional version of the "real story" highlights two elaborations on the known facts in the case, and they serve as the two most significant literary fabrications in the novel: the spectacular scene referenced by the book's title, the burning of several million Argentine pesos, and the development of a highly complex homoerotic relationship between the two principle male characters.⁴ And while there exists a number of critical studies devoted to both of these contrived fictional elements, it appears that many critics seem reluctant to question the veracity of Piglia's concocted plot devices, or even to suspect that they are merely contrivances that enrich the narrative. As a result, Piglia has succeeded in creating the surprisingly credible illusion that both devices are part of the historical evidence (they are not), when it is far more probable that the author needed to conjure them in order to enhance his literary rendering of the story, elevating it to epic stature. With that in mind, I want to focus on the non-normative sexuality of the two main characters, to explore Piglia's decision to invent a homoerotic relationship between them, and to evaluate how this particular plot element functions in the novel.

According to Haberkorn's interviews with Claudia Dorda, the Dorda family agrees that there was never the least hint of homosexual-

ity or mental illness in the life of her father. Haberkorn affirms that "[e]n *Plata quemada* Piglia lo describe como un psicópata, muy loco, esquizofrénico, 'con tendencia a la afasia', homosexual, de gran inteligencia, supersticioso, huérfano de madre, que podía permanecer un mes callado, que oía voces en el interior de su cabeza, [...] *Todo es un invento*" (*Liberajij* 53-54; emphasis added). In addition to Piglia's fictional invention of a sexuality for which Haberkorn can find no evidence in real life, he seems to be deeply troubled by the incongruity that a married man with a young child might also be attracted to other men. In pursuit of a resolution to the apparent contradiction, he explores possible explanations for Piglia's falsification. He notes with irony that the one character in the novel that may have been suspected of homosexuality, as reported in the press of the time, was Carlos "El Cuervo" Mereles, the driver of the getaway car and the third person killed in the Montevideo apartment. Haberkorn cites a newspaper source—whose reliability is never questioned—to back up his confirmation: "[s]e sabe también que Mereles es adicto a las drogas y para completar el inquietante cuadro, tiene inclinaciones homosexuales", sostuvo *La Razón*." The Uruguayan journalist finally engages in what appears to be a bit of mind-reading when he asserts unequivocally, "De allí seguramente sacó Piglia la idea de crear una pareja gay entre dos integrantes de la banda, Dorda y Brignone..." (*Liberajij* 72; emphasis added). Notwithstanding Haberkorn's decisive assertion, it appears more likely that Piglia chose to invent the homoerotic relationship between Dorda and Brignone to support a structural and thematic construct for his novel, one that allows him to employ a technique that heightens the impact of the tragedy, and raises the characters from mere deviants and delinquents to a classical heroic stature.

As much as it may seem incompatible to connect the notion of the tragic hero with murderers and thieves, there is no question that issues of marginality, homosociality, and an exaggerated masculinity are fundamental themes that run through Piglia's fiction. Balderston, for example, notes that "the importance of the homoerotic in the construction of masculinity" (405) is evident in his early stories, "La invasión" and "El Laucha Benítez," and that his writing is "fraught with tension concerning the homoerotic, especially in relation to violent male bonding" (408). Piglia has commented on this particular fascination for him as a writer, and in a 1998 conversation, published in a later edition of his *Crítica y ficción*, the author speaks of his interest in the promising fictional possibilities of exploring the various "worlds" in which men interact exclusively with other men, including those that are characterized by violence and danger: "...un mundo sólo de hombres..., digamos el ejército, el mundo del box, el mundo del deporte, las pensiones, ciertos ámbitos donde funcionan redes masculinas han sido siempre para mí muy atractivos por el tipo de pasiones que circulan ahí, la competencia extrema, los desafíos, los sentimientos desplazados..." (*Crítica* 224). Later in the same published conversation, he explicitly mentions the world of criminals and prisons, the latter being "un espacio de circulación entre cuerpos sin que nadie se quede fijo a un tipo de conducta es-

tablecida que la sociedad considera normal, anormal o desviada" (*Crítica* 226).⁵ The stunning irony of a prison as a place where there is greater freedom of sexual desire and its expression than in the society at large may have originally attracted Piglia's keen sense of paradox and incongruity to the story of a gang of ex-convicts who carry out a daring robbery of several million pesos.

But rather than a violent "world of men" populated by a group of individuals who are connected only by their participation in the criminal events that occur in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in 1965, Piglia has chosen to create a central dyad, an emotionally and sexually conjoined pair as the protagonist. Dorda and Brignone form a "couple" that integrates two complementary halves of a divided whole. Queer Studies scholars have found the concept of the Platonic "missing half" a highly productive notion for reimagining modern homoerotic desire, and for moving past Freud's troubled conception of narcissism and the theory of attraction to one's own self as it is projected onto a person of the same sex.⁶ Bersani, for example, explores the power of Aristophanes' fable in which human beings were originally created in three forms: male, female, and a spherically-shaped combination of the two. The humans were punished by Zeus because of their "powerful and ambitious [...] attempts to vanquish the gods" by splitting them into two halves, with the result that "every human being is longing for his or her lost other half. 'Love' [...] 'is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature'" (364). Consequently, the ancient Greek notion defines erotic attraction as a search for what has been lost, for what is missing, and for some it is the search for a person of the same sex, and for others, a person of a different sex. Piglia seems to allude to the mythological story when he has Brignone describe the impulse for his public cruising for sex with men in very nearly the same terms: "Es como buscar algo que se ha perdido y que de pronto aparece bajo una luz blanca, en medio de la calle. Es irresistible" (*Plata* 105).

Piglia's creation of a reunited wholeness and plentitude in the conjoined dyad of Dorda and Brignone solidifies their role as protagonist in the story, and gives them an exceptional power that they would lack as individuals. In the text, it is evident that the two characters function most efficiently as two complementary halves of an intensified whole, similar to the exceptionally strong connection between twins. The first lines of the novel explain that "[l]os llaman los mellizos porque son inseparables. Pero no son hermanos, ni son parecidos" (*Plata* 11). Still on the first page, the narrator continues to speak of them as a functional unit by emphasizing the word "pareja": "[e]ran llamativos, extravagantes, parecían una *pareja* de boxeadores o una *pareja* de empleados de una empresa de pompas fúnebres" (*Plata* 11-12; emphasis added). Later on, we read of Dorda's sense of wholeness with Brignone: "...el Gaucho y el Nene, eran, para el Gaucho, uno solo. Hermanos mellizos, gemelos, los hermanos corsos, es decir (trataba de explicar Dorda) se entendían a ciegas, actuaban de memoria. Le parecía así, a él, que sentía lo

mismo que el Nene Brignone" (*Plata* 68-69). And further, the prison psychiatrist, Dr. Amadeo Bunge, notes that it is "[U]n caso muy interesante de simbiosis gestáltica. Son dos pero actúan como una unidad. El cuerpo es el Gaucho, el ejecutor pleno, un asesino psicótico; el Nene es el cerebro y piensa por él" (*Plata* 69).⁷ The fictional psychiatrist's assessment of the relationship between Brignone and Dorda as a symbiotic unit reinforces the classical theme underlying this work, elevating the two characters to mythic status, deserving of a story that is worth repeating for future generations, and rescued from the oblivion of forgetting and disappearance — a fate that likely would have occurred had Piglia not published his novel thirty years after the historical events.

The mythic status of the characters emphasizes a structure that Piglia finds powerfully "attractive" to him as a writer, *tragedy*. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia takes a sequence of historical events and converts them into a work of narrative art in the form of "una versión argentina de una tragedia griega" (*Plata* 250). Piglia has explained his concept of tragedy in these terms:

Yo defino la tragedia como la llegada de un mensaje enigmático, sobrenatural, que a veces el héroe no alcanza a comprender. La tragedia es un diálogo con una voz que habitualmente aparece ligada a los dioses o a la sombra de los muertos [...], es decir, hay una frase hermética, escrita en una lengua a la vez familiar y sobrenatural, y hay un problema de desciframiento; pero el que tiene que descifrar tiene la vida puesta en juego en ese desciframiento. [...] Habitualmente el héroe no comprende o comprende mal y por eso termina como termina. La tragedia dramatiza una interpretación... [*Crítica* 204]

Later in the conversation, Piglia suggests that the tragic heroes (officially plural, but functionally singular) are haunted by a destiny that demands that they obey a conviction, a "ley propia" and they accept the impossible option demanded by their "sistema de valores propios" (*Crítica* 205). Without using the word, Piglia implies that the tragic *flaw* of these heroes is their deadly determination either to live outside of the norms of the capitalist, bourgeois society that has abused and poisoned them, or die in the attempt.

The marginality of the protagonists who live outside of civilized society in a world made up almost exclusively of men may help explain Piglia's choice for Dorda's criminal nickname, "el Gaucho Rubio" — a nickname that Roberto Dorda's daughter insists was totally unknown to any of her family members. Dieleke, for example, makes explicit the link between Dorda and Martín Fierro, the most famous "gaucho rebelde." And in a footnote, Premat clarifies that because "el contexto pampeano (delirios sobre indios ranqueles, elementos espaciales como lagunas, tacuaras, totoras), aparece en el pasado del Gaucho Dorda, y por lo tanto en su definición ficcional" (323), the reader cannot help but connect Piglia's character to the gauchesque genre and to Hernández's Martín Fierro. The intertex-

tual parallels between Dorda and Martín Fierro and their "fraternity of the marginal" (Geirola 187) further enrich Piglia's text as a commentary on *argentinidad* and national identity.

For me, what makes *Plata quemada* so appealing to readers is the manner in which Piglia magnifies and amplifies the marginality of the main characters—their value as outsiders or underdogs—by connecting their criminality with the abuse that they suffered as children and adolescents in the Argentine penal system. In this way, the author is able to link Otherness with sexual violence, with the functional common element between them being toxic masculinity and culturally sanctioned homophobia. In order to accomplish this, Piglia invents believable, but completely fictional backstories for both Dorda and Brignone as a way to allow the reader to understand better their particular situations, and how they came to find their missing other half in the other person. Chapter 3, for example, is devoted to Dorda's troubled mental state and his long history of psycho-sexual abuse, and Chapter 4 has a long interior monologue in which Brignone speaks of how he had been "poisoned" throughout his young life, and the lessons he learned in prison about the evils of humanity. It must be noted, however, that Piglia does not offer these passages in the novel as some type of explanation of criminality and delinquency in general, but instead they provide the necessary background for understanding the sense of tragedy he sets up in the novel. And in order for the tragedy to be truly effective, the reader must understand what Piglia calls the tragic heroes' "convictions" or their "personal value systems," and how the fateful messages to be deciphered lead them to their final destiny in Montevideo. But the reader must understand that Piglia, of course, does not condone their actions: "[e]n el caso de *Plata quemada*, esta ley por supuesto no era la que yo sostengo; no es que yo esté de acuerdo con que haya que matar gente por la calle como hacen estos personajes, pero sí estoy de acuerdo con que ellos son fieles a una ley propia y la llevan hasta el fin" (*Crítica* 205). In other words, the novel functions on the foundational principle that what is heroic in these characters is not the value system itself, but their decision to remain faithful to it.

In a sense, the outlaws who serve as protagonists in the novel earn a certain compassion from the reader once their personal histories become known. Piglia sets up the devastating ending of the novel by providing what was disappointingly lacking in the "true" version of the historical events of 1965, and what Haber Korn's book highlights so starkly: a robbery turns deadly, and when trapped, the criminals make the almost inexplicable decision to die rather than be sent back to jail. What is known (or *may* be known) about the real events cannot adequately explain the motive, the reason for the final bloodbath in the Liberaj apartment building—but Piglia's fiction can. By magnifying the tortured situation of these stigmatized outcasts, and by providing a story to explain their explosive rage and brutally destructive anti-social behavior, the author is able to satisfy the reader's need to understand the *why* behind the historical facts, as his characters lash out at capitalist society by attacking

both the highly cherished values of heteronormativity as well as the materialistic desire for an ever-increasing accumulation of wealth.⁸

Clearly, one of the most skillful and unsettling features of Piglia's novel is how the author is able to build empathy for characters whose actions can only be described as despicable or barbaric as they rage against "civilized society" from their savage, marginalized environment.⁹ Their rebellion against society, and their hatred of mid-20th-century Argentine norms that come as a result of suffering at the hands of that society, is tempered by their passionate devotion to each other. From the very first page, the novel sets in motion a cumulative effect that humanizes them and inspires empathy for them—in spite of their reprehensible acts. Again, Piglia's choice to create a homoerotic relationship between the men becomes key to understanding the ultimate tragedy of the narration. Were the protagonists of the story merely associates in a gang of criminals—without any deeper connection than their greed or their lust for revenge against a society that they view as having victimized them—the novel could not possibly have made the same affective impact on the reader. The love relationship between Dorda and Brignone is fundamental in creating the emotionally-charged finale and the resulting experience of *catharsis*.¹⁰ But unlike the typical catharsis in the classics of the Western canon, Piglia brilliantly sets up a voluptuously *queer*, turn-of-the-21st-century cathartic moment—the tragic scene in which Dorda cradles the dying Brignone in his arms. Dorda does not merely hold the man that he loves in their final moments together, but rather he experiences the feeling of life emptying out of his own being as it slowly drains away from his Platonic complementary half.

The richly detailed and vivid narration of the catastrophic events of the 5th and 6th of November in 1965 provide a spectacularly dramatic climax to the novel. And while the fictional burning of the money might be considered the culminating apex of the narrative trajectory, I would argue that the death of Brignone in Dorda's final embrace must be understood as more than merely an emotional closure to diminish the tension after the scene when spectators shriek in horror, anger, and disgust at the destruction of the money. In my view, the burning of the money does form the climax of the one plot line that focuses on the socio-economic themes explored by Piglia, most probably as a way to comment on the neo-liberal capitalist excesses of late 20th-century Argentina when the novel was written, but the death of Brignone creates a co-equal climax for the plot devoted to the queering of the dual protagonists as a construct to elevate readers' emotions as they view the spectacle of the tragic heroes' end. While the burning of the money may cause the reader to be appalled, even traumatized, by the incineration of such an enormous amount of cash—and all that it represents—I contend that the action of the novel concludes when Piglia forces the reader into the position of voyeur—to witness, to be engaged sensorially and sentimentally in the intimate exaltation of the main characters as they are raised to heroic stature by the tenderness and poignancy of their final embrace:

Por fin Dorda llegó junto al Nene y lo arrastró contra la pared, a cubierto, y lo levantó contra su cuerpo, lo tendió sobre él, abrazado, semidesnudo.

Se miraron; el Nene se moría. El Gaucho Rubio le limpió la cara y trató de no llorar. [...]

El Nene le sonrió y el Gaucho Rubio lo mantuvo en sus brazos como quien sostiene a un Cristo. [...]

—No aflojes, Marquitos—dijo el Nene. Lo había llamado por el nombre, por primera vez en mucho tiempo, en diminutivo, como si fuera el Gaucho quien precisara consuelo.

Y después se alzó un poco, el Nene, se apoyó en un codo y le dijo algo al oído que nadie pudo oír, una frase de amor, seguramente, dicha a medias o no dicha tal vez pero sentida por el Gaucho que lo besó mientras el Nene se iba. (Plata 217-218)

At this point, in my view, the novel fully realizes its artistic ambition. Piglia's queer *pietà* provides a transcendence to the events that occurred in Montevideo so many years ago, and allows for the cathartic release of emotion for readers who are permitted to witness the affectively charged final moments of these flawed tragic characters. While the burning of the money may provide a moment of dramatic flair of astounding intensity for its pure nihilistic destructiveness, the agonizing death of el Nene Brignone and the hopeless grief of el Gaucho Rubio furnish a superb countermeasure that places their and our humanity at the center of the tragedy. Piglia's novel reminds the reader that the seemingly useless immolation of the money pales in comparison to the significance of the obliteration of the person who provides wholeness, completion, and fullness to his beloved other half.

NOTES

¹ The Borgesian *falsificación* has served as a potent inspiration for Piglia. In general terms, Borges makes use of what appears to be a purely intellectual game of false references, attributions, and quotes from invented texts and apocryphal authors as a way to give the illusion of truth and reality underlying his fictions. But beyond the playful tricks, the game's effects undermine the idea of authority and authorship, they blur the distinctions we draw between fact and fiction, and they reveal the inherent limitations of language and the myth of "truth" as a discoverable entity. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia picks up where Borges leaves off, and takes literary falsification to a new level. For a succinct analysis of the influence of Borges and Arlt on Piglia, see Garabano.

² I am using terminology to avoid fixing an identity marker to the characters. Rather than a gay relationship or a gay identity—which would be anachronistic in the 1965 time period—I prefer *homoerotic* or *queer* to describe the physical and emotional passion between men, one which may or may not express a self-defined identity position that we understand currently as "gay." The non-heteronormative fluidity of sexual desire is something that Piglia himself views as an element of fascination, and as I will indicate later, one that appears with some frequency in his fiction. See his *Crítica y ficción* 224-226.

³ Kokalov sees the homoerotic relationship in Piglia's novel as less significant. In comparing the novel to the film, he asserts that "la novela contiene elementos indiscutiblemente queer ... mas la representación de dichos elementos es secundaria a la crónica policial narrada por el autor." He praises Piñeyro's film version, in contrast, stating that "el centro del film está indudablemente ocupado por la historia de amor entre El Nene y Ángel (el Gaucho) mientras que en este caso el crimen es el trasfondo trágico a lo largo del cual se desarrolla la acción" (38). While I agree that the film visually portrays the relationship between El Nene and Ángel in a more explicit manner, I contend that the homoerotic union of the two protagonists in the novel cannot reasonably be considered secondary to the story of the crime and its devastating aftermath.

⁴ In the novel, Piglia gives the exact amount stolen from the armored

car: 7,203,960 Argentine pesos. In October of 1965, the amount would be equivalent to approximately \$32,000 (A\$225 = US\$1), but adjusted for inflation, that amount would have the approximate value of over \$265,000 in 2020, according to online inflation calculators. The enduring questions surrounding the disappearance of the money—as well as the personal effects of the criminals (e.g., clothing, drugs, guns, etc.)—is not very mysterious: it is most likely the result of all-too-common official corruption. By the time that journalists were allowed into the apartment, the Argentine and Uruguayan police had "cleaned up" the entire crime scene, leaving only the naked bodies of the criminals on the kitchen floor. See Calero and Haberkorn (176-178).

⁵ While Foster's analysis focuses on the film version of the novel, he insightfully connects the nature of the marginalized, criminal characters to those in Jean Genet's work, in which "homosexuality and antisocial criminality have in common the radical Otherness of the individual who chooses to subvert conventional morality on all fronts possible" (133-34).

⁶ The suggestive power of the mirror as a reverse likeness or a duplication of sameness and self, is certainly an image that has long been associated with same-sex desire. Freud codified that link for most of the 20th Century, but in recent years, scholars have made important gains in breaking down the association between narcissism and homoerotic attraction (e.g., Bersani, Dean, and Reeser). See Brant (pp. 110-111) for a fuller discussion of this issue.

⁷ The psychiatrist's name is a fairly transparent reference to the early 20th-century Argentine social scientist, Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918), known for his racially-focused views on the degenerative quality of Native American and African influences on Spanish-American societies, and the civilizing value of white European immigration to Argentina, as well as his social-Darwinist studies of crowd psychology. It seems very likely that Piglia's use of the name is intended to discredit the character, and to suggest malpractice or even abuse of Dorda while in prison.

⁸ It is interesting to note that Haberkorn's book consistently emphasizes how the family members he interviews are totally mystified by the

tragedy that occurred, and it reinforces his point that, based on the available evidence, no coherent motive will ever be found to explain why the band of criminals comes to its violent end. Haberkorn's criticism of Piglia, in fact, centers precisely on the novelist's use of fiction to fill in gaps where information is missing from the historical record of the case, including the reasons why it happened the way it did. It appears that he does not understand that Piglia's fictional version of the events offers an artistic means to satisfy the intensely-felt human desire for an explanation of seemingly incomprehensible events.

⁹ It is often assumed that Brecht's conceptualization of epic theater rejects emotional responses to the action on the stage, and that empathy and catharsis obscure the desired critical (rational) response on the part of the audience. Squiers and other scholars note that Brecht's journals and letters

indicate that emotion has an important place in epic theater, but that identification and sympathy with the characters should be prevented by use of estrangement effects (Squires 244).

¹⁰ The concept of catharsis has a highly complex history, and the metaphor used by Aristotle to liken the emotional purification inspired by tragedy to the physical purging of substances from the human body has been applied to a wide variety of contexts. Given Piglia's insistence on the story of Dorda and Brignone as a modern-day tragedy, my use of the term catharsis refers to the classical view that the fall from grace and the suffering of the tragic hero(es) that the reader witnesses at the end of the novel unleashes a strong sense of pity which could serve to inspire the reader to view the events from a heightened perspective, one that goes beyond the traditional bourgeois view of criminality (bad) vs law-and-order (good).

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Manos sucias, árboles y cemento: una lectura ecocrítica de *Huracanada* de Mayra Santos-Febres

Víctor Figueroa
Wayne State University

ABSTRACT: Este ensayo examina el poemario *Huracanada* (2018), de la escritora puertorriqueña Mayra Santos-Febres, desde una perspectiva ecocrítica. Específicamente, estudia cómo estos poemas resaltan en qué medida la devastación que provocó el huracán María en Puerto Rico en 2017 no debe atribuirse solamente al poder de las fuerzas naturales, sino también a un desequilibrio profundo y sistémico en la relación entre seres humanos y la naturaleza, tanto en la isla como globalmente. Este desequilibrio ha contribuido a la intensificación de fenómenos como los huracanes—algo que la literatura científica sobre los efectos del calentamiento global antropogénico señala enfáticamente—y a los catastróficos efectos de estos eventos sobre las poblaciones más vulnerables del planeta. Además, el poemario expone cómo, tras este tipo de desastres, los justificados intentos de asegurar la sobrevivencia y la prosperidad de diversas poblaciones—incluyendo las más vulnerables—frecuentemente implican la colaboración con un sistema económico, industrial y tecnológico que es cómplice del problema que se intenta resolver.

KEYWORDS: Mayra Santos-Febres; Huracán María; Puerto Rico; Ecocrítica; Literatura puertorriqueña

En 2018, la escritora puertorriqueña Mayra Santos-Febres publica su quinto poemario, *Huracanada*, en el cual convergen múltiples temas que ha explorado a lo largo de su carrera literaria: la articulación de espacios en que cuerpos e identidades femeninas puedan autoliberarse de los roles y estereotipos impuestos por siglos de dominación machista; la celebración de voces y cosmovisiones negras que se sobrepongan a la larga historia de prejuicios y exclusiones racistas en Puerto Rico; y la indagación en la historia de la isla misma y su lugar subordinado en un orden capitalista global enraizado en estructuras económicas y sociales de corte claramente colonial. A estos tópicos familiares en su obra, Santos-Febres añade una serie de poemas que responden a la seria crisis causada por el asolador paso del huracán María por Puerto Rico en septiembre de 2017.

Es este último tema—el impacto del huracán María en Puerto Rico—el que este ensayo intenta explorar más a fondo. Más concretamente, me interesa reflexionar sobre las dos últimas secciones de libro, “Las manos sucias” y “Sistemamundo”, que son las que más directamente articulan una representación poética de la experiencia del huracán. Desde una perspectiva ecocrítica, es posible constatar cómo estos textos poéticos resaltan—si bien no siempre de manera explícita—en qué medida la devastación que provocó el huracán en la isla no debe atribuirse simple y simplistamente al poder de las fuerzas naturales, sino también a un desequilibrio profundo y sistémico en la relación entre seres humanos y la naturaleza, tanto en la isla como globalmente. Este desequilibrio ha contribuido a la intensificación de fenómenos como

los huracanes—algo que la literatura científica sobre los efectos del calentamiento global antropogénico señala enfáticamente—y a los catastróficos efectos de estos eventos sobre las poblaciones más vulnerables del planeta. Más aún: la polisemia de la frase “manos sucias”, que como veremos es de gran importancia en el poemario, apunta a uno de los aspectos más intrincados y problemáticos de las luchas ambientales contemporáneas. Tras desastres como el huracán María, los justificados intentos de asegurar la sobrevivencia y la prosperidad de diversas poblaciones—incluyendo las más vulnerables—implican frecuentemente la colaboración con un sistema económico, industrial y tecnológico que es cómplice del problema que se intenta resolver. Esto presenta un paralelo (que examinaré más adelante) con las ideas que explora Jean Paul Sartre en su clásico drama *Las manos sucias*: la inacción no es una opción viable, pero la acción frecuentemente conlleva compromisos con prácticas y estructuras que, aun aliviando emergencias a corto plazo, contribuyen a largo plazo a problemas graves como el cambio climático.

Como he indicado, mi análisis sigue los parámetros de la llamada ecocrítica o crítica ambiental. El acercamiento ecocrítico examina la representación de la naturaleza en textos literarios o culturales (lo cual puede incluir debates sobre el significado mismo de la palabra “naturaleza”); representaciones literarias de la relación entre los seres humanos y sus entornos materiales (naturales o contruidos por seres humanos, incluyendo las relaciones con los seres no humanos); y particularmente textos que abordan la crisis ambiental contemporánea, entendida como la mercantilización,

degradación y destrucción de la naturaleza por fenómenos antropogénicos como la contaminación, el cambio climático y el consumo excesivo, entre otros. Como sugiere esta tercera faceta, un rasgo que la ecocrítica comparte con muchos movimientos ecologistas y ambientalistas contemporáneos es que, en la mayoría de sus vertientes, no sólo se interesa en un análisis descriptivo de la relación entre los seres humanos y la naturaleza, sino que adopta una posición crítica ante la explotación de la naturaleza y sus efectos sobre los hábitats humanos y no humanos.

En el caso de *Huracanada*, no se trata de leer los poemas de manera ingenua o transparente como simples crónicas de los efectos del huracán, sino de examinar la manera en que la naturaleza y su relación con la sociedad humana son construidas en estos textos poéticos de manera que recalca serios problemas ambientales tanto en Puerto Rico como a nivel global. Además, la perspectiva ecocrítica pone de relieve que en estos textos la naturaleza no tiene una función meramente alegórica, como símbolo de emociones humanas, o como simple telón de fondo para preocupaciones estrictamente antropocéntricas. Esos elementos metafóricos están ahí, como veremos, pero el poemario de Santos Febres también representa una intervención en una crisis social y política con claras implicaciones ecológicas y ambientales, por lo que resulta esencial examinar con atención la dimensión referencial (y no sólo la figurada) de las alusiones a la naturaleza que encontramos en estos poemas. Como han indicado DeLoughrey, Gosson y Handley en su importante volumen ecocrítico sobre literatura caribeña, *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, “los escritores caribeños se rehúsan a representar el mundo natural en términos que borren la relación entre paisaje y poder...” (4; mi traducción). Podemos incluir a Santos Febres entre los escritores y escritoras que se han enfrascado en esa tarea que podríamos llamar, con justicia, ecocrítica.¹

El hambre hipotecada

Significativamente, el poemario no comienza su reflexión sobre los efectos del huracán María en la isla con una representación del fenómeno climático en sí, sino con un poema titulado “Deudas”, en el cual se denuncia la aparatosa situación económica de Puerto Rico en el 2017. Ya en el 2015 el entonces gobernador había catalogado la deuda pública del país como “impagable”, lo cual llevó en 2016 al presidente Barack Obama a la creación de una Junta de Supervisión Fiscal que efectivamente se hizo cargo de las finanzas de la isla y la re-estructuración de la deuda a través de medidas de austeridad y privatización típicas del neoliberalismo capitalista. El poema de Santos-Febres, sin embargo, alude a un proceso económico y social que comienza mucho antes que esos desarrollos más recientes, apuntando a un periodo durante el que “hipotecamos el hambre / había que escapar del hambre” (49). No es difícil identificar ese periodo con el desarrollo económico-industrial de la isla a lo largo del siglo 20. Varias décadas de cañaverización masiva casi exclusivamente dependiente de capital norteamericano

desembocan en la “Operación Manos a la Obra” de los años 40 y 50, durante los cuales la isla se urbaniza e industrializa radicalmente. César Ayala y Rafael Bernabé recalcan que durante este periodo,

Lo inquietante es que se perdió la oportunidad de crear una agricultura más diversificada y un vínculo más salvable entre el desarrollo urbano y el desarrollo rural en la isla...La tierra llegó a ser considerada, tanto por los planificadores gubernamentales como por la mayoría de los puertorriqueños cuyas vidas fueron moldeadas por esta transformación social, como mero espacio para construir edificios...Esto, a su vez, preparó el terreno—literalmente—para un proceso de urbanización caracterizado por la adopción del modelo norteamericano de expansión suburbana horizontal basada en el automóvil que progresivamente se propagó sobre tierras fértiles. (186-87; mi traducción)

El poema “Deudas” representa poéticamente el mismo proceso de este modo:

Hipotecamos su hambre,
el hambre de todos.
Dimos la Tierra como colateral
como si fuera nuestra.
Vendimos la Tierra,
nos dio vergüenza nuestra Tierra
y la ofrecimos en colateral.
Ahora es la Isla de la que hay que escapar
a toda costa,
Islahambre. (50)

Obsérvese cómo los versos recalcan los efectos de este desarrollismo económico no sólo en los seres humanos, sino también en la relación entre éstos y la tierra misma, palabra que la voz poética insiste en enunciar con mayúscula. Mientras la isla se transforma en vitrina del capitalismo hemisférico durante el siglo 20, los seres humanos se atribuyen un poder sobre la naturaleza (“como si fuera nuestra”) que eventualmente, ante desastres “naturales” como María, se revelará como falaz.²

No es sorprendente entonces que en el siguiente poema, titulado “Huracán”, se usen los siguientes términos para representar la destrucción:

Caen los techos.
El cemento en las paredes
de los edificios
se tiñe de la sangre de las hojas.
Los árboles cierran carreteras,
parten cables,
se convierten en proyectiles de madera

contra el mundo de metal y fibras
que hemos levantado. (51)

Estas dramáticas imágenes configuran una naturaleza herida (“la sangre de las hojas”) que parece rebelarse contra una civilización que la ha excluido y cosificado. La sutil personificación de la naturaleza alzada contra “el mundo de metal y fibras” es una estrategia común en textos con preocupaciones ecológicas, y aunque siempre conlleva el riesgo de reforzar la perspectiva antropocéntrica contra la cual protesta, es efectiva en su énfasis en una perspectiva *otra*, ajena a intereses humanos que nuestra sociedad tecnológico-industrial asume automáticamente como los únicos a ser considerados.³ Nótese también—pese al énfasis en la mayor parte del libro en las desigualdades entre seres humanos causadas por fuerzas como el colonialismo, el racismo, y el sexismo—cómo en este pasaje se opone un «nosotros» humano («que *hemos* levantado”) ante el mundo no humano que se levanta en armas (“proyectiles de madera”) durante el huracán.

El poemario en su totalidad insiste en representar al ser humano como el resultado de fuerzas, flujos, y ciclos naturales (desde la interacción perenne entre la vida y la muerte [27] hasta el ciclo menstrual femenino [23-29]), oponiéndose así a la visión cartesiana moderna que asume al ser humano como sujeto autónomo ajeno a—y en control de—las fuerzas ciegas que le rodean.⁴ Así pues, desde el comienzo la voz poética se declara “habitada / de una fuerza / que en mí toma cause” (13). El texto no articula la naturaleza como una unidad abstracta, sino como un conglomerado de consciencias y agencias no humanas con sus propios intereses, que aunque relegadas al olvido (o peor aún: destruidas) mientras reina la “normalidad” de un capitalismo depredador y tecnocrático, reclaman otra vez sus espacios ante la destrucción provocada por un fenómeno natural (el huracán) cuya fuerza ha sido probablemente intensificada por el cambio climático que han instigado los seres humanos. Así leemos:

Ya regresan los colibríes a libar las flores
del roble que quedaron abiertas
después de la tormenta.
Ya regresaron las reinitas y los zorzales,
las libélulas.
Las abejas y moscas regresan también.
Regresan las ratas,
suben por los escombros y los cables caídos. (73)

El poema no jerarquiza animales generalmente apreciados por los seres humanos (colibríes, reinitas, abejas) sobre animales despreciados (moscas, ratas). Este universo no humano no responde a categorías antropocéntricas: responde a ciclos evolutivos en los que cada agente ocupa un nicho particular siempre conectado con la totalidad circundante.⁵ Dadas la alienación y arrogancia de los seres humanos con respecto a este entorno del que inevitablemente

forman parte, no es sorprendente encontrar en el poemario estas palabras, con las que el huracán personificado apostrofa a la voz poética:

Tú querías esta destrucción.
La estabas esperando.
Lloras y ríes ante la Isla caída,
te alegras de que todo se derrumbe
herido ante tus manos. (72)

Este duro pasaje no ha de leerse como una celebración de la destrucción causada por el huracán, sino más bien como una constatación de que el “progreso” industrial y urbano que el huracán ha interrumpido era (y sigue siendo) insostenible a largo plazo. En el caso concreto de Puerto Rico, ese desarrollo ha estado basado en una situación de dependencia colonial que ha generado grandes ganancias para unos pocos mientras excluye a muchos del acceso pleno a oportunidades de todo tipo, a la vez que les ha privado sistemáticamente de medios más tradicionales de subsistencia.⁶ A un nivel más amplio, pero también particularmente grave en Puerto Rico, se ha tratado de un desarrollo que explota a la naturaleza como un recurso desechable, a la vez que crea zonas de sacrificio en las que las poblaciones más vulnerables son víctimas recurrentes de injusticias ambientales.⁷

Las manos sucias

En la historia e imaginario del Caribe, los huracanes han ocupado un lugar importante durante siglos, tanto en un rol metafórico inspirado por la sobrecogedora intensidad de su fuerza, como en su impacto literal y frecuentemente destructivo en las sociedades y economías de la región a lo largo de los siglos. Un recorrido histórico-cultural podría remontarse a los orígenes de la palabra misma en la deidad *Juracán* de la religión taína, para luego detenerse en *La tempestad* de Shakespeare, que se ha convertido en la alegoría más conocida de las dinámicas coloniales que han dominado el Caribe, pasando por importantes figuras como el cubano José María Heredia (“A una tempestad”) y el puertorriqueño Luis Palés Matos (la “ráfaga de huracán” de su “Plena del menéalo”), y muchos otros incluyendo a Santos-Febres en *Huracanada*.⁸

Ahora bien, desde una perspectiva ecocrítica, el análisis de la representación de los efectos del huracán María en el texto de Santos-Febres requiere algunas observaciones sobre el rol que la ciencia contemporánea atribuye a las acciones de los seres humanos en la intensificación de esos fenómenos naturales. En este contexto, un problema importante es el de los llamados “gases de efecto invernadero”, definidos como “el componente gaseoso de la atmósfera...que absorbe eficazmente la radiación infrarroja emitida por la superficie de la Tierra, por la propia atmósfera y por las nubes” (Méndez Tejeda 127-28), impidiendo así se libere el calor producido por la radiación solar en el planeta, y provocando como

consecuencia una elevación en la temperatura del mismo. Aunque varios de estos gases son de origen natural, algunos han sido generados en cantidades exorbitantes por las actividades de los seres humanos a partir de la revolución industrial, particularmente el dióxido de carbono producido por el uso de combustibles fósiles. Se estima que el aumento global en la temperatura del planeta en los últimos 100 años ha sido superior al aumento en los últimos 2,000 años (Méndez Tejeda 127). Esto se refleja en la temperatura de los océanos, pues se estima que los mismos han absorbido veinte veces más calor que la atmósfera durante el último medio siglo (Méndez Tejeda 190). Y el calor acumulado en los océanos funciona como "combustible" en la formación de huracanes más intensos: el aire caliente en la atmósfera absorbe más humedad, y los océanos liberan cada vez más calor—esta combinación no produce necesariamente más huracanes, pero sí genera huracanes más destructivos.⁹

Estos factores ambientales, así como el contexto histórico-social previo al huracán María sobre el que reflexiona la voz poética en el poema "Deudas" anteriormente comentado, ponen de relieve ciertas paradojas, e incluso contradicciones, en la respuesta al huracán que el poemario representa y, en gran medida, celebra. Como indicaré más adelante, esas paradojas son hasta cierto punto inevitables, y pueden ser encapsuladas en una imagen que predomina en esta sección del libro: la de las "manos sucias". Es importante, por lo tanto, examinar algunas de las implicaciones de esa imagen.

Al representar su lucha para sobrevivir tras el huracán, así como la lucha de muchos de sus compatriotas, la voz poética recalca su proveniencia de la clase humilde y trabajadora,

heredera de tablas y techos de zinc,
de gente que con sus manos sucias
levantó
el primer cemento.
El bloque y la sangre se entremezclaron,
la arena y los vientos del mar,
la sal y el azufre,
la clorofila y el escombros se entremezclaron,
para levantar y destruir. (58)

En esta alusión a las casas de madera y zinc que por mucho tiempo caracterizaron las barriadas de gente pobre en todo el Caribe, y que en Puerto Rico gradualmente dieron paso al cemento, nótese que el poema presenta el trabajo de estas personas trabajadoras "con sus manos sucias" como en armonía con los elementos del mundo natural. En la representación poética de la edificación del "primer cemento", confluyen la imágenes del bloque, la sangre, la arena, los vientos, y otros elementos, fundiéndose así lo humano y el entorno natural. Podría cuestionarse si este lirismo se justifica o no, dado que el "primer cemento" que el poema celebra dará paso a un proceso de urbanización masiva que a lo largo del siglo 20 tendrá un

impacto destructivo en la naturaleza y el medio ambiente de la isla. Justificables o no, en sus imágenes el poema sugiere que, como la naturaleza misma, la clase trabajadora levanta, y tiene la capacidad de destruir si así lo desea.

Por contraste, inmediatamente después se nos advierte que

Lo otro es el poder, que es un juego muy sucio.
Quien se acerca al poder
no tiene de otra más que negociar
y debe permanecer luchando una batalla sin fin.
Juicios, abogados, títulos de propiedad, papeleo,
seguros, repartición de bienes, custodia,
requisiciones, bancarrotas, cotizaciones, contratos,
adquisiciones, fraudes, impuestos,
desviaciones de fondos,
y otra vez a levantar cemento.
Sin embargo, el cemento,
el vidrio, los metales,
son frágiles ante el viento. (58)

En estos versos, lo "sucio" (por contraste a las "manos sucias" anteriormente celebradas) alude a la corrupción del poder, y la larga lista de acciones y personajes legales evoca la corrupción gubernamental que agravó el endeudamiento de la isla en la últimas décadas. Aquí, la actividad humana corrompida por la sed de poder se presenta en tensión y contraste con las fuerzas naturales, a las que no pueden oponerse ("frágiles ante el viento").¹⁰

Es en este punto, sin embargo, que una perspectiva ecocrítica nos invita a proceder con más cautela. Cuando se trata del impacto humano en el medio ambiente, ¿es realmente tan simple distinguir entre las actividades instigadas por las intenciones corruptas de los poderosos y las acciones constructivas de los trabajadores, si en ambos casos el resultado es la creación de junglas de cemento que paulatinamente devoran los espacios y recursos naturales que les circundan? Si nos circunscribimos a la esfera de los seres humanos, es indudablemente legítimo y necesario distinguir entre quien trabaja para sobrevivir y quien invierte capital para lucrarse a expensas de su entorno, incluyendo tanto la naturaleza como los trabajadores mismos. Pero la naturaleza, como vemos en estos días ante países pobres que justamente piden su derecho a "desarrollarse" como los países ricos ya lo han hecho, no distingue entre, digamos, emisiones de carbón generadas por los opresores y las generadas por los oprimidos.¹¹ Como indica el poema, quien se acerca (o accede) al poder, así sea para sobrevivir, "no tiene de otra más que negociar", lo cual implica que incluso la gente trabajadora con "manos sucias" de tierra y trabajo se ve en la necesidad de ensuciarse las manos en el sentido que podríamos llamar "sartreano".

La frase "las manos sucias" fue popularizada por el escritor y filósofo francés Jean Paul Sartre en su obra teatral titulada, precisamente, *Las manos sucias* (1948). En este clásico de la literatura existencialista, presenciamos el dilema de Hugo, joven burgués que

desea incorporarse a la lucha revolucionaria comunista. El partido lo recluta para asesinar a Hoederer, miembro del partido a quien se acusa de traición por su deseo de colaborar con otros grupos políticos más moderados. Al conocer a Hoederer, Hugo es seducido por la fuerza de su personalidad y la pasión de su deseo de alcanzar el poder para estar en posición de ayudar a los seres humanos de carne y hueso, en lugar de guiar sus acciones exclusivamente por la pureza ideológica abstracta de los dogmas del partido. Hoederer intenta convencer a Hugo de que toda acción en el mundo real—particularmente la acción política—implica ensuciarse las manos; es decir, hacer compromisos, renunciar a lo ideal, e incluso transgredir la moral si es necesario, para lograr lo posible, no lo perfecto. Hugo finalmente mata a Hoederer cuando lo sorprende besando a su esposa Jessica, con lo cual no queda claro por qué lo mata: lealtad a las directrices del partido, o celos.²²

Ahora bien, como hemos visto, *Huracanada* distingue entre el “juego muy sucio” del “poder” (58), y las manos sucias “de tierra y de sudor” (51) de los trabajadores. Lo que intento indicar aquí es que, desde la perspectiva del impacto de las acciones humanas en la naturaleza, mucho de lo que estos poemas representan son “manos sucias” en el sentido sartreano. Es decir, manos cuyos esfuerzos para reconstruir la isla pueden ser celebrados en el contexto del sufrimiento humano que el huracán ha traído a sus habitantes, pero cuyas acciones intentan reconstruir un mundo alienado de la naturaleza y dependiente de insostenibles emisiones de carbón que garantizan la intensificación de fenómenos como el huracán María.

Un motivo que se repite en el texto es el de “levantar lo caído” (54; 62). ¿Todo lo caído? Como hemos visto anteriormente en el poema “Deudas”, mucho de lo caído se había levantado a través de un proyecto desarrollista en el que “dimos la Tierra como colateral / como si fuera nuestra” (50). La fragilidad de ese proyecto (“el cemento / el vidrio, los metales / son frágiles ante el viento” [58]) y la manera en que, no obstante, se ha hecho prácticamente indispensable para la sobrevivencia de los puertorriqueños, se expresa a través de múltiples detalles pequeños, pero elocuentes, en los poemas.

Por ejemplo, el texto alude al desamparo de toda la isla cuando comenta “estamos sin agua y sin luz” (57). Las palabras “luz” y “agua” evocan fuerzas naturales elementales y absolutamente necesarias para la vida humana y no-humana en el planeta. Pero el poema no alude a esas fuerzas elementales, que Puerto Rico como isla tropical posee en abundancia, sino a la interrupción del servicio eléctrico tras el impacto de la tormenta.²³ Y en efecto, la isla pasó meses con la infraestructura que provee servicio eléctrico destruida, infraestructura que también es necesaria para la transmisión del agua potable. Dado que la isla no produce petróleo, esto significa que está inserta en, y absolutamente dependiente de, un mercado global de combustibles fósiles que explota la tierra sin gran preocupación por los riesgos de contaminación ambiental y se lucra de algunas de las regiones más pobres del planeta. Naturalmente, aunque el petróleo fuera producido en la isla, su combustión genera

gases de efecto invernadero que contribuyen a la intensificación de fenómenos como el huracán María. Eso es lo que significa estar “sin agua” y “sin luz”, así como la mención de la necesidad de “buscar gasolina” (55) y la realidad de que “acunados por el ronroneo de plantas eléctricas / duermen algunos” (65).

Es importante recalcar que la dependencia de combustibles fósiles, tanto en Puerto Rico como en gran parte del mundo, es una realidad que plantea serios problemas éticos que no pueden soslayarse apelando a alguna forma de purismo ambientalista, incluso si se asume la perspectiva de una ecología profunda que radicalmente cuestiona el antropocentrismo que aboga por la supremacía de los seres humanos sobre el resto de la naturaleza y sus seres.²⁴ Por ejemplo, el poemario celebra a “aquellos que treparon altas torres / para llevar luz a los enfermos”. Una vez más, “luz” es electricidad, lo cual implica todo lo indicado anteriormente, pero también representa la preservación de vidas humanas. Cuando la voz poética comenta “hoy, al fin, tengo señal/ entra una llamada apenas”, ignora momentáneamente que la producción de teléfonos celulares depende de la minería de metales raros como el coltán a través de la explotación de poblaciones vulnerables en África, pero reconoce la capacidad de tales medios contemporáneos de comunicación para restablecer lazos de comunidad, solidaridad, e incluso para salvar vidas.²⁵ Algo similar se puede apreciar en la repetición de la necesidad de destapar alcantarillas “para que fluyan las aguas / que se salieron de su cauce” (51; 62): es, evidentemente, el cauce natural de las aguas el que ha sido interrumpido por una urbanización descontrolada y mal planificada, y no al revés. Sin embargo, una vez más, el poema alude al imperativo de restaurar un orden que, aunque letal e insostenible a largo plazo (e intermitentemente incluso a corto plazo), resulta esencial en el presente inmediato para la sobrevivencia de gran número de personas, particularmente las más vulnerables. En todas estas tareas y decisiones, se impone la incómoda paradoja sartreana de las manos sucias: hacer compromisos con un sistema insostenible y en última instancia inmoral, para preservar vidas cuya existencia se ha hecho, a lo largo de las décadas, totalmente dependiente de ese sistema.

La pregunta que el texto implícitamente plantea es, ¿qué tipo de estructuras sociales, económicas y ambientales establecer después que las actuales estructuras se ven interrumpidas de manera que revela trágicamente su bancarrota moral y ecológica? Aun sin negar la necesidad de atender al sufrimiento humano inmediato, ¿se reconoce la naturaleza insostenible de la comodidad que hasta ese momento muchos daban por sentada? Por una parte, *Huracanada* en algunos momentos cede al triunfalismo antropocéntrico:

Mi país es grande, inmenso y huracanado.
Furia contra furia, maña contra maña.
le ganamos a los vientos.
Le estamos ganando. (65)

En estos versos, la *metaforización* del huracán como símbolo de la energía del pueblo encubre la lección del huracán *real*: que el ser humano no puede sosteniblemente existir *contra* la naturaleza, de la cual forma parte, ya sea a través de la manipulación (maña) o la violencia (fuerza). La victoria es breve, frecuentemente falaz, y en última instancia, alienante.

Por otra parte, poco después de esos versos encontramos los siguientes:

Ya vendrán los días los días en que de nuevo,
adormecidos,
caeremos en la ruta complaciente,
eso temo. (65)

En este momento de lucidez, la voz poética reconoce el riesgo inherente en la crisis provocada por fuerzas naturales exacerbadas por los excesos del capitalismo tecnológico-industrial—que el deseo de aliviar el sufrimiento se confunda con la tendencia a regresar a la complacencia que se asocia con la “normalidad”. Aunque reconoce el riesgo, la voz poética indica que “mientras dure este corto momento / que muchos presentimos que se aproximaba, / veo salir el sol y saludo a mi pueblo” (65). El gesto es comprensible, pero problemático: precisamente la brevedad del momento invita a la crítica de las condiciones que lo han hecho posible, particularmente si se reconoce de antemano que también es posible “presentir” la aproximación renovada de la complacencia. Notemos, una vez más, el gesto sintomático de metaforizar la naturaleza para privilegiar lo humano al margen de la misma: la voz poética ve “salir el sol”, un sol símbolo de futuro y renovado comienzo, mientras la radiación del sol real no puede ya escapar del planeta a causa del efecto invernadero, lo cual intensifica huracanes como María.

Todo lo anterior no implica, como ya he indicado, que no sea válido dar prioridad a la preservación de vidas humanas durante una crisis como el huracán María, o que no se deban celebrar los innumerables actos heroicos llevados a cabo con ese propósito. Se trata, no obstante, de no perder de vista las circunstancias sistémicas que, ignoradas, harán inevitable que la crisis se repita, con más intensidad aún. La voz poética comenta,

Pan.
¿Habrá pan?
Quiero pan con mantequilla,
alimentos frescos de todo tipo.
Quiero agarrar
con las manos sucias
una tibia hogaza de pan. (74)

Aquí, las manos sucias pueden referirse a manos que, tras la jornada de trabajo, acceden a los alimentos que son derecho inalienable de todo ser vivo. Pueden ser, también, manos sucias en el sentido sartreano, que reconocen que un trozo de pan con mantequilla,

en el mundo contemporáneo, frecuentemente implica sistemas de agricultura y ganadería totalmente mecanizados, llenos de pesticidas y de crueldad hacia los animales, sostenido por sistemas de manufactura, distribución y consumo en los cuales el lucro desmedido toma prioridad sobre el bienestar de la naturaleza y de los mismos seres humanos.

El poema final de la colección incluye una celebración del poder de la palabra, de la cual puede provenir

la cura,
la hendidura
de la cual renace un pliegue
en el espacio y en el tiempo
para que algo nuevo nazca.
La palabra narra el milagro
que aparece. (79)

En cierto modo, es apropiado que el poemario concluya con esta evocación del poder de la palabra para hacer “que algo nuevo nazca”. Pues ante la crisis social, económica, y ecológica de la cual el huracán María es solamente un síntoma, es vital una nueva narrativa, una nueva visión que reconecte a los seres humanos al entorno natural en el que existen y del que dependen para sobrevivir. Un riesgo, en momentos de crisis, es la idealización de la “normalidad” que precedió—y en gran medida provocó—la catástrofe. En Puerto Rico, como en el resto del planeta, cada vez más voces intentan ofrecer modelos alternativos de subsistencia y comunidad. Podemos pensar en el proyecto de autogestión comunitaria y activismo ambientalista *Casa Pueblo* en Adjuntas; en los múltiples proyectos para utilizar energía solar en la isla; granjas de agricultura ecológica como la Organización Boricuá; proyectos para construir viviendas sostenibles como Earthship PR; y los numerosos grupos que ofrecen educación sobre sustentabilidad, como Plenitud PR.¹⁶

Huracanada elocuentemente articula las aspiraciones, tensiones y conflictos que un fenómeno como el huracán María pone de relieve. El libro apunta a cómo los inevitables compromisos con lo urgente no deben hacernos olvidar el insoslayable compromiso con transformaciones sustanciales a largo plazo. Cuando la voz poética comenta,

¿Qué debemos hacer
sino mirarnos las manos sucias,
limpiárnoslas nuevamente
y luego
salir a buscar
una hogaza de pan? (75)

una incómoda pero inevitable doble estrategia es expuesta. Por un lado, vemos el reconocimiento de que—como casi toda acción concreta en el mundo contemporáneo, en el cual incluso nuestras

necesidades más básicas son satisfechas y controladas por sistema global tecnológico-industrial con fines de lucro cuyo mismo funcionamiento implica un ecocidio paulatino e incesante—la búsqueda de esa hogaza de pan siempre conlleva compromisos, imperfecciones, ensuciarse las manos. Por otra parte, se presenta el compromiso incesante con limpiarse las manos nuevamente: formular y poner en acción una visión que *aspire* a romper radicalmente con el *status quo*, con una manera de conceptualizar

la relación entre seres humanos y la naturaleza que se ha revelado, cada vez con más violencia, como absolutamente insostenible. Desde esa perspectiva, *Huracana* es una invitación a re-imaginar y a transformar el paradigma del desarrollismo tecnológico-industrial que domina globalmente, y a sustituirlo por modelos sostenibles de subsistencia y comunidad. Se trata, entonces, como indica la poeta misma en una entrevista sobre el poemario, de “unir esfuerzos para crear otra versión del país” (Díaz).

NOTES

¹ Para tres sólidas introducciones a la teoría ecocrítica, véanse Buell; Clark; y Garrard.

² Para una exploración de los efectos de la industrialización de la isla durante la “Operación Manos a la Obra” en el contexto histórico anterior y posterior a la misma, véase Picó; y Ayala y Bernabé. Para estudios más específicos sobre el impacto de esa transformación en la naturaleza y la agricultura puertorriqueñas, véase Nazario Velasco; y Alvarez Febles. Para un estudio de cómo esa transformación afectó la producción cultural en Puerto Rico, véase Esterrich.

³ Desde una perspectiva ecocrítica, el tropo de la personificación incurre en el riesgo de un antropomorfismo que explícita o implícitamente encubre el antropocentrismo, es decir, la voluntad de subsumir la otredad de otros seres naturales (plantas, animales) bajo la primacía de una perspectiva que sólo puede concebir el mundo en base a los intereses de los seres humanos. Para posibles pros y contras de esta estrategia, véanse las secciones sobre antropomorfismo en Clark; y en Garrard.

⁴ El acercamiento de Santos-Febres a la naturaleza también podría entenderse como una crítica ecofeminista al dualismo cartesiano y científicista que durante la modernidad ha dominado la relación entre seres humanos y naturaleza. Véase Merchant.

⁵ Podría observarse algo similar con respecto a la “recuperación” de espacios por parte de animales silvestres durante la cuarentena global provocada por el impacto del coronavirus en la primavera y verano del 2020. Véase Goldman.

⁶ Véase Alvarez Febles. Los efectos del desarrollo económico e industrial de Puerto Rico a lo largo del siglo 20 tienen paralelos en otras regiones subordinadas al modelo desarrollista de la globalización neoliberal que domina el planeta desde las últimas décadas del siglo pasado. Para el efecto de esas políticas en las poblaciones más vulnerables en países pobres (e incluso en las poblaciones más pobres de países “desarrollados”), véase Stiglitz. Un ilustrativo ejemplo del impacto de la globalización capitalista es el caso de México, donde modelos tradicionales de agricultura y soberanía alimentaria se han visto gravemente fracturados desde la creación del Tratado de Libre Comercio en 1994; véase Gálvez.

⁷ Véase Atilés-Osoria, así como el informe *Justicia ambiental, desigualdad y pobreza en Puerto Rico* preparado por el Instituto Caribeño de Derechos Humanos y Clínica Internacional de Derechos Humanos de la Facultad de Derecho de la Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico

⁸ Para un excelente recorrido histórico del impacto de los huracanes en el Caribe, véase Schwartz.

⁹ Para información científica más detallada sobre la relación entre el cambio climático y los huracanes, véase el sitio de internet de *Union of Concerned Scientists*: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/hurricanes-and-climate-change>.

¹⁰ Para una interesante evaluación del rol de la corrupción gubernamental en la crisis económica de Puerto Rico (en contraste con las causas estrictamente estructurales de dicha crisis), véase Morales.

¹¹ El tema del “derecho” de países pobres a “desarrollarse” siguiendo modelos similares a los de los países industrializados de Europa occidental y Estados Unidos ha generado numerosos debates entre pensadores ambientales y ecologistas. Para un recorrido panorámico de varios de los elementos del debate, véase Wenz. Véase también DeLoughrey & Handley; Sessions, ed.; y Leff.

¹² Para una visión panorámica de cómo el “problema de las manos sucias” ha sido conceptualizado en las ciencias políticas, véase Restrepo.

¹³ La abundancia del agua potable como recurso necesario para la existencia humana es algo que se ha visto en peligro en Puerto Rico (por ejemplo, durante sequías prolongadas) desde mucho antes del huracán María, por causas que pueden relacionarse al calentamiento global antropogénico. Véase el informe *Justicia ambiental, desigualdad y pobreza en Puerto Rico*.

¹⁴ Para una exploración de los postulados de la ecología profunda y el peligro, frecuentemente exagerado por sus críticos, de que incurra en posiciones misantrópicas, véase Sessions, ed.; y también Bradford.

¹⁵ Véase McIntosh y Pontius para una descripción del impacto ambiental de la manufactura de teléfonos celulares y otros artefactos electrónicos, así como de su destino más común (*ciberbasura* o basura electrónica) una vez son desechados como obsoletos. Una representación dramática del impacto de la producción de teléfonos celulares que ha alcanzado gran difusión es el poema “El celular”, del nicaragüense Ernesto Cardenal.

¹⁶ Para más detalles sobre el importante trabajo de estos grupos y organizaciones, consúltense sus sitios de internet o sus páginas en Facebook, que frecuentemente tienen enlaces con otros grupos similares. Para una descripción más detallada sobre el contexto económico, cultural, y ambiental en que algunas de estas iniciativas han surgido, y los retos que confrontan, véase Massol González; Klein; y Moody.

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Un antihéroe en el exilio. Dialogismo, carnavalización y parodia en *Cobro revertido* de José Leandro Urbina.

Francisco Brignole
University of North Carolina Wilmington

RESUMEN: Este artículo discute la novela *Cobro revertido*, publicada en 1992 por el escritor chileno José Leandro Urbina. Siguiendo teorizaciones de Mikhail Bakhtin y Carlos Alberto Brocato, examino cómo, desde los propios discursos literarios, se arroja una mirada reflexiva, autoconsciente y escéptica en torno al proceso de mitificación que evidencia el discurso del exilio político en Latinoamérica. Propongo que la contribución principal de esta ficción tiene que ver con su audaz intervención en el seno de una tradición literaria que a principios de los noventa ya evidenciaba señas de saturación y desgaste. Carnavalizando estereotipadas representaciones en las que lo político-testimonial y los presuntos deberes del exiliado invaden la diégesis, la novela de Urbina marca un punto de inflexión, revitalizando la poética del exilio y anunciando nuevos rumbos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Postdictadura; Cono Sur; Exilio; Chile; Canadá; Novela

La novela *Cobro revertido*, publicada en 1992, presenta la vida de un exiliado político chileno en Canadá, después del golpe de estado que acabó con la vida de Salvador Allende en 1973. Como si se tratase de una tragedia griega, los eventos principales de este relato transcurren en la ciudad de Montreal durante tan solo un día de julio de 1979. Este es un momento delicado en el que la represión política alcanza un nuevo auge en Chile, puesto que el oficialismo intentaba allanar el camino a una victoria de Pinochet en el cuestionado plebiscito de 1980.¹ La represión en el país andino había sido tal que, ya para finales de los setenta, cerca de 200.000 chilenos habían sido forzados o escogieron vivir en el extranjero (Wright y Oñate ix). Entre ellos se encuentra “el sociólogo”, apodo con el que se identifica al peculiar protagonista, quien al inicio de la novela recibe un inesperado llamado telefónico desde Chile en el que se le comunica que su madre acaba de fallecer. Visiblemente perturbado, les promete a sus familiares y amigos que regresará a su país después de seis años de exilio ininterrumpido para participar del sepelio. En veinticuatro alocadas horas, deambulará inebriado por las calles de Montreal con sus amigos del exilio, se enredará en medio del carnaval *Caribfête* y finalmente encontrará su propia muerte, en azarasas circunstancias.

El inusual recuento de las vivencias de este exiliado tiene su correlato en la vida del propio autor. Nacido en Santiago en 1949, Urbina cursó estudios de Literatura en la Universidad de Chile hasta que decidió exiliarse en 1974, primero en Argentina, donde escribe su conocida colección de cuentos *Las malas juntas* (1978), y luego en Ottawa, donde todavía reside.² Pertenece a una generación de escritores chilenos emigrados a Canadá poco después de la cruenta represión propulsada por Augusto Pinochet desde el recordado ataque a la Moneda. Entre los autores chilenos que se establecieron

en suelo canadiense en la década del setenta se destacan también Jorge Etcheverry, Carmen Rodríguez, Jorge Fajardo y Hernán Barrios, pero Urbina y Etcheverry son los que más han profundizado en el tema del exilio en su producción literaria. Escribiendo desde un lugar excéntrico como Canadá, se asientan en una larga tradición literaria chilena sobre el destierro, siguiendo los pasos de autores canónicos como José Donoso, Isabel Allende, Antonio Skármeta, Carlos Cerda o Ariel Dorfman, por nombrar solo a algunos.

El primer corpus de testimonios y ficciones sobre la represión militar en Chile fue publicado en distintos puntos de la geografía mundial, predominando, como apunta María Teresa Johanson, el prurito testimonial y de denuncia (219). Este tipo de narrativa comprometida de los años setenta fue posible gracias a la distancia física que separaba a estos escritores de la censura gubernamental. Mientras que los autores que permanecieron en Chile dejaron de escribir o se vieron forzados a hacerlo en clave alegórica, como Diamela Eltit, el escritor chileno exiliado pudo trabajar, en palabras de Skármeta, “en un espacio de exacerbada libertad”, a tal punto que expresó “las cosas por su nombre, y cuando optó por las metáforas y parábolas, éstas eran fácilmente desentrañables” (34). A partir de los ochenta, predominan, en cambio, narrativas que ya no se ocupan tanto de las violaciones a los derechos humanos en Chile, sino de representar las vicisitudes de la vida en el exilio y de esbozar un conjunto de identidades en proceso de transformación.

En sendos trabajos sobre autores latinoamericanos en Canadá, Brigit Mertz-Baumgartner, Naim Nomez y Elena Palmero González afirman que la gran mayoría de los textos bajo su estudio presenta a sujetos desorientados, incapaces de tender puentes y hacer pie en sociedades muy disímiles. Norman Cheadle, Amy Kaminsky, Stephen Henighan, Grínor Rojo y Patrick O’Connell llegan a

conclusiones similares, pero lo hacen específicamente en torno a la novela de Urbina, a la que abordan desde lineamientos teóricos como la transculturación, los estudios de género, el psicoanálisis y la memoria. Un tanto paradójicamente, quizás, citan causas disímiles para explicar la presunta muerte literaria del protagonista: su supuesta aculturación a través del contacto con mujeres extranjeras (Kaminsky 55), su estancamiento y desintegración por no poder asimilarse a la sociedad canadiense (Cheadle 295, Rojo 114, Henighan 291), y sus dificultades para reconciliar los traumas del pasado con su presente (O'Connell 54-55).

Luis Torres y Roberto Castillo Sandoval, por su parte, llevan a cabo lecturas discordantes de *Cobro revertido*. Al igual que Kaminsky en su libro *After Exile*, Torres rechaza los usos metafóricos del exilio y utiliza la novela como un ejemplo paradigmático del exilio político tradicional, aquel asociado con las nociones de trauma, dolor, pérdida, nostalgia y desesperanza (182). Su lectura parece un tanto desacertada, sin embargo, puesto que, lejos de exaltar con solemnidad lugares comunes de la narrativa del exilio, *Cobro revertido*, como bien señala Castillo Sandoval, "podría leerse como una denuncia de ciertos modos estereotípicos de representar la realidad humana del destierro" (164). En lo que sigue de este ensayo, profundizo en la línea crítica abierta por Castillo Sandoval, reconociendo que la novela de Urbina está cargada de significados que van mucho más allá de todo aquello relacionado con el exilio tradicional o las cuestiones de asimilación o no del protagonista en la sociedad canadiense.

Propongo, de hecho, que en este complejo relato de corte bajtiniano, el "sociólogo" emerge como un antihéroe que contrasta marcadamente con la figura tantas veces exaltada del exiliado político. Lejos de ser ensalzado a través de una retórica grandilocuente, ni siquiera se nos proporciona su nombre. Se esbozan, en cambio, los contornos de un personaje menor, un intelectual frustrado que poco a poco acreditará su dudoso compromiso político, patriótico y familiar. Los años de exilio, la muerte de su madre y las vastas cantidades de alcohol ingerido se combinan además en un *cocktail* ideal que le confiere cierta lucidez al protagonista. Poco a poco, a medida que avanza el día y aprendemos detalles de su pasado, se pone de manifiesto un discurso original y disidente que, siguiendo a Bakhtin, "carnivaliza" estereotipadas representaciones del exilio en las que lo político-testimonial y los presuntos deberes del exiliado invaden la diégesis. Interactuando dialógicamente con un variopinto grupo de personajes, el sociólogo y sus interlocutores añaden nuevas perspectivas en torno al destierro. No solo revisan su pasado personal y nacional bajo un prisma escéptico, sino que también se ocupan de identificar los excesos retóricos de algunos exiliados que, independientemente de su militancia o no, actúan por momentos como si fueran los protagonistas de una gesta épica.

La carnavalización de la poética del exilio tradicional

Carlos Alberto Brocato ha señalado que una politización desmedida del exilio puede generar una serie de distorsiones problemáticas y construcciones "míticas" (96). Entre ellas cita la llamativa tendencia a comparar el exilio con la cárcel o la muerte, la errónea suposición de que el exilio es un espacio poblado de personalidades notables y la noción de que solo los exiliados preservan la esencia cultural del país de origen "usurpado". Añade a estos malentendidos el supuesto, también infundado, de que todo exiliado político puso en riesgo su vida por la causa revolucionaria, así como la exageración de la presumida heroicidad del exiliado y la frecuente exaltación de su sufrimiento (77-171). Este tipo de distorsiones, propias de los discursos públicos, se perciben hasta nuestros días, pero aparecen también predominantemente en la producción cultural surgida durante o poco tiempo después de las últimas dictaduras latinoamericanas. Dada la inmediatez de la cruenta represión estatal, el inevitable trauma y la experiencia de exilio, muchas ficciones testimoniales reinciden con frecuencia en la mitificación de la idea de patria, en la insistencia autoral sobre la necesidad de regresar al origen y, por último, en la adopción de perspectivas maniqueas que tienden a soslayar o minimizar las corresponsabilidades propias de los conflictos ideológicos.

Considerando estas tendencias, sugiero que la contribución principal de *Cobro revertido* en las letras latinoamericanas no tiene que ver con la problemática de la inserción o no de su protagonista en tierras canadienses, sino con el lugar que ocupa la novela al intervenir de manera audaz en el seno de una tradición del exilio que ya a principios de los noventa evidenciaba señas de saturación y desgaste. No es el autor chileno el primero en recorrer este camino en el contexto de las postdictaduras latinoamericanas. Con el título "Cobro revertido", de hecho, Urbina rinde un pequeño homenaje a José Donoso, quien anteriormente abordara la experiencia del exilio chileno desde una perspectiva autoconsciente y crítica en *El jardín de al lado* (1981). En la novela de Donoso también se alude a la muerte de la madre del protagonista exiliado, cuya esposa atiende el teléfono en Europa, diciendo: "—Chile, ...dice, —Cobro revertido. Qué cosa más rara, ¿no?" (172). Se trata de un merecido tributo al reconocido integrante del Boom ya que, con su particular mirada crítica, Donoso comienza a demarcar un nuevo rumbo en la poética del exilio. Pero es sin duda Urbina quien llevará esta nueva corriente a su punto culminante, reencauzando distorsiones, derrumbando mitos y despojando a la narrativa del exilio de su acostumbrada solemnidad.³

El autor logra su cometido siguiendo de cerca las premisas de la novela dialógica, que tiende a "carnivalizar" discursos y tradiciones genéricas establecidas. Como postula Bakhtin, el debilitamiento o destrucción del orden monológico tiene lugar solo cuando entran en contacto una pluralidad de voces en torno a un mismo objeto referencial (189). En *Cobro revertido*, el referente subyacente tiene que ver con un amplio conjunto de ideas sobre el

exilio y el compromiso político, algunas de las cuales parecen haber sedimentado en presuntas verdades inobjektas.⁴

Para poner en diálogo una pluralidad de perspectivas sobre este tema, Urbina maneja el tiempo y el espacio narrativo de manera deliberadamente *bajtiniana*. Lo hace concentrando la trama principal de la novela en un espacio limitado (la ciudad de Montreal) y en tan solo un solo día de 1980. Estos sucesos—y muchos otros recuerdos de la vida en Chile antes del exilio—son evocados por dos voces narrativas que emanan del “sociólogo”, quien pareciera enunciar su discurso en dos momentos y estados mentales distintos. Narra los eventos alocados transcurridos durante ese día en Montreal con mesura, en una tercera persona que recoge al paso una pluralidad de voces. Dichos pasajes, empero, son frecuentemente interrumpidos por diversos monólogos del sociólogo sobre su vida en Chile y los primeros años en Canadá, todos estos en primera persona y de fuerte carga emotiva. Esta escisión o desdoblamiento del protagonista exiliado forma parte de un discurso de doble voz que permea la novela entera y que también puede notarse en los extensos diálogos que la pueblan. Tal y como hace el sociólogo, otros diversos interlocutores también harán escuchar sus perspectivas a lo largo del relato, confirmando, matizando o rechazando distorsiones y construcciones míticas en torno al exilio como las enumeradas por Brocato.

Asimismo, como he sugerido, la novela de Urbina prescinde del tono solemne que tradicionalmente ha caracterizado a los relatos del destierro. Lo hace subvirtiendo esta tradición mediante un contradiscurso escéptico que se vale de la parodia y una serie de situaciones tragicómicas. Añade en las calles de Montreal, como para no dejar lugar a dudas de la influencia bajtiniana, la presencia explícita del carnaval caribeño de *Caribfête*. Con esta transposición del carnaval al mundo diegético, el sociólogo y sus amigos, arrastrados por el torbellino humano, habitarán un mundo en que todas las reglas y jerarquías permanecerán en suspenso. Como propusiera el crítico soviético, al igual que en la ancestral celebración, en los géneros literarios carnavalizados:

All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchichal worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, welds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid. (Bakhtin 123)

El autor establece así, en *Cobro revertido*, un espacio diegético privilegiado en el que una comparsa de personajes menores cuestiona o relativiza todos aquellos planteos solemnes, unívocos o dogmáticos proferidos por algunos individuos que, como veremos, se autoconstruyen de manera oportunista como exiliados notables.

Un doble paródico en las calles de Montreal

Queda claro desde el comienzo de la novela que el sociólogo no conforma con el molde del exiliado ilustre al que aluden Ángel Rama y Julio Cortázar en sendos ensayos, destacando su importancia en la preservación de la esencia cultural de la nación (341, 12). De hecho, conocemos al doble paródico de esta tradicional figura durante una alborotada mañana de julio de 1979, mientras intenta en vano abrir la puerta de su propio departamento. Se muestra incapaz de hacerlo, por estar todavía borracho y por la puntada de un puñetazo recibido en las costillas, luego de haber ofendido a la esposa de un amigo en una fiesta que se había extendido hasta la madrugada. Le abre la puerta su compañero de departamento, un portugués de familia exiliada llamado Joao, quien le da otro golpe al informarle sobre el inusual llamado del padre desde Chile, que solo auguraba malas noticias. Poco antes de caer desmayado “en una ola de sueño violento e incontrolable” en el sillón de la sala, el sociólogo tiene la certeza de que “su madre había muerto” (10), materializándose así uno de los miedos más grandes con los que convive todo exiliado: el fallecimiento de la madre o del padre (Castillo Sandoval 161).⁵

Después de un extraño sueño en el que empieza a delinear los contornos de su progenitora, el exiliado chileno despierta como producto de un incontenible vómito que lo desprestigia un tanto más como figura, a la vez que lo sume en un estado de indefensión pueril. A medida que el sociólogo revela partes de su pasado, se vislumbra que para él la figura de la madre está cargada de un complejo contenido simbólico. Pensando en la asociación implícita entre madre y patria que recorre la novela de Urbina, Henighan y O’Connell observan que la muerte de la progenitora representa una ruptura definitiva del protagonista exiliado con su país de origen (290, 43). Esta equiparación casi automática entre madre y nación es característica de los discursos literarios del exilio, en los que la madre patria usualmente alcanza un valor cuasi-mítico, por considerarse que está siendo temporariamente usurpada y contaminada por el enemigo ideológico.

En *Cobro revertido*, sin embargo, la madre del protagonista es descrita como un ente omnipresente y asfixiante que quiere controlar todos los aspectos de la vida del individuo. Representa metafóricamente al régimen de Augusto Pinochet, pues opera un poco al modo de aquel ojo escrutador que teorizara Michel Foucault en *Vigilar y castigar* (1975), actuando casi como “un aparato disciplinario perfecto” que desde “una sola mirada [logra] verlo todo permanentemente” (178). Esta inusual asociación entre la figura materna y la represión estatal se percibe en varios pasajes en los que el sociólogo recuerda eventos de su niñez, como cuando afirma que cada vez que su madre lanzaba una carcajada en su casa “temblaban los vidrios, como si pasaran tanques por la calle” (29). La asechanza constante con la que la relaciona se vislumbra también en otros pasajes en donde el narrador explica que “cada vez que [su] madre aparecía en escena [su] existencia se llenaba de sobresaltos” (29). Así ocurre, precisamente, otra mañana de su adolescencia en

la que ella irrumpe en su intimidad cargando contra la puerta del baño como si fuera "la *Schutzstaffel* [nazi] detrás de un complot inminente" (47), justo cuando él estaba masturbándose. Al igualar a la madre del protagonista con un Chile inherentemente conservador y opresor, el sociólogo cancela toda posibilidad de regreso al origen y prescinde, al mismo tiempo, del discurso nostálgico-patriótico tan común en este tipo de narraciones.

La desmitificación de la madre-patria se completa cuando el protagonista insinúa que su propio exilio fue indirectamente causado por el agobio de su progenitora. En un distanciamiento preliminar que servirá de preludio a su destierro definitivo, el joven expresa sus ansias de libertad juvenil: "quería tener mi propia radio, escuchar los Beatles. Dejarme crecer el pelo. No ponerme camisa blanca y corbata y parecer un empleado de oficina de dieciséis años" (49). A pesar de esta rebeldía inicial, finalmente accede a estudiar abogacía, tal y como deseaba su madre y se mete en política, puesto que ese era un requisito "de todo abogado que se precie" (26). Además de unirse a un partido de izquierda, participa en el Centro de Estudiantes de su universidad, en donde conoce a su primer amor, Magdalena, una activa militante mayor que él. Ocho días después del golpe de estado del 11 de septiembre de 1973, en medio de la cruenta represión pinochetista, comete la imprudencia de ir a visitarla. Los grupos paramilitares que intentaban recabar información sobre el paradero de su novia lo capturan y lo llevan al Estadio Nacional, donde primero es torturado y luego pasa semanas miserables vagando "adolorido por entre las graderías y los túneles, peleando por un pedazo de pan" (70). Finalmente, es también su progenitora, indirectamente responsable de esta sucesión de eventos trágicos, quien logra obtener un salvoconducto para el exilio definitivo de su hijo en Canadá.

En el momento de su destierro, el joven protagonista tiene tan solo veintitrés años, seis menos que en aquella trágica mañana en la que recibe la noticia de la muerte de su madre. Volviendo al presente narrativo, poco después de enterarse del deceso, el sociólogo sale de su departamento para ponerse en contacto con amigos y conocidos, y hasta con su exesposa Megan, una canadiense anglófona. Recurre a todos ellos no solo para obtener consuelo, sino también recursos monetarios para poder realizar el proyectado viaje de retorno a Chile para asistir al sepelio. Una vez que recibe algo de dinero de Megan, se dirige hacia el Bar Español, en donde el sociólogo espera encontrarse con lo que llama su "cuasifamilia" en suelo canadiense: "Los exiliados, los refugiados, los desintegrados, los desbancados, los desubicados, los perdidos en el espacio, los alegres, los doloridos, los patéticos. Su tribu, su gente, mejores o peores, orgullosos, arrogantes y llorones, su cuasifamilia desde siempre, desde ahora" (46).

Aun antes de que el protagonista se trencé en largas discusiones con los integrantes de este grupo, la novela de Urbina muestra rasgos distintivos de la novela dialógica. Bakhtin advierte, de hecho, que una pluralidad de voces no es una condición necesaria de este tipo de novela, puesto que aun dentro de una misma

declaración puede insinuarse o parodiarse la posición semántica de otras conciencias o voces (184).⁶ Esto ocurre, por ejemplo, cuando narrándose a sí mismo en tercera persona, el sociólogo revela los que fueran sus propios pensamientos al dirigirse hacia el bar en el que lo esperaban sus amigos:

...su madre está muerta y ahora *tiene que sentir que su madre ha muerto y tiene que hacer sentir a los demás que su madre ha muerto*, la madre de todos, allá lejos, en el país que todos sueñan como una mezcla de imágenes infantiles, chistes adolescentes y frustraciones de adultos expulsados de *una suerte de paraíso problemático, no para sociólogos sino para mitólogos*, donde uno ya no puede enterrar ni a su madre como el resto de la gente porque el Tata Dios General Augusto Pinochet cerró la puerta a nuestras espaldas. (45, énfasis mío)

En este pasaje no solo se imbrican las voces del sociólogo como narrador y como protagonista en una sola declaración, sino que se alude a un subtexto discursivo propio de la comunidad del exilio. Insinuándose inflexiones semánticas opuestas, con estas estrategias se cuestionan la tendencia a exagerar el sufrimiento, la habitual idealización del país de origen y, por último, las altas expectativas de la comunidad del exilio en torno al cumplimiento de los deberes filiales.

Por otra parte, si tradicionalmente ha sido el café el lugar privilegiado por intelectuales y otros exiliados comprometidos para discutir sobre política, literatura y organizar la disidencia, en la novela carnavalizada de Urbina el protagonista se refugia principalmente en el mucho menos solemne Bar Español.⁷ Una vez llegado allí, se sumerge, entre cervezas y otras libaciones, en un atolondrado diálogo que versa sobre las vicisitudes del destierro. La novela cobra, ahora sí, un marcado carácter polifónico, puesto que allí confluyen y chocan distintas y opuestas posturas frente al exilio, la patria, el compromiso político y los deberes filiales, como las que encarnan Sarita, Ferrero, Toño, Frías, don Moisés, Gamboa, Tito y don Antonio, entre otros peculiares desterrados. Aunque el narrador cita las palabras de cada uno de los interlocutores de manera textual, sin hacer comentario alguno, sobresalen las intervenciones del sociólogo, quien actúa en todo momento o bien como un revulsivo o bien como un agente desmitificador.

En una primera muestra, responde a las críticas de dos de los concurrentes al bar, Sarita y Ferrero, quienes le recriminan el abandono de la madre y, por extensión, de su patria. Sin pelos en la lengua, Sarita le critica su falta de cumplimiento con los deberes filiales, señalando que ni bien "llega el momento del pequeño esfuerzo [los hijos] se demuestran como unos verdaderos gusanos irresponsables" (64). Ferrero va aún más lejos, cuando en lugar de consolar al sociólogo, lo culpa en parte por la muerte de su progenitora, reprochándole que "podría haberse traído a su madre y a lo mejor no le habría pasado esto de morir" (72).

Exhibiendo gran control sobre sus emociones, el sociólogo sonríe suavemente y le agradece las sugerencias a Ferrero, pero responde con cordialidad y firmeza que, aunque lo hubiera intentado, su madre “no se habría venido” porque sus padres “tenían los medios. Se quedaron [en Chile] sin ningún problema” (72). A pesar de su buena disposición con respecto a los hábitos del café, el sociólogo recuerda que también había sido juzgado negativamente cuando se ausentara del Bar español por un año para priorizar su relación con Megan. La ausencia, imparcialidad o indiferencia hacia su pueblo, las causas de izquierda o la comunidad de exiliados chilenos son impugnadas por igual. Esto es a tal punto así que su familia del café, evidenciando cierto maniqueísmo, pronto comienza a considerarlo poco menos que un traidor, “un perdido para la causa, un asimilado que se olvidó de dónde venía, que se tomó en serio lo de la tierra de las oportunidades y les daba la espalda a las luchas del pueblo y se alejaba de su gente justo ahora que los informes aseguraban que el tirano iba a caer” (152). Ante este nuevo embate, el sociólogo nuevamente logra mantener la calma, evita entrar en acaloradas discusiones y privilegia los lazos de amistad. Solo en el momento de la enunciación matiza estas recriminaciones, compartiendo con los lectores lo que realmente piensa, pero también revelando una sana sensibilidad: “Yo, sin confesarlo, me sentaba en sus opiniones mitificadoras. Nosotros éramos los divididos, ellos los fantasiosos irremediables, pero necesitaba verlos” (153).

Como agente de cambio en esta comunidad, el sociólogo aprovecha también el espacio privilegiado del bar para corregir distorsiones que emergen en torno a la construcción mítica de los exiliados políticos quizás más notables y romantizados: los exguerrilleros de izquierda expulsados por las dictaduras latinoamericanas. Como ejemplo paradigmático de la distancia entre mito y realidad, menciona el caso de un guerrillero chileno exiliado en suelo canadiense: el Pato Macías, “de la extrema, con su camisa de leñador, con boina y barba a lo Che Guevara, Macías, el representante del pueblo resistente” (87). Tras esta irónica descripción inicial, estereotipada y parodiada al máximo, el sociólogo describe cómo el guerrillero se larga en lo que llama una “enorme y lírica diarrea sobre la organización de la insurrección armada” (87). Pero se vislumbra que el guerrillero lo hace solo para cubrirse de un manto de heroísmo frente a las muchachitas allí presentes, en aras de terminar “en la cama de alguna doncella sudorosa que le pedía por favor se dejara la boina puesta” (87). Ya menguado con estas primeras señas, el mito del Pato Macías termina por derrumbarse sobre el final de la novela, cuando el sociólogo añade que el exguerrillero está preso desde que encontró a su exesposa con un hombre. Sin poder controlar sus celos e impulsos violentos, “el Che Guevara de los montes de Venus quebequenses” no tuvo mejor idea que meterle cuatro cuchilladas en el pecho (176), en un pavoroso femicidio. Con esta representación paródica del guerrillero, Urbina se anticipa a tendencias mucho más recientes en la narrativa latinoamericana, donde una serie de jóvenes novelistas buscan, en palabras de Jorge Volpi, “ajustar cuentas con cualquier

resabio del romanticismo revolucionario del pasado” (183).

De manera análoga, en sus interacciones con otros conocidos, el sociólogo descubre y denuncia el presunto oportunismo de algunos exiliados políticos chilenos en Canadá, quienes, como sugiriera Donoso en *El jardín de al lado*, a veces tienden a sacar ventaja de las trágicas circunstancias de su pasado para enaltecerse en los ojos de la sociedad receptora a través de su exotismo. Si en la novela de Donoso el miedo más grande de Julio Méndez, escritor chileno exiliado en Barcelona, es que se esfumen y palidezcan sus “seis días de calabozo” y la “experiencia heroica” que considera su “pasaporte al triunfo” (31), algunos de los exiliados chilenos que pueblan las páginas de *Cobro revertido* padecen de una similar aprensión. Esto se observa cuando el sociólogo intenta una nueva reforma en las prácticas de la comunidad del exilio. En este caso, cansado de la enervante solemnidad que caracterizaba las reuniones políticas de sus compañeros exiliados, el sociólogo propone amenizarlas (o “carnivalizarlas”) con un poco de música, libaciones y diversión, pero su idea es mal recibida porque se considera que es peligrosa para los intereses de la comunidad. Evidenciando un discurso tan autoconsciente como cínico, su amigo Tito le responde que estos cambios no serían posibles, puesto que, se desprende, tal comportamiento destruiría el mito construido en torno a la supuesta heroicidad de los exiliados políticos latinoamericanos: “nosotros hemos llegado a estas costas como *los protagonistas de una tragedia importantísima y si nos salimos del papel, si tomamos y bailamos en estas circunstancias, nos van a considerar poco serios*” (87, énfasis mío).

Además de reaccionar ante esta evidente performatividad en el comportamiento de los exiliados políticos, el sociólogo de la novela de Urbina denuncia cierta propensión hacia la jerarquización de distintos tipos de éxodo, que frecuentemente lleva a la exaltación del exiliado político tradicional. Un precedente paradigmático de este fenómeno en la novela latinoamericana del exilio se vislumbra en *Andamios* de Mario Benedetti. Aunque es difícil desentrañar la opinión del autor de carne y hueso, en esta ficción se establece una problemática jerarquía de exiliados, a los que se les asigna distinta valoración ética en función de las causas que motivaron el éxodo.

Javier se había ido obligado, por razones obvias que [su madre] comprendía, pero Gustavo y Fernanda porque así lo habían querido. Uno y otra habían construido muy lejos una nueva vida: Gustavo había empezado como cónsul en Tegucigalpa y había terminado como gerente de un supermercado en California; Fernanda había obtenido, mientras le duró la beca, un PhD en Chapel Hill y ahora enseñaba español en otra Universidad. (125)

En el pasaje recién citado se vislumbra que los exiliados políticos son privilegiados en detrimento de otros tipos de desterrados o emigrantes. El mayor pecado de dos de los hermanos, de hecho, parece residir en haberse ido del Uruguay “pero no por problemas

políticos" ya que, como vuelve a subrayar el narrador, "no tenían motivos para exiliarse", ni mucho menos para establecerse "en Estados Unidos" (72). Esta diferenciación entre las causas del éxodo no resulta problemática *per se*, pero sí deviene reprochable cuando más tarde se retrata a Gustavo y Fernanda como si fueran enemigos o traidores a pesar de su total indiferencia política, o quizá precisamente por ello. Al aglutinar la autenticidad y el sufrimiento en un único y exaltado exilio de tipo político, la novela representa a otros exiliados o emigrantes como copias ilegítimas y poco dignas. Se siguen así las teorizaciones de William H. Gass en su ensayo "Exile" (1994), puesto que todo parece sugerir que, al menos para el narrador, otros emigrantes y exiliados son poco más que "carbons, copies, no-accounts, unable to muster the misery, the enmity, the enemies who might give them an honest exile's status, and an entry into the aristocracy of the properly deposed" (222).

Respondiendo indirectamente a este tipo de posturas elitistas, el sociólogo de Urbina jamás intenta conformar con el accionar de un arquetipo de exiliado ejemplar. Lejos de querer mantener esta ficción, el joven chileno expresa su fastidio hacia quienes se empeñan en crear improductivas divisiones entre exiliados leales y traidores, legítimos e ilegítimos, auténticos y falsos. Lo hace, una vez más, interviniendo en una de las acaloradas conversaciones que tienen lugar en el Bar Español. Pone como ejemplo de ente regulador de insólitas jerarquías a su compañero de hogar Joao. Tan controlador como su madre, el portugués también intenta gobernar y codificar el comportamiento del sociólogo, presumiblemente para que este no se aleje de lo que se espera de un exiliado político tradicional. De modo que Joao parece coincidir con una estrecha definición de exilio político, como aquella formulada por Yoshi Shain, quien propone que para él los "expatriados"—independientemente de la causa de su partida—son exiliados políticos solo si durante su destierro se mantienen fieles a sus convicciones, representando los valores de la patria usurpada por el enemigo ideológico y comprometidos por la lucha (15). Frustrado ante expectativas similares por parte de su compañero de hogar, el sociólogo se desahoga señalando que Joao "se cree mi ángel de la guarda, mi hermano mayor, y quiere que coma cereales con banana y que no tome y deje de fumar y haga una vida de estudiante ascético, postulante a santo sabio, como un verdadero exiliado" (82, énfasis mío). Corroborando estas impresiones, sobre el final de la novela el sociólogo vuelve a sentirse presionado por Joao, quien nuevamente lo insta a conformar con el arquetipo del exiliado político comprometido: "yo tenía que ser de alguna manera como seu pai y mantener una cierta línea de conducta, darle a mi vida un nuevo sentido, comportarme a la altura de los desafíos históricos y ser consecuente con lo que predicamos a los demás y ahora debe estar indignado porque perdí la segunda llamada de mi padre" (193).

Inmune a los cuestionamientos de varios de sus interlocutores, el sociólogo nunca se inclina abiertamente por una ideología política u otra, sino que evita adoptar posturas extremas. Elude así las polarizaciones habituales en los discursos del exilio, donde

frecuentemente observamos interpretaciones parciales de la historia. Como confirma Grínor Rojo en su análisis de la novela, de hecho, ni en Chile ni en Canadá "el sociólogo" termina de definir su posicionamiento político (114). En el país andino, nunca llega a rechazar a su tradicional madre por completo, a pesar de su noviazgo con una mujer revolucionaria como Magdalena. En Canadá, reproduce este esquema, siendo capaz de involucrarse sentimentalmente con mujeres tan distintas como Megan, una separatista de familia anglófona nacida en Quebec, y Marcia, una *québécoise* que "está por la separación de Quebec, por la total y plena independencia" (37).

En un pasaje narrado en primera persona por el sociólogo, se percibe claramente su perfil conciliador. Rememora un viaje a Toronto para visitar a los hermanos de Megan, pero, como en Chile, la política divide a la familia. Años antes, los hermanos, el resto de la familia y muchos otros anglófonos viviendo en Quebec, habían resuelto mudarse a Toronto "temerosos de lo que les deparaba el futuro si el movimiento independentista tomaba la vía violenta para realizar su plan político" (100). Megan tampoco está a favor, pero sabe también que prefiere quedarse a vivir en Montreal, más allá de los resultados de la puja independentista. Se justifica alegando que "nunca le había gustado Toronto", que "no deseaba sentirse expulsada por las circunstancias" y remata diciendo que "en el fondo no consideraba ilegítimos los anhelos de los quebecos de tener su propio país" (100). Al notar la reacción escandalizada de los hermanos de Megan, el sociólogo decide intervenir, "tratando de mantener un tono liviano y de internacionalizar la discusión" (100). Actuando esta vez como narrador en tercera persona, cita sus propias palabras de aquel día:

En mi trabajo hay unos angoleños blancos que se vinieron a Canadá porque no podían quedarse en Angola, que ellos consideran su país y que lloran todos los días. Cuando la situación se hizo insoportable se marcharon a Portugal, pero tampoco aguantaron la vida en ese país que ellos consideraban extranjero y donde eran a su vez considerados africanos y mirados como rara basura *por los grupos de derecha e izquierda*. (100, énfasis mío)

Con esta mesurada intervención, el sociólogo evidencia haber aprendido ciertas lecciones del violento pasado chileno, expresando un sano escepticismo frente a discursos radicales de diverso signo que generalmente tienden a coincidir en su construcción del otro como enemigo.

Sin jamás minimizar ni justificar la cruenta represión pinochetista, la novela de Urbina, por último, inserta una abierta autocrítica hacia los ideales y el proceder de la militancia política de izquierda a la que el mismo autor perteneciera durante su juventud.⁸ Este cuestionamiento cobra forma a través de las certeras acometidas de Grenier, exdirector de tesis de maestría del "sociólogo" en Canadá, quien preparado con gran munición de

pruebas expone las presuntas limitaciones de este movimiento. Lo hace en otro bar, esta vez el del Club de la Facultad, mientras toman abundantes cantidades de vino. En este espacio propicio para el intercambio de ideas, Grenier cuestiona la militancia de los sectores más comprometidos de la izquierda chilena. Ahonda, además, en lo que considera una falta de heroísmo y lucidez por parte de los rebeldes, cuyo compromiso, según expone, habría terminado siendo "más pose que verdad, porque cuando llegó la hora del gran enfrentamiento no hubo pelea y el fanfarroneo y la vociferación habían terminado con el exterminio de todo un segmento de la población" (184). A lo largo del extendido e incómodo *tête à tête* con su director, el sociólogo se muestra incapaz de encontrar respuesta alguna que le permita reivindicar sus años de militancia política, a tal punto que durante la conversación Grenier "lo miraba por encima del vaso, esperando ser desafiado, se lamía los labios y después miraba por la ventana bostezando como un lobo cansado de la torpeza de su víctima" (184-85).

Los frecuentes intercambios de ideas en el Bar Español, en el Bar de la Facultad y en otros lugares insólitos, como la tienda del sastre Josefo, contribuyen al despertar de una consciencia escéptica en el sociólogo.⁹ Con la lucidez que le brindan también los años, lejos de vanagloriarse de un pasado presuntamente heroico como algunos otros impostores, el sociólogo, antes exmilitante de izquierda, hace una fuerte autocrítica. Recuerda cómo su ex amante Magdalena lo había iniciado en nuevas prácticas sexuales y políticas, pero también hace hincapié en su ingenuidad al dejarse llevar por "esa chatura mística que constituye la militancia política juvenil concebida como un sustituto de la iglesia" (143). Elabora sobre este punto, notando que en aquella tensa coyuntura obedeció órdenes sin demasiadas certezas, sin hacer ni hacerse cuestionamientos y anulando su individualidad: "sólo la promesa del futuro esplendor [proveía] la razón para el olvido de lo personal y para la concentración piadosa en las tareas que se nos encomendaban y que nuestra imitación de monjes y mesías nos impelía a realizar en medio de una niebla de fantasías e ideales abstractos" (143). Auscultando su pasado bajo este nuevo prisma escéptico, el sociólogo se cuida también de no exagerar las circunstancias de su presente exilio. Exhibiendo un discurso moderado, con el que demuestra su preocupación por ajustarse a los hechos, admite que su doble protagonista "no [estaba] en las listas de la gente con el ingreso al país prohibido", sino tan solo "en la de ex prisioneros políticos en libertad condicional, *nada muy heroico*" (110, énfasis mío).

En su continuo afán por despojar a su relato y su persona de cualquier elemento que lo eleve por sobre otros mortales, el exmilitante ahora exiliado reconoce y exhibe otras llamativas fallas de carácter. Ya fuera de peligro en Canadá, confiesa por ejemplo que simplemente "se [le] olvidó que tenía que llamar de vuelta" al primo de su novia Magdalena (77), a quien había prometido llamar para ultimar los detalles de un matrimonio con ella que podría haberla puesto a resguardo de las brutales fuerzas represoras pinochetistas (77). Sin ese llamado, la joven pronto fue capturada,

asesinada y desaparecida. De la misma manera, "el sociólogo" tampoco cumple con su prometido regreso a Chile para el entierro de su madre. Atrás han quedado las sentidas palabras con las que había desafiado posibles peligros y comienza a vislumbrarse que en realidad todo ha sido poco más que una pose. Un escueto llamado de su padre pidiéndole que no se haga presente en el velorio es todo lo que necesita para justificar la cancelación de su viaje, puesto que momentos antes de recibir el llamado ya sabe que "no tiene ganas de ir a Chile, quiere quedarse en Montreal bajo la ducha y luego ir a comer comida china, pato Pekín, con la novia Marcia y después a comer postre y tomar té en el viejo Montreal" (179). Se vislumbra aquí, además, que el sociólogo no tiene ninguna intención, ni presente ni futura, de regresar al terruño. De modo que una vez más rompe con prescripciones tradicionales; esta vez, aquellas que conciben el exilio como un viaje *a priori* circular, en el que se anticipa y espera que el exiliado regrese al país de origen tan pronto como las circunstancias políticas lo permitan.¹⁰

Por último, solucionado el incómodo problema que le ocasionara la muerte de su madre, el desenlace de la novela presenta la insólita muerte del sociólogo, en pleno carnaval. Todo llega a un trágico fin cuando al caer la noche sale a la calle en búsqueda de una nueva compañera sentimental, pero termina siendo arrastrado hacia el Parc Lafontaine por un torbellino de gente que celebra la *Caribfête de Montreal*. Ebrio, solo y desorientado por la música, los bailes y los disfraces de este carnaval caribeño, el inescrupuloso sociólogo no tiene mejor idea que lanzarse en una "danza conquistadora y frenética" para intentar seducir a una atractiva mujer que iba vestida ni más ni menos que "como una réplica atenuada de Carmen Miranda" (196). Desafortunadamente para él, su afán de conquista choca con los celos desmedidos del esposo de esta mujer, que resulta ser chilena. Luego de recibir una golpiza, se anuncia el inminente fin cuando el sociólogo siente una puntada en el lado, como aquella que lo aquejara esa misma mañana en la puerta de su casa, al despuntar el día. Aunque los motivos son similares, esta vez el dolor no se debe a una trompada como la recibida la noche anterior, sino a una certera puñalada que le perfora el costado a la altura de los riñones y en ese mismo instante. En un último y memorable monólogo en suelo canadiense, el narrador medita sobre lo que será una muerte ridícula, desprovista, ella también, de todo viso heroico, de todo elemento redentor. Piensa, de hecho:

que sería el chiste más increíble si resulta que se muere ahora en el parque La Fontaine. [...] Sin el consuelo de una muerte heroica imaginada mil veces como fantasía romántica: caer herido frente al palacio de gobierno, en la insurrección final, dedicando a Magdalena ese gesto último de los dedos que tocan el cielo proletario, ese grito último que sus compañeros de jornada recordarán para siempre, que los labios hermosos de las muchachas de su tierra repetirían por siempre. Tanto sueño épico, tanta

canción de gesta malograda y luego tanta amargura trivial, tanto naufragio y tratar de mantenerse a flote, para venir a morir aquí, en el parque La Fontaine, acompañado de una mierda de calipso fuera de tono, entre las patas sudorosas del mundo, en Montreal, como un bicho reventado, Megan. Sería pa'la risa. (200)

Con esta elocuencia, el sociólogo concluye su lúcido y siempre autoconsciente contradiscurso. Después de criticar las exageraciones, fallas y distorsiones discursivas de otros exiliados chilenos, solo le queda tiempo para parodiar fugazmente sus propios sueños de juventud y para dar el golpe de gracia que termina de derrumbar el arquetipo mítico del exiliado político latinoamericano satirizado a lo largo de la novela.

NOTAS

¹ En Canadá también se vivían momentos tensos por el inminente referéndum que tendría lugar en mayo de 1980. En esta consulta se intentaba decidir si la provincia debía seguir un camino tendiente hacia la independencia.

² Los cuentos de *Las malas juntas* describen con crudeza la feroz represión pinochetista que siguió al golpe de estado de 1973. Urbina también ha publicado *Las memorias de Baruni* (2009), una serie de falsos recuerdos en los que el autor se oculta bajo el anagrama de Baruni (González 78), y *Derrumbe* (2015), otra colección de cuentos sobre seres desesperanzados.

³ Además de Donoso y Urbina, otros reconocidos autores también han dejado su huella en esta vena tragicómica y/o escéptica de la novela del exilio. Me refiero a Jesús Díaz, Eliseo Alberto, Jaime Baily, Mayra Santos Febres, Horacio Castellanos Moya y Claudio Ferrufino-Coqueugnot, por citar solo algunos ejemplos.

⁴ El posicionamiento crítico de Urbina frente a mitos y verdades osificadas queda plasmado en su particular entendimiento del rol del escritor: "I would say that [a writer] is an individual who produces texts by working with a specific language and within a particular mythology, reproducing this mythology, or criticizing it, from the perspective of the social group or groups to which he or she belongs" (Urbina 123).

⁵ Como bien menciona Castillo Sandoval, el otro gran miedo que tiene todo exiliado es el de morir en el exilio. A estos dos temores aluden tanto el propio Urbina como su compatriota Carlos Cerda, que titula *Morir en Berlín* (1993), a la que sería la más leída de sus novelas.

⁶ "Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances; a dialogical approach is possible toward any signifying

part of an utterance, even toward an individual word, if that word is perceived not as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position, as the representative of another person's utterance. Thus, dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically" (Bakhtin 184).

⁷ Al situar parte de la acción en el Bar Español, Urbina deja constancia del primer grupo de exiliados hispanos en Canadá, aquellos llegados como consecuencia de la Guerra Civil Española y la represión franquista.

⁸ En un vívido pasaje, por ejemplo, el sociólogo detalla el momento de su captura y posterior tortura: "Y allí estaban esperándola o esperándonos, da lo mismo, y allí me detuvieron y me llevaron a uno de los regimientos y me patearon y apalearon y torturaron preguntando por armas, contactos internacionales, y por Magdalena, que no había sido habida, hasta que se cansaron de apagar me cigarrillos en el cuerpo y sacarme a un patio a las cuatro de la mañana y amenazarme con fusilamiento" (69-70).

⁹ También en la sastrería se enfatiza explícitamente el dialogismo que recorre toda la novela: "Ellos han puesto las sillas en círculo y Josefo se encarga de abrir la botella y repartir los cigarrillos. Se reinicia el ritual desahogador de los discursos, en cualquier momento, en cualquier lugar. Como los senadores que se aprestan a discutir el estado del mundo, la seca y la meca, el cielo y el infierno, la vida y la muerte (107).

¹⁰ Como señala Ana Vázquez, las comunidades del exilio tienden a juzgar "al que se deja seducir por los atractivos de exilio", a tal punto que "la mayor condena es decir de alguien que ya no quiere volver" (22).

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“Something in the Body”: Material Memoir and Posthuman Horror in Samanta Schweblin’s *Fever Dream*

K.M. Ferebee
Ghent University

ABSTRACT: Samanta Schweblin’s 2014 novel *Distancia de rescate*, published in English as *Fever Dream*, tells the unsettling tale of a mother who, while vacationing in a rural area of Argentina, may or may not be exposed to a toxic agricultural chemical that may or may not have poisoned the area’s children, who have been subjected to an unconventional healing treatment that may or may not have displaced their souls from their bodies, causing pieces of them to reside in someone else. The novel has been read as “a toxic ecohorror tale” (Meyer) or as an “ecological horror story... about toxic agribusiness” (Economist), yet here I argue for another interpretation of *Fever Dream*: one that utilizes the tropes of what Stacy Alaimo characterizes as the “material memoir,” peeling back their familiarity to expose a toxic uncanny and literalizing the leaky, confused human subject that is found dwelling in it. The novel’s ambivalent, dread-laced depiction of a posthumanist reality in which the whole, complete, and “real” human subject is unrecoverable—and in which we contaminate and are contaminated by the familiar body of the human other as well as the foreign body of the nonhuman threat—offers, I suggest, the possibility of a new approach to ethics of responsibility in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS: Schweblin; *Distancia de rescate*; *Fever Dream*; posthuman; material memoir; ecohorror

The central narrative of Argentinian author Samanta Schweblin’s 2017 novel *Fever Dream* unfolds as a dialogue. We enter, *in medias res*, the strange interrogation of the narrator, a woman who is dying, by a boy who is attempting to help her realize the exact moment when what is killing her began. This process requires her to tell him the story of everything that has happened since she first came to her vacation home in this small rural town. He prompts her with questions: “*What else? What else is happening in that very moment?*” (His speech is represented in italics, as though his voice is ambivalently real.) There is no clear logic that governs what details are and are not important; when the woman, whose name we learn is Amanda, demands to know where her daughter, Nina, is, she is told this doesn’t matter. The fact that she is going to die in a few hours is similarly unimportant. But the fact that Nina has a habit of running around the vacation house in circles at lunchtime is important, as is the memory of a three-legged dog that crosses the street after running out of a field. “I need to understand which things are important and which things aren’t,” Amanda pleads. But she doesn’t. She can’t. The boy, David, can tell her only that *the important thing is “something in the body. But it’s almost imperceptible, we have to pay attention”* (66). Yet this important thing never seems to arrive. It centers around an incident in which Amanda, Nina, and David’s mother observed the delivery of several plastic drums containing a substance toxic enough that the drum-handlers have to wear gloves, and a sudden wetness on Amanda and Nina’s clothing, and a strange smell, and Amanda’s sudden sickness. “*This is the moment,*”

David says. “... *We’re looking for the exact moment because we want to know how it starts*” (90). However, “the exact moment” seems to both keep happening and never quite happen. It is *about* to happen, and then has *already* happened without Amanda perceiving it—David shifts abruptly to the Anthropocenic pronouncement that “[t]he important thing [has] already happened. What follows are only consequences” (131).

Has Amanda’s illness been caused by whatever was in the plastic drums? Is this same substance related to the dead bird in a stream that David drank from, or a horse that sickened after drinking from the same stream? What afflicts David and the town’s other children, some of whom “*go through poisoning episodes*” (“*sufrieron intoxicaciones*”) and some of whom “*are born already poisoned, from something their mothers breathed in the air, or ate or touched*” (151)? The implication seems to be that David is trying to discover the “exact moment” of Amanda’s contamination, and thus the contamination of the town. Yet time and space have become unstable and disjointed. “Is this about the poison?” Amanda asks. “It’s everywhere, isn’t it, David?” David replies, “*The poison was always there.*” (169). When Amanda reflects on the afternoon when she encountered the plastic drums, she laments that the “rescue distance” she monitors, her sense of the distance she would need to cross in order to save her daughter, “didn’t work, [she] didn’t see the danger” (170). The book’s title in its original Spanish is, in fact, *Distancia de rescate*, or *Rescue Distance*, foregrounding the disordering of geographies and the disrupted calculations that consequently pour outwards.

Reviewers have described *Fever Dream* as a "toxic eco-horror tale" (Meyer), an "ecological horror story... almost as if Henry James had scripted a disaster movie about toxic agribusiness" (Economist), situating it in the context of growing concern about the effects of pesticides and fertilizers on Argentina's rural farms. Yet to read the book as a tale of environmental contamination's catastrophic and insidious effects upon the natural world neglects to observe the extent to which the unease in *Fever Dream* arises not from toxic contamination and its effects, but rather from the uncertainty as to whether or not there *is* or *could be* toxic contamination, and, if so, whether or not it has *had* any effects—the inability to locate any precise moment at or way in which the human body might have been corrupted, or to confront the implications of this confusion for humanness. In this respect, *Fever Dream* draws upon the tropes of the increasingly influential environmental contamination genre that Stacy Alaimo characterizes as "material memoir," peeling back the assumptions of these tropes to locate their anxiety not in the infiltration of the body by outside elements, but in awareness of the body as always already infiltrated and therefore impossible to discretely bound. Schweblin's novel thus becomes a powerful lens through which to critique the binary speciation in which material memoir deals, and a lens that directs our attention away from this obsessive battle against contamination, towards the need to re-evaluate the very body that this genre seeks to protect and defend.

Material memoir

Material memoir is, Alaimo writes, a form of "trans-corporeal autobiograph[y]" that insists "the self is constituted by material agencies that are simultaneously biological, political, and economic" (87). In practice, the kernel of a material memoir is the author who is sick, or who has been sick, or who feels sick. The author interprets the environment through the lens of her sickness, in search of its origin. Narratives of sickness, of personal history, of local history, of science, and of environment are drawn together in a way that implies an attribution but cannot ever quite point to it. As Alaimo explains, "at present it is not feasible to trace the exact causes of cancer or other environmentally generated illnesses within an individual" (88), and so, though the material memoirist may present scientific studies suggesting the carcinogenic properties of toxic chemicals, or the devastating effects of radioactive discharge, "there is a chasm, a vast lack of proof, between these scientific facts and the murkier realm of the individual case history" (ibid). Therefore material memoir is always a genre of doubt, of indeterminacy, a form of discourse, which, as Lawrence Buell writes, "is of allegation rather than proof" (659). Sometimes sickness itself serves as a bodily allegation: while Sandra Steingraber, in *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, recounts her experience with bladder cancer, other material memoirs deal in ailments that are unclear, unnamed, or even disputed. In *Body Toxic*, Susanne Antonetta outlines a list of complaints: "Every

vital system of my body disrupted: an arrhythmic heart, a seizing brain, severe allergies, useless reproductive organs" (203). Mel Y. Chen, whose *Animacies* contains a chapter that engages in tropes of material memoir, variously describes their condition as "multiple chemical sensitivity," "heavy metal poisoning," and "mercury toxicity" (197)—widely disputed diagnoses (Rossi and Petidis; Rathore et al). Kristen Iversen, in *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*, describes the "chronic fatigue, fever, and swollen lymph nodes" from which she and her brothers and sisters suffer. "No one has any answers for us," she says (286).

From its opening line, "*They're like worms*" ("*Son como gusanos*") (1 English; 11 Spanish), *Fever Dream* works to foreground a similar sense of epistemological unsteadiness. We quickly realize that this opening line is David's attempt to describe Amanda's contamination—if we accept that it is really David, rather than an hallucination, which the failure to format dialogue between him and Amanda in quotation marks may cause us to doubt. He repeats the same metaphor ("*Like worms, all over,*" or, in the Spanish, "*Como gusanos, de todas partes*") before subtly shifting his explanation; when Amanda finds herself unable to move, he tells her that "[i]t's the worms"—"*Por los gusanos*" (2 English; 11 Spanish), which could more accurately be translated as "because of the worms," which also implies the worms' actual, literal existence. This establishes an uneasy oscillation between simile and literal statement and between individual and collective entity that continues throughout the book: whatever is in Amanda's body is both worms and only like worms, is simultaneously a *they* and an *it*.¹ Furthermore, David, pushing Amanda to describe the events of the previous days in more detail, tells her: "*We're looking for worms, something very much like worms, and the exact moment when they touch your body for the first time*" (52). Yet earlier he has told her, "[W]e have to find the exact moment when the worms come into being" (2). In other words, even as he reiterates that the contaminant both is worms and is like worms, he suggests these are also worms that do and do not pre-exist Amanda's contamination: that infest her, but are a product of her infestation. They are at once something that has penetrated her body and something that has been created within it.

The uncertain, even paradoxical existence of these worms does not seem to trouble Amanda or David. What is "*important... very important for us all*" (ibid) is not the worms themselves, but discovering how they got into Amanda. Yet David's questioning only seems to further confuse matters. He elicits detailed accounts from Amanda about her experiences of driving in the city and the country, the scenes she encounters as she walks past the fields at night, her feelings about his mother—"Are you sure these kinds of comments are necessary?" Amanda asks dubiously at one point. "Do we have time for this?" (3) David confirms that the details are important, but he does not elaborate on their connection to Amanda's illness. Their importance is solely attendant on David's evaluation of Amanda's bodily sensations, or rather by her reported memories of these sensations. The dialogue between David and Amanda comes

to form the figure that Alaimo sketches of the chemically reactive/ environmentally ill person as both scientist and instrument, in this case not monitoring material agencies around them, but attempting to parse material agencies in the past. In the sense the potential reading of David as hallucination takes on significance: has Amanda created him as a self-who-investigates, an outside observer who can glean meaning from an experience that resists normal meaning-making procedures? Amanda's body registers that something—the undefined "it" that David refers to—is happening, but requires an interpreter (or, perhaps, a narrator) to place it in an intelligible context. "Don't you realize what's happening right now?" David asks. "I can't realize, David," Amanda tells him (92)—in the original Spanish text, "No puedo darme cuento" (68), which suggests not that she *doesn't* realize, but that she *cannot*. She has not yet, in that moment, learned to translate the knowledge she will later understand her body as having. Yet the formal structure of their conversation, in which Amanda's guided journey into her memories is voiced by both herself and David in the present tense, means that the novel represents her as simultaneously knowing and not-knowing. Her constant uneasiness in the past appears to stem from the awareness that she knows *something*; her body registers symptoms of wrongness, yet she is unable to identify what that wrongness is.

The production of material memoir is typically a way of producing an answer to this urgent question, a *why* an illness is, with the result that a recurring tension in the genre is that between acceptance of a condition that must remain nameless and sourceless, and a narrative that *qua* narrative is an act of attribution. Iversen, for example, asks, "What does it matter, anyway, where my symptoms come from? It could be anything. Allergies, viruses, flu, exhaustion, bad weather, a bad day at the office. Maybe it's all in my imagination. The uncertainty is frustrating" (301). Yet her uncertainty is not, after all, so very uncertain: the "lingering feeling that this chapter wasn't supposed to be a part of my story, or my family's story, or anyone's story" (*ibid*) is apposed to the assertion that "[g]overnments aren't supposed to poison their own people" (*ibid*). There is a cognitive dissonance here, a knowing that can never quite be knowing, as when Antonetta writes, "I don't expect anyone to explain what's wrong with me," and follows the statement by noting that she "[doesn't] believe in coincidences of this magnitude, either: clusters of children with brain disorders, toxic plumes and clouds, radiation spewing in the air" (203). And, indeed, Kroll-Smith and Floyd characterize sufferers of environmental illnesses as believing that "their bodies know things," drawing attention to the centering of subjective experience in narratives of environmental illness and its production as evidence of this. Alaimo highlights the possibility of resistance in this act, characterizing the material memoir as a critique of the divisions between popular and "expert" knowledge and a place where the author offers up "personal experiences as 'data'" and "examines her own life story through a scientific lens" (87). The genre, she argues, allows the option of "refusing the oppositions between objective scientific knowledge and subjective autobio-

graphical rumination, between the external material environment and the inner workings of the self" (95). Much ecocriticism reads this option as inherently radical: Michelle Murphy suggests that environmental illness produces "new knots of possibility for inhabiting bodies" (157), and Chen describes their own environmental illness as providing "reminders of interdependency, of softness, of fluidity, of receptivity, of immunity's fictivity and attachment's impermanence." (Episodes produced by environmental illness, they write, force them "to rethink animacy" [202-3]). Kroll-Smith and Floyd see environmentally ill bodies as having found a voice, in resistance to "the Cartesian revolution [that] successfully silenced the authorial voice of the body" (52). They suggest a radical "heretic" bent to the environmentally ill tendency to seek truth within "a deliberately rational practice" while basing that practice on "human experience" (98).

Yet the dangers of this "heretic bent" are evident in its similarity to current anti-vaccination rhetoric, which rejects scientific evidence in favor of intuition and anecdote (Kata). Indeed, this rhetoric is explicitly present in Mel Chen's *Animacies*, in which the author's theorizing (in part) of their own environmental illness includes numerous inaccurate statements about mercury poisoning from dental fillings and allergy shots (198), as well as a claim that "a significant number of accounts tie childhood autism to the neurotoxicity of environmental mercury, with much attention to vaccines" (211). How ought we to respond to such claims, which feed into and reinforce what Dennis Flaherty has described as "perhaps... the most damaging medical hoax of the last 100 years"? The "evidence" or "data" of Chen's body is not in dispute; however, something has gone badly wrong in the situation of this popular, subjective knowledge within a rational, objective framework when it leads us into positions where the "voice" of the body can simply assert whatever it likes and expect the assertion to be accepted as true. The difficulty appears to be that, rather than functioning as the trans-corporeal autobiography Alaimo claims that it is, the material memoir does not refuse the dualisms between subject/object, self/environment, or rational/natural—rather, the environmentally ill subject argues for the admissibility of their private subjective sensations into the realm of legitimate objective data, but does not challenge the model of the discrete subject distinct from its surroundings, either in a material or in an ontological sense. This is part of a larger tendency in the environmentalist movement that Val Plumwood criticizes, particularly when it makes an appearance as "the feminism of uncritical reversal" (31) which argues for a turning-towards women/nature/emotion and the consequent renunciation of men/culture/reason without challenging the flawed assumptions at the heart of such a divide. In its commitments to overturning the "masculine" logic of scientific rhetoric, material memoir unwittingly reproduces the violent binary that it ought to reject.

Mother Nature

As Giovanna Di Chiro and Alexis Shotwell have explored, anti-toxic rhetoric fundamentally depends upon a set of assumptions that arise from "the idea that there is an uncontaminated, pure, natural state that is being affected by artificial chemicals" (Shotwell 90), and that "toxic chemical pollution is responsible for the undermining or perversion of the 'natural:' natural biologies/ecologies, natural bodies, natural reproductive processes" (Di Chiro 2010 201). What *seemed* natural (and *should have been* natural) was in fact *unnatural*. This perception of the contaminant as deceptive and insidious, "a grim specter [that] has crept upon us almost unnoticed," as Rachel Carson described it (13), the secret threat in "visuals that seemed to signify 'normalcy,'" as Buell quotes from an analysis of Love Canal coverage, "but [that revealed] the opposite" (645), is repeated even in Iversen's *Full Body Burden*, which leans less heavily on anti-toxic rhetoric. Iversen compares the moon—"a thin curl of ribbon," or "round and full and portentous, a pregnant beacon"—with the "other beacon" that is the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant:

The lights from Rocky Flats shine and twinkle on the dark silhouette of land almost as beautifully as the stars above, but it's a strange and peculiar light, a discomforting light, the lights of a city where no true city exists. It, too, is portentous, even sinister— if only one could have the ability to see beyond the white glimmer, to see what is really there (12).

This perception of the unnatural as a "sinister" mimic of the natural speaks to an anxiety that frames itself in terms of invasion, subterfuge, and disruption. The unnatural attacks the natural, disguises itself as the natural, and disrupts the natural; more than any "natural" itself, it is this boundary, the distinction (the idea that there *is* a natural, clearly distinct from the unnatural) that is under threat, a fact that further emerges when we consider the sites at which anti-toxic rhetoric has tended to focus its energy— sites that are significantly unstable, and traditionally zones of, in Mary Douglas's terms, purity and danger.

Both Shotwell and Di Chiro focus on the ways in which anti-toxic rhetoric has shown a troubling tendency to center around the perceived danger of sexually fluid or gender-unstable bodies, which are presumed to result from contamination. Early alarm, in the 1990s, about the effects of endocrine-disrupting industrial chemicals linked these endocrine disruptors to the "breakdown of the family" and "dysfunctional behavior in human society" and offered the hypothesis that "the hormonal experience of the developing embryo at crucial stages of its development has an impact on adult behavior in humans, affecting the choice of mates, parenting, social behavior, and other significant dimensions of humanity" (Colborn, Dumanoski, and Myers 238). Environmental historian Nancy Langston lamented "Gender Transformed" in a 2003 article on the peril of endocrine dis-

ruptors, arguing for the natural biological determination of gender and positioning the reproductive system as the site of both gender and the natural. "Our most intimate reproductive environments," she writes, "the places that make us most female and most male, the places we are most vulnerable and most natural, may have been hijacked by the residues of our industrial world" (154). Significantly, both Langston and the team of Theo Colborn and Dianne Dumanoski, whose book *Our Stolen Future: Are We Threatening Our Own Fertility, Intelligence, and Survival?* achieved national attention upon its publication, figure industrial toxins as intruders into or disruptors of the home, which Colborn and Dumanoski suggest, in their title, is fundamentally linked to the human and its survival. Industrial chemicals "hijack" the "most intimate" environment, in Langston's language; they not only "break down" the family and cause "dysfunction," but "steal our future," as the title of Colborn and Dumanoski's book also suggests, and the cover of which— across numerous editions— features the image of an embryo, the book's titular future emblemized as embodied biological reproduction, which, after all, seems to be at the center of what Colborn characterizes as "significant dimensions of humanity."

It is unsurprising, therefore, that material memoirs, among whose authors women are heavily overrepresented, often showcase an obsession with toxic interference in motherhood. Susanne Antonetta's inability to have children haunts *Body Toxic*; she writes of "the moment when [her] biological children were lost" (115) as though these children had existed within her and been taken, returning multiple times to the theme of infertility-as-bodily-injury, an idea that frames childbearing as the way in which a woman's body is *meant* to function. She writes that radionuclides "bear only female children, at least in language, and are astonishingly prolific... As they throw off atomic bits radionuclides decay into other elements: fertile children, daughters" (209). The radionuclides are rendered faintly monstrous in their usurpation of the female body, filling the function that Antonetta can't, and echoing her observation that humans have "failed to make immortality for our bodies" but have "made immortality for our [nuclear] waste" (208-9)— radionuclides outbreeding and outlasting the human, which has made its women sterile. "Radiation is the alpha and omega of our lives, the beginning and the end," she writes, by which she means that "in many cultures— Yoruba, Shinto, old Hebrew— my father is dead anyway, lost through the loss of a continuing line of bodily offspring," and thus Antonetta's own birth "under a cloud... [t]he daughter of my father, who did not die in the Sea of Japan because we had the bomb" (222) is bookended by the figurative death of her infertility. The "malfunctioning" female body is positioned as the mortality of the human itself. Sandra Steingraber does not fare much better in her own discourse of the female body; though Di Chiro praises her as taking "an anti-toxics approach that demonstrates the interconnection of environmental and health problems with gender, class, and racial injustices" rather than "resorting to the discourse of environmental normality to drive home her point"

(2010 218), Steingraber has written an entire memoir devoted to motherhood and toxicity, 2001's *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood*.

In this book, a material memoir in which the author's physical testimony is rooted in pregnancy rather than sickness, Steingraber combines scientific discourse on the physical processes of pregnancy with meditations on the "mystery" and "miracle" of her condition, frequently likening the pregnant body to the nonhuman world: "[t]he internal anatomy of a human placenta closely resembles a maple grove: the long columns of cells sent out by into the uterine lining... quickly branch and branch again until... the treetops of an entire forest press up against the deepest layers of the womb" (30-1); the placenta is "a blood-drenched forest," "the sapwood of pregnancy" (33). At the close of the book, she offers a "prayer" celebrating the commencement of weaning: "*Sleeping girl, I release you from my breast into the world, where the tides run with fish and berry bushes flutter with migrating birds*" (283). This "world" is really an *ideal* world, the prelapsarian "green oasis" of anti-toxic fantasy, which is also figured as the natural body of the mother, in turn identified (as Lawrence Buell points out of the "pastoral-utopian innocence" of threatened landscape) as a purity that is always at risk.

In Steingraber's work, the implications of these ideas go unexplored, leading to a heteronormativity that even Alaimo— who defends Steingraber by arguing that "[f]eminism, even gender-minimizing feminisms, cannot turn away from matters of reproductive health and bodily politics" (104)— acknowledges. Indeed, Steingraber's preface allies itself with such views, marking the body of the mother as "the first environment," and intrinsically linked to the outer environment of the Earth (x). This "truth," as Steingraber labels it— and the threat it implies to the rhetorically powerful figure of the child, who in turn might be contaminated through "the ecosystem of a mother's body"— "should inspire us all— mothers, fathers, grandparents, doctors, midwives, and everyone concerned about future generations— to action," Steingraber writes (*ibid.*), reinscribing the centrality of procreation in the anti-toxic narrative, and reaffirming its moral valence. Yet Steingraber's book is not really organized around toxic threat. Rather, *Having Faith* is concerned with the violation of the natural zone of the maternal body by the artificial, represented not only by toxic chemicals, but by technological intervention. Steingraber passionately endorses natural childbirth, criticizing episiotomy (the common surgical severing of the perineum) and the use of epidurals. She describes her own experience of labor as "a *profound* pain... like the chords of a pipe organ filling a cathedral... like an earthquake" (196), and interposes into her account of childbirth the memory of a surviving an avalanche while hiking a mountain (197)— the nonhuman, in its guise as the wild and the sacred, inhabiting the flesh of the mother once more. The entirety of childbearing becomes the hyper-natural, the *ur-natural*, the same "natural" that Langston endorses when she writes of the "intimate" reproductive system as the site of what it *means* to be natural in the first place.

Material memoir's fixation on the maternal appears in *Fever Dream* as a foregrounding of the maternal body as the site at which anxiety about toxic contamination congeals. Yet in *Fever Dream* the legitimacy of this anxiety, and the validity of the actions it generates, are rendered ambiguous, as they are not in the material memoir. On the one hand, the novel suggests that the spatiotemporal dislocations of toxic contamination— its counterintuitive, disjointed timelines, its tendency to go unseen— render useless Amanda's constant calculations of the "rescue distance" between herself and her child, and thus the natural bond that inspires a mother to protect her child. "Is it because I did something wrong?" Amanda wonders about Nina's contamination. "Was I a bad mother? Is it something I caused? ...When Nina and I were on the lawn, among the barrels. It was the rescue distance: it didn't work, I didn't see the danger" (169-70). Carla, too, recalling the incident when David was poisoned, tells Amanda, "It's just that sometimes the eyes you have aren't enough, Amanda. I don't know how I didn't see it—" (19) echoing Amanda's later lament that she *couldn't* realize what was happening at the instant that she and Nina were contaminated.

However, at the same time as the emotions and mechanisms of natural motherhood seem undermined by the new danger posed by toxic chemicals, *Fever Dream* suggests that new possibilities of non-biological and "unnatural" kinship are not only engendered but also demanded in response to contamination. These new kinships arise from the last-ditch cure available for poisoning victims, an ambiguously magical procedure offered by the town's alternative healer, "the woman in the green house." When David is contaminated, Carla takes him to this woman, who proposes that she "move David's spirit to another body" so that "part of the poison would also go with him. Split into two bodies, there was the chance he could pull through" (26-7). This soul migration would cause complications, the woman outlines: "The transmigration would take David's spirit to a healthy body, but it would also bring an unknown spirit to the sick body. Something of each of them would be left in the other" (29-30). David will thus be, according to the woman, a "new being" ("*nueva forma*"), or rather more than one new being: "David's body, and also David in his new body" (38). The woman emphasizes that Carla is still responsible for "the body," even without David in it; at the same time, she refers to David's body post-migration as David, and Carla as his mother, raising the question of how one ought to think and speak about the now- multiple Davids and their family relationships.

This situation is further complicated by the realization that Amanda's daughter Nina may also not be who or what she seems. Nina's seemingly innocuous child-habit of referring to herself in the first-person plural— she "has always been convinced that lords and ladies speak in the plural," Amanda explains— takes on another, more disquieting interpretation: is Nina harboring some part of one of these dislocated souls? Is she harboring *David's* soul? An incident in which Carla shows up at Amanda's house, claiming that David is inside it and pointing to Nina's room, also raises this possibility. That

night, Amanda dreams that Nina tells her that she, Nina, is David. The latent confusion about the identity of both children is heightened when the Amanda of the present tense realizes that David is telling her about scenes he could not have witnessed: moments when only Amanda, Carla, and Nina were there.

Certainly, *Carla* seems convinced that there is a chance Nina might harbor part of David. She is obsessed with locating David's soul and returning it to his body in order produce a "real" or whole David— she confesses, "I checked all the kids [David's] age... I follow them without their parents' knowing. I talk to them, take them by the shoulders to look them right in the eyes" (146-7). Ultimately, she steals Nina off to the woman in the green house while Amanda is ill, telling Amanda, "[W]hen I find my real David... I won't have any doubt it's him" (164). The novel's conclusion strongly suggests that Nina is left in David's body: when Amanda's husband visits the town after Amanda's death, David climbs into the backseat of his car, crossing his legs in the pose that Nina has adopted throughout the book. Amanda, watching supernaturally through her husband's perspective, sees "those other eyes" ("esos otros ojos") in David's own eyes (182). Someone must be in Nina's body, as well; Amanda's husband says that though Nina is recovering, "there's something else, and I don't know what it is. Something more, within her" (177). But it is unclear who or what this something is.

This confusion of identity suggests that the "migration" that occurs in the green house makes a mess of what are meant to be "natural" connections and divisions, raising the possibility that a mother might not be [able to be] the mother of her own child, that a girl might be partly a boy, or a boy a girl, or that both might be more than one person and therefore a girl and a boy at the same time. What's more, the migration raises the question of what it *means* to be a mother or a child, to be one or the other gender, to be a person, and whether these qualities and relationships are fixed or subject to change— whether there can be such a thing as a "son who is no longer [his mother's] son" ("hijo que ya no es su hijo") (160 English; 110 Spanish), or a boy who has a girl inside his body, or a girl who goes away and comes back with more self inside her than there was when she left. In short, migration disrupts the natural order of the body and the natural order *between* bodies.

This disruption of the natural is the ultimate terror that underlies material memoir, yet it is not the ultimate terror of *Fever Dream*. Instead, the novel uses it as a site at which to stage a fundamental question of posthumanist ethics: how do we figure human responsibilities in a world where the human is disrupted? When Carla brings David to the woman in the green house who will "migrate" his soul to another body, the woman emphasizes to Carla that not only must she "be responsible for it, for the body, no matter what happen[s]," but that Carla must "be willing to accept his new being" (30)— "*su nueva forma*," *forma* being a word that can connote both a body and a way of being. Carla violates this adjuration almost immediately, when she won't pick the new David up, hold him, or even touch him. She regards the "new David" only as a "monster," and though she

acknowledges that David is now two Davids, she insists that there can only be one "real David," and her responsibility is to him. The possibility that part of David is in Nina does not inspire her to treat Nina with love and fondness, but drives her to allow, if not orchestrate, Nina and Amanda's poisoning and Amanda's death. She, not David, is *Fever Dream's* truly sinister character, for she is incapable of perceiving that a world in which people she loves dwell in and through a multitude of bodies is one in which she has a responsibility to all of them: to every body that they may have been, may be, might yet be a part of. "Is there part of you in her body?" Amanda asks David, remembering a severely disabled child whom she saw crying in a store (52). It's not clear if even David knows the answer, or how he *could* answer for the people that he might become now that he is unmoored from the easy markers of skin and selfhood. He might be that girl. She might be him.

The Toxic Uncanny

It is not only identity that has been disrupted by the destabilizing of the human in *Fever Dream*. Carla believes, David tells Amanda, "*that changing me that afternoon from one body to another body has changed something else. Something small and invisible that has ruined everything*" (160). It is a belief that seems to concisely articulate the fear at the heart of current anti-toxic thinking: literally, the fear of *contamination*. This is not the fear of toxins themselves, but the fear that conceptual categories in the world are not firmly divided from each other but instead unstable and leaky, prone to collapse at the least disturbance— that objects (including, but not limited to, objects in the mirror) may be less solid than they appear, and that the structure our society is built upon is revealing itself as patchy and unsustainable. It is, in short, a classic case of the uncanny— here, what we might term the *toxic uncanny*.

In using the term "toxic uncanny," I do not mean to imply that this is a state of being *created* by the toxic. That is the impression given by many material memoirs. Antonetta describes "the world of chemicals," by which she means the world of industrial chemicals, as a separate sphere whose focus is "the restructuring of the carbon atom, the building block of life, into new and insidious molecules that could penetrate and alter the basic functioning of the body" (199)— the toxin construed entirely in terms of two characteristics, mutation and infiltration, the ability to transgress the boundary of a person and subvert the normative set-up it found within, the ability above all to *change*. "A *new thing* had just been born," she quotes I.I. Rabi as saying upon the first test of the atomic bomb, then adds: "Like Michelangelo's ceilinged God we stretched out our hands. And brought them back burning. Different, atomically charged" (218-9). Steingraber writes in *Living Downstream*, on the topic of dioxins and furans (which can be produced by incineration, including forest fires): "Dioxins and furans are not the natural-born children of fire. They are the unplanned, unwanted offspring of modern chlorine chemistry" (218). That is, toxins not only *cause* the corruption of

procreation, but they *are themselves* "unplanned" and "unwanted" products of an artificial procreation, in contrast to the "natural-born" children who existed "until the 1920s and 1930s, corresponding to the advent of organochlorine production," when widespread dioxin contamination began to register (ibid). The pre-toxic era is fundamentally a *natural* time—indeed, Steingraber's descriptions in particular evoke the mythologization and sacralization that Cronon sees underlying the concept of "wilderness"—before toxicity sabotaged the previously unproblematic speciation of reality.

However, what toxicity in fact reveals is that this speciation has always been incoherent. The toxic uncanny is a mode of revelation. Material memoirs acknowledge the discomfiting uncanny of the toxic, but attempt to account for this by characterizing it as a quality of modern contaminants, and therefore as an external threat that can be eliminated, or at least contained. If one understands the toxic uncanny as itself a form of contamination, an external force disrupting the conceptual body into which it has leaked, then it is not necessary to view the body itself as in need of re-evaluation.

Schweblin's innovation lies in highlighting the destructiveness that results from this attitude towards the toxic. Not only is Carla consumed by her need to restore some whole, "real" version of David that would be undisrupted, unpolluted, and complete, but David himself seems yoked to a quest that would allow him to trace, isolate, and expel the intruder. When Carla describes one of the incidents in which David seemed to draw animals to him and engage them in silent communion before burying them, she tells Amanda that she "asked [him] about the dog several times, and each time [he] replied that the dog wasn't the important thing" (106). There is an implication that David did to the animals what he is doing to Amanda: interrogating them in an effort to discover the "exact moment" at which they became contaminated by toxins, and thereby understand "the important thing," which seems linked to a coherent theory of the town's uncanny deterioration. Too, in the final pages of the book, Amanda's husband sees that David has begun tying objects in his house together—pictures arranged so that each "hangs from the previous one... tied with the same thin rope" (176) and other objects that "are hanging from rope, or are tied together with it" (179). Amanda tells David, "It seems... like, in your own way, you were trying to do something with the deplorable state of the house and everything in it" (ibid). This tying-together suggests a desperate need to arrive at or maintain some structure that will prevent the literal disintegration of everything around him. His use of rope is particularly evocative, perhaps implying a *pulling* that is the opposite of the "pushing" that David describes himself as performing on the animals, the children, and Amanda. The book uses the term "push" without defining what it means for David to "push"—*empujar*—someone or something; it seems to be a form of dislocation in time that allows them to review the past and the future, but which also inevitably ends in their deaths. One interpretation is that David is struggling to rearrange the pieces of the world into their "proper" places by this pushing and pulling. Interestingly, the term

that Amanda uses to describe the material with which David ties things together (rope, *hilo*) to describe the invisible cord that binds her to Nina, with which she measures the rescue distance. David's tied-together objects therefore mirror the "natural" bond between mother and child, which the contamination has revealed as always unstable, contingent, and in need of construction. His efforts to replace or render concrete the lost connective structure only point towards the fact what is happening in the town can't be resolved by locating the source of the contamination. The *real* danger lies in the unreliability of all previous structures. "The rope cannot break," Amanda insists frantically, "because I am Nina's mother and Nina is my daughter... This rope can't break, Nina is my daughter. But yes, my God, it's broken" (171). Later, she describes the rope as "slack," suggesting that the rope is neither broken nor unbroken, but that something else has occurred: perhaps that there is no longer anything to tie the rope *to*, on one or both sides, that the body/lies of Amanda and/or Nina are no longer solid enough to sustain such a connection. To attempt to re-lasso these elusive bodies, to push and pull at them in an effort to make them materialize in the desired places, is fundamentally misguided—a child's idea of how to cope with the "deplorable state" of the conceptual house in which they live, or find that they can no longer go on living. Yet because *Fever Dream* is a horror novel, no character steps forward to offer the obvious solution: what is needed is a total renovation of the house, a new way of understanding relations to one another.

Conclusion

A substance moves through multiple bodies, muddying the issue of where they start and it ends, making it difficult for us to define and regulate the "real," the "original," the "natural" state of things. Sometimes the substance is harmful. Sometimes it is hard to rule on: delivering both positive and negative effects. Mostly, it requires from us a new way of relating to ourselves and to that which is not ourselves, and a reconsideration of the boundary between those two elements. Though our "souls" may not migrate, everything else does—one might say, from our cells to our selves—and much of that which is "us" has its own identity, toxic or nontoxic, transitory or lasting, of which we may form only a part. What are our responsibilities in this case? What invisible ropes link us together—or is our task to find a way of living free of ropes, in the strange spatiotemporalities where we still require rescue, but are no longer (troublingly or reassuringly) quite so far apart?

Fever Dream ends with Amanda's husband returning to the city, having turned his back on David (who may also be Nina). His journey accrues shades of dread: "He doesn't see," Amanda says, "the soy fields, the streams that crisscross the dry plots of lands, the miles of open fields empty of livestock, the tenements and the factories as he reaches the city" (183)—the indications of environmental disaster. Finally: "He doesn't see the important thing: the rope [that connects Amanda to Nina, measuring the rescue distance] finally

slack, like a lit fuse, somewhere; the motionless scourge about to erupt" (ibid). At the last, we are granted a definition of "the important thing" in Amanda's story: the failure of the structure that has held things together in the past. The slack rope that has previously marked order is now a dislocated fuse, promising or counting down to a "*plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse*," an immobile plague about to excite itself. This cryptic image seems to suggest the toxins that lie sown in the soy fields, waiting to arise and inflict their poisonous ef-

fects. Yet at the same time there is the rope, burning itself down to some affective explosion (*se puede irritar*—one can excite—strong emotions, just as is the case in English) that will unleash a "plague" previously imprisoned, paralyzed. There is a profound sense of danger, but also anticipation, the "fuse" prompting the reader to an indrawn and unreleased breath. This ambivalence is, perhaps, the most appropriate possible note for the book to end on. A collapse is coming, *Fever Dream* suggests. And something new is waiting for it.

NOTES

¹ This worm-description is perhaps not incidental; it is reminiscent of Morgellons, a recent form of delusional parasitosis in which sufferers believe that they are incubating and extruding fibers in/from under their skin.

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Una lectura de *Memorias póstumas de Blas Cubas* a través del *Elogio de la locura*

Carmen J. Jiménez

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

RESUMEN: En este artículo se plantea que el desarrollo del tema de la locura en *Memorias póstumas de Blas Cubas* del brasileiro Machado de Assis es una adaptación del cuadro teórico de los planteamientos de Erasmo en *Elogio*. Un examen del diálogo entre estas dos obras muestra que no sólo *Memorias* hace referencias directas e indirecta a *Elogio*, sino que también se apropia de los propósitos encubiertos en esa obra que fueron estudiados por Foucault en *Madness and Civilization*. Esto lo lleva a cabo a través de un efecto especular por medio del cual la crítica hecha en *Elogio* contra el conocimiento de su tiempo se replantea y refleja en *Memorias*, manifestándose en un cuestionamiento de la sociedad de su tiempo y sus nociones del conocimiento y otros conceptos tales como razón y locura.

PALABRAS CLAVES: literatura, locura, intertextualidad, razón

"Los hombres están tan necesariamente locos, que sería estar loco, con otra clase de locura, el no ser loco." Pascal

"[E]¹ discurso de la ficción está atravesado de otras voces y opera sobre la cita y la referencia a otros textos. Un libro con-cita a otros libros y a su vez él mismo será citado en obras presentes o futuras." Sylvia Iparraguirre (comentando a Bajtín)

Erasmo de Rotterdam es considerado el representante más auténtico del humanismo (Subirats 11). También él fue una de las figuras religiosas más polémicas de su tiempo. Su libro *Elogio de la locura* (1509) alzó su voz en medio del debate religioso del momento. Fue considerado subversivo por algunos y, como consecuencia, la Contrarreforma lo incluyó en el *Índice* de 1559. Sin embargo, a pesar de su prohibición, esa obra fue una de las más leídas en su tiempo. J. M. Coetzee alega que las imprentas de los protestantes vieron que *Elogio* se acercaba a algunos de sus planteamientos y por esa razón y por mostrar su rivalidad religiosa, apoyaron su publicación (15).

Según Michel Foucault expone en su libro *Madness and Civilization*, en el capítulo 'Stultifera Navis', *Elogio* se inscribe dentro de la corriente renacentista de obras que se inspiran en la locura. Muchas de esas obras denunciaron la locura y se convirtieron en críticas morales. En el caso de *Elogio*, esa obra también subvierte y deconstruye los conceptos razón/locura con los propósitos, en primer lugar, de demostrar lo absurdo del conocimiento que intenta sobrepasar la medida del hombre y, en segundo lugar, de parodiar las falsas pretensiones de las filosofías del momento. *Elogio* plantea que madness is the punishment of a disorderly and useless science. If madness is the truth of knowledge, it is because knowledge is absurd, and instead of addressing itself to the great

book of experience, loses its way in the dust of books and in idle debate, learning becomes madness through the very excess of false learning (25).

Ahora bien, teniendo en cuenta esos planteamientos, a través de este ensayo quiero defender la tesis de que la influencia de *Elogio* se manifiesta en *Memorias póstumas de Blas Cubas* (1880) del escritor brasileño Joaquín María Machado de Assis. Aunque *Memorias* es una novela considerada por muchos críticos como una obra maestra por las innovaciones que tienen su asiento en ella¹, también evidencia que está en diálogo con la tradición humanística y con su tiempo histórico. Ese diálogo se muestra a través del desarrollo del tema de la locura cuyo cuadro teórico es una adaptación de los planteamientos de Erasmo en *Elogio*. Un examen del diálogo entre estas dos obras muestra que no sólo *Memorias* hace referencias directas e indirecta a *Elogio*, sino que también se apropia de los propósitos encubiertos en esa obra que fueron estudiados por Foucault en *Madness and Civilization*. Esto lo lleva a cabo a través de un efecto especular por medio del cual la crítica hecha en *Elogio* contra el conocimiento de su tiempo se replantea y refleja en *Memorias*, manifestándose en un cuestionamiento de la sociedad de su tiempo y sus nociones del conocimiento y otros conceptos tales como razón y locura.

Cuando se lee *Memorias* llama la atención no solo la referencia directa que se hace a *Elogio* sino que específicamente sea en voz del personaje clasificado como loco. Es Quincas Borba quien hace alusión a un pasaje que él mismo dice que se encuentra en esa obra. Se trata del pasaje de los asnos que se rascan. Quincas dice así:

Erasmo, que en su *Elogio de la locura* escribió algunas cosas buenas, llamó la atención hacia la complacencia con que dos asnos se rascan uno a otro. Estoy lejos de rechazar esta observación de Erasmo; pero diré que

lo que él no dijo, a saber: que si uno de los asnos rasca mejor al otro, ése debe tener en sus ojos algún indicio especial de satisfacción ... No olvides que, como todo es una simple irradiación de Humanitas, el beneficio y sus efectos son fenómenos perfectamente admirables. (225-6)

A través de la lectura de ese pasaje se advierten unas intenciones que, a mi parecer y como demostraré en este ensayo, se diseminan por todo el texto. Es decir, en *Memorias* se lleva a cabo lo que Quincas menciona que él hará con el pasaje de *Elogio*. Según sus palabras, Quincas, aspira a comentar y a expandir lo expuesto sobre los asnos por Erasmo. La consecuencia que se desprende de esto es que para entender tanto el pasaje que alude a *Elogio* como a *Memorias*, primero, hay que recurrir al texto de Erasmo, luego, situar al pasaje dentro del contexto de *Memorias* y, por último, establecer una conexión. Un método igual o parecido es el que yo llevaré a cabo a continuación.

Dentro de *Elogio*, la Locura se refiere a los asnos que al rascarse se adulan unos a los otros. Del mismo modo sucede con los filósofos, a quienes constantemente se les compara con asnos. Después de sus rebuznosdiscursos, respondiendo a la necesidad humana, se adulan unos a otros. En *Memorias*, Quincas alude a ese pasaje en el momento en que Blas se siente perplejo por la reacción de su cuñado Cotrim ante la noticia enviada a un periódico que anunciaba el rotativo que Blas comenzaría a escribir. En su periódico Blas criticaría al ministerio. Puesto que Cotrim no quiere que lo relacionen con ese periódico, envía una declaración a otros periódicos, donde aclara su inconexión con la iniciativa de su cuñado. Blas no entiende cómo, a pesar de la ayuda que él le había provisto a su cuñado Cotrim, éste decide salvar responsabilidades en lo relacionado con su periódico. Ahora bien, al juntarse los dos textos, *Memorias* y *Elogio*, el acto de Cotrim se puede relacionar con las adulación que se hacen los asnos. Cotrim es como uno de los burros, que sacando a flote su naturaleza humana, su amor propio, indirectamente adula y se alía con los que ahora tienen la palabra y se asegura el beneficio de parte de los que tienen el poder que una vez Blas tuvo. Cotrim decide rascarse con los rebuznadores.

Sin embargo, ése no es el único lazo que podemos establecer entre *Elogio* y *Memorias*. Otro de los aspectos que resalta cuando se estudian estas obras es el punto de vista desde el cual ambas se narran. En *Elogio* la Locura expone su panegírico y reflexiona sobre sí misma usando la primera persona singular. Por otro lado, Blas también cuenta sus memorias utilizando básicamente la primera persona singular. Ambas obras usan el mismo recurso retórico y en mi opinión convierten en sinónimos a sus narradores. De acuerdo con Coetzee:

[I]n the monologue of Folly Erasmus dramatizes a well-established political position: that of the fool who claims license to criticize all and sundry without reprisal, since his

madness defines him as not fully a person and therefore not a political being with political desires and ambitions (1).

De cierta manera, sucede lo mismo en *Memorias*. No hay que olvidar que *Memorias* es escrita por un escritor difunto, por un ente no político que tiene inmunidad. Además, si se toma en cuenta lo postulado por Platón y afirmado en *Elogio*, de que la inspiración del escritor es una clase de locura (38), se puede argüir que el escritor muerto es también un escritor loco que habla sobre sí mismo, como la locura. Así que, en definitivas, en ambos libros tenemos narradores locos cuyas locuras los sitúan en el margen, a cierta distancia de la situación. Además, para acentuar ese distanciamiento, ambos narradores le agregan cierto humor a lo que cuenta, según mi opinión, para enseñar deleitando. Por último, si a esto le añadimos que en *Memorias*, como mostraré más adelante, Blas se convierte en símbolo de la humanidad, podemos, entonces, concluir que locura, Blas y humanidad son conceptos casi intercambiables.

También hay similitud entre *Elogio* y *Memorias* en cuanto a la visión sobre la vida que ambas presentan. Para ambas obras la vida es una representación, un espectáculo. Al respecto, durante su delirio, Blas ve pasar la vida de la humanidad y se refiere a ella en esto términos: 'Tal era el espectáculo; acerbo y curioso espectáculo' (44). Por otro lado, la Locura señala: 'Pues bien, ¿qué es la vida una farsa en la que, oculto detrás de una máscara, cada cual representaba su papel hasta que el director les ordena retirarse del escenario?' (59). Las implicaciones que tienen estas visiones son, en primer lugar, la de dar la impresión de hacer del hombre un ser desamparado que vive a la merced de fuerzas superiores (un director) y, en segundo lugar, el de convertir la vida en una ilusión.

Sin embargo, ¿es la vida sólo una representación, una ilusión? No, la visión de la vida que se presenta en esta novela es bastante amplia. Consecuentemente, uno de los aspectos más evidentes es el de describirla como un valle de miserias. Donde mejor se presenta esto en *Memorias* es a través de la narración del delirio de Blas, el cual se convierte en un evento clave. Durante su delirio Blas, acompañado por la Naturaleza o Pandora (el director), se convierte en un tomo de la *Summa Theologica*. La *Summa* es un texto que por su extensión parece contener un caudal casi infinito de conocimientos. Ese texto es similar a la humanidad: en ella todo parece estar contenido. Además, de acuerdo con Paula K. Speck, 'the book is one of Machado's favorites metaphor for man himself' (13). El hombre es como un texto escrito que puede leerse y que, a su vez, se convierte en un tejido de muchos textos. También, de acuerdo con *A Dictionary of Symbols* de Jean Chevalier y Alain Gheerbrant, el libro es símbolo de la humanidad (112). Entonces, a través de la metamorfosis Blas-libro-hombrehumanidad, Blas se constituye en representante del hombre o en uno de los múltiples textos importantes de los que conforman la humanidad. Es un espacio en el cual se ha escrito algo, es también un poco de lo mismo, sólo que en una edición nueva. Es por eso que tras observar

y repasar la historia de la humanidad, Blas repasa su propia vida; su vida es una muestra de la de todos.

Ahora, para que Blas pueda repasar su vida, la Naturaleza lo sitúa en una posición alta y desde allí, entonces, él contempla, la miseria humana que se repite una y otra vez:

Tendí la mirada sobre una de las vertientes y contemplé ... una reducción de los siglos y un desfilar de todos ellos, las razas todas, todas las pasiones, el tumulto de los imperios, la guerra de los apetitos y de los odios, la destrucción recíproca de los seres y las cosas. (44)

Del mismo modo, en *Elogio* hay un pasaje que es casi idéntico, en cuanto a contenido, a la descripción del delirio de Blas. En el mismo la Locura dice:

Si alguno entre vosotros pudiera ser llevado a las alturas en que los poetas colocan a Júpiter ¿qué vería? Pues una multitud de males que afligen a la humanidad: el nacimiento es inundo, la crianza es penosa, la infancia se halla rodeada de peligros ... Vería además las enfermedades que nos acechan, los innumerables accidentes que nos amenazan y la muchedumbre de trastornos que amargan los momentos más dulces. (62)

Es muy evidente. Tanto para Blas como para la Locura, la vida está llena de males. Se puede llegar a esa conclusión asumiendo una postura de distanciamiento, o sea, mirando desde arriba. También está muy claro, como más adelante mostraré, que ambas obras están de acuerdo en que lo que le permite seguir viviendo de una manera mejor al hombre es la ilusión, en otras palabras, la locura positiva. De acuerdo con la Locura:

Existen, entonces, dos clases de locura: una es la que asciende de los infiernos cada vez que las vengadoras Furias vomitan sus serpientes para despertar en los hombres la fiebre de guerra, la insaciable sed de oro, el crimen del incesto, los amores sacrílegos, el parricidio y otros horrores, o para clavar en las conciencias culpables el aterrador aguijón del remordimiento.

La otra, bien distinta, es la que emana de mí, y es el mayor bien que se puede esperar. Esta dulce locura se manifiesta cada vez que una ilusión libra al alma de dolorosas preocupaciones y la sumerge en un mar de delicias. (72)

De esas descripciones se desprende que el primer tipo de locura es más bien la locura negativa del diario vivir del hombre normal, mientras que la segunda es la locura positiva. En otras palabras, la diferencia entre ambas es que la primera es el motor que mueve a la humanidad hacia las grandes empresas que promueven "todo tipo

de violencias morales, políticas, etc." (Subirats 20). Por otro lado, la segunda es lo que facilita la vida del hombre, llenándola de una ilusión que borra los contornos de la miseria. Esa locura le cierra los ojos a la verdad al hombre.

De acuerdo con lo que expresa Locura, la mayoría de los hombres poseen el uno o el otro tipo de locura.² En *Memorias*, el alienista se hace eco de ese planteamiento. La locura domina en el hombre y en la humanidad y su carácter se traduce en un desear no morir. El iluso no quiere morir porque no considera a la vida en su realidad, sino que la ve a través de un lente llamado ilusión. Por esa razón se aduce que la locura acarrea ventajas. Por el contrario, los pocos que no poseen cierta locura, los sabios, son los que se dedican a contemplar la vida. Sin embargo, ellos también son los que se desilusionan y desean la muerte. Dice la Locura:

Quien meditara sobre [las miserias de la vida] ... acabaría tentado de seguir el ejemplo de las doncellas de Mileto y buscando el consuelo en el suicidio.

Sin embargo, ¿habéis inquirido alguna vez quiénes fueron los hombres que pusieron fin a sus vidas para acabar con sus pesares? Fueron aquellos pretendidos sabios a que nos acabamos de referir. Sin mencionar a Diógenes, Xenócrates, Catón, Casio y Bruto, deseo citar solamente a Quirón, que pudiendo disfrutar de la inmortalidad prefirió la muerte. (62-3; mi énfasis)

Añade, la locura 'es la única cosa que mantiene la juventud y atrasa la venida de la muerte' (39). También dice que 'el más necio llega a ser el más feliz, pues es cierto que la tristeza es un anticipo de la muerte y conviene huir de ella y dejarnos llevar por el placer, que hace más amable la existencia' (48).

En otras palabras, la aparente sabiduría termina siendo una reflexión sobre la vida que conduce a la tristeza, a la desilusión y a desear la muerte. Por el contrario, la locura es la ilusión y el cubrir las miserias para encontrar placer en ellas y desear vivir. Esta locura es lo que estimula al hombre a continuar viviendo.

Si tomamos en consideración las definiciones de locura y sabiduría, entonces, se puede señalar que la Locura a través de su discurso no hace otra cosa que invertir los significados de esos términos. De esa manera, los cuerdos o sabios se convierten en los que normalmente llamamos locos, en la mayoría de la gente que se afana por vivir, y, del mismo modo, los locos se convierten en esa minoría que se diferencia de los demás, en los sabios que buscan no vivir. Asimismo, esa inversión se hace extensiva a *Memorias*. Los llamados locos que desfilan por esta novela parecen unos cuerdos-iluminados-sabios que viven en un estado más avanzado que la gente cuerda o normal. A través de sus discursos o de los contextos de las situaciones donde éstos se presentan, hacen patente que sus locuras consisten, más bien, en un estado de diferenciación distanciada. Sus locuras estriban en estar colocados en una posición o espacio diferente al que ocupa la mayoría de las personas. Esas

posiciones o espacios se pueden comparar con puentes cuya función es separar a la vida de la muerte. Desde ellos se puede observar de una manera distanciada y crítica el espectáculo de la miseria de la vida. Consecuentemente, ese contemplar los lleva a la desilusión y a desear morir, o en otras palabras, a asumir el comportamiento que la Locura les atribuye a los sabios.

Sobre esa transformación de loco a sabio, María José Somerlate Barbosa expresa lo siguiente:

Frequently Machado's... characters escape into either madness, sickness, delirious states or reveries. During these 'escapes' the characters in Machado's texts reveal their visions of life and investigate the so-called 'truth' that guides our notions of beings in the world. Machado's characters often evade 'reality' through hallucination, delirium, or by creating their own philosophical systems and metaphysical speculations. (19)

Según esta afirmación, los locos de Machado se vuelven locos para escapar de la aparente realidad de la vida. Sin embargo, a mi parecer, esa locura también se convierte en un medio a través del cual se les transporta a estados superiores de sabiduría. De igual manera opina J. R. Maia Neto: 'Instead of sheer madness, Folly represents the moment of Brás Cuba's highest lucidity' (89).² En *Memorias* hay varios ejemplos que evidencian esa inversión o subversión, siendo el más claro de todos Blas.

Durante toda su vida a Blas se le encuentra envuelto en amores, estudios y hasta se obsesiona con un emplasto que, según él, prometía traerle fama. Durante toda su vida cuerda-loca negativamente se siente atraído por la vida. Es un loco que no sólo quiere encontrar la fama a través de su emplasto, sino que desea perpetuar la vida y la miseria que la acompañan primero a través de un hijo que le ruega a su amante que le dé y luego a través de un libro. Sin embargo, entre otras ocasiones, es durante su delirio que se le altera la realidad, y que ve la vida diferente. Dice él mismo 'los ojos del delirio son diferentes' (44). Como consecuencia de esto, en vez de ver la vida llena de ilusión, sucede lo contrario. Durante su delirio se le revela su vida a través de la vida de la miserable humanidad. Al final del mismo le pide a la Naturaleza que se lo trague, o sea, que termine con su vida. En otras palabras, durante su delirio se convierte en un sabio que después de haber reflexionado sobre la vida se siente atraído por la muerte. Ocurre la desilusión final y se le cae el velo que cubre las apariencias.

El caso del emplasto es otro ejemplo que demuestra que durante su llamada vida cuerda Blas no era sino un loco. A través de esa obsesionante empresa él tenía el propósito de 'aliviar a nuestra melancólica humanidad' (33). Si como pensaban en el Renacimiento los propulsores de la teoría de los humores que la melancolía es una de las causas de la locura, entonces se puede afirmar que Blas sabía que la humanidad estaba loca.³ Además, a él también se le puede catalogar de loco si se le compara con el alquimista que

describe la Locura. Ella señala que locos también son 'aquéllos que se entregan al estudio de las ciencias ocultas, creyendo poder trocar la naturaleza de las cosas por medios misteriosos e ignorados y persiguiendo incesantemente una quimérica quintaesencia'(75). Él es un loco entre locos que quiere curar la locura con otra locura.

Ahora bien, otro caso descrito en *Memorias* que sugiere que la que los hombres llaman locura no es sino una iluminación de sabio es el del hombre que va en el barco en el cual Blas se embarca hacia Portugal. Él es un hombre que se volvió loco como consecuencia de la muerte de una hija. En ese viaje ocurre una tormenta, y mientras todos están aterrorizados, el loco ríe y baila. No le teme a la muerte. Más bien, su alegría ante ese evento pudiera interpretarse como la bienvenida a una ocasión propicia para la muerte y para dejar atrás las miserias. Parece que ese loco posee un conocimiento que los demás no tienen, y por esa razón, su actitud ante la tormenta y sus posibles consecuencias es diferente. Además, con relación a este incidente, vale la pena mencionar que está en diálogo con el simbolismo de la nave de los locos y el viejo mito del viaje.

La nave de los locos fue una realidad durante la Edad Media. Era una nave que llevaba un cargamento de locos de ciudad en ciudad. Foucault arguye que esa nave durante ese tiempo era altamente simbólica: era emblemática de los hombres que iban en busca de su razón (9). También tenía un significado ritualista. A estos hombres locos se les colocaba en una nave en medio del mar. Así, el agua desempeñaba dos funciones: purificaba y conducía. De esa manera, 'Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman sets sails in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when disembarks' (11). A los locos se les situaba en una posición intermedia de la cual ellos no podían escapar. Se les hacía perder contacto con su punto de origen y también sentirse sin contacto con la nueva tierra a la cual alguna vez llegarían. Su nueva casa (la nave) se encuentra en el infinito, en el medio de dos mundos. Así pues, es la posición de Blas. En primer lugar, él va en un barco; en segundo lugar, va en busca de un grado universitario, en otras palabras, del conocimiento, de la razón. Además, también va a instancias de su padre quien busca que, a través de esa experiencia, Blas se purifique y enmiende su vida, lejos de Marcela o la tentación, presagio de su destrucción. El subtexto aquí es el propio Machado como si a través del viaje de su escritura pudiera justificarse y exorcisar su locura.

Finalmente, Quincas Borba es otro personaje a través del cual la locura se manifiesta. Quincas es loco porque se lo dicen y porque, aunque presenta un discurso filosófico internamente muy coherente, su actitud ante la vida es diferente. Él dice que su filosofía es de la miseria (127). Sin embargo, ante esa miseria él resume optimismo. Se confiesa contento porque ha trascendido una fase, y está más allá de lo que está la gente cuerda. Desde su nueva perspectiva puede observar las miserias de la vida y no amargarse: 'si hay algo que pueda hacerme olvidar las amarguras de la vida es el gusto de haber dado por fin con la verdad y la felicidad' (167).

Es muy obvio que tanto en *Memorias* como en *Elogio* la locura se manifiesta como un estado superior. Hemos visto que esto se ejemplifica a través de Blas, del hombre loco del barco y de Quincas. Sin embargo, todavía no he examinado el planteamiento de que a través de las filosofías de Blas y de Quincas, a otro nivel, también se arremete contra las filosofías o locuras que pululaban durante el tiempo en que se escribió *Memorias*.⁴ Esto se convierte en otro punto en común con *Elogio*. Ambas obras critican las filosofías predominantes durante los tiempos en que se escribieron. También, ambas obras equiparan la aparente razón que postulaban las filosofías coetáneas con locura. Esto concuerda con lo que dice Foucault sobre *Elogio* y la manera de ver la locura. Él aduce que durante el Renacimiento la locura era sinónimo de conocimiento. Al sabio se le representaba como el hombre que era tentado por la curiosidad del saber. Sin embargo, la sabiduría les era prohibida porque presagiaba el reino de Satán y el fin del mundo (12). También, durante ese periodo el loco se convirtió en aquél que poseía un conocimiento invisible, no real, de las cosas. Ese conocimiento lo engañaba y lo hacía vivir en un estado en el cual no conocía sufrimientos; por eso vivía enajenado y vuelto hacia sí mismo. De esa manera él se convertía en símbolo del desorden del mundo. También se convertía en símbolo del hombre que, por querer de la sabiduría del árbol del Edén, comió del fruto prohibido y, como consecuencia, instaló el pecado en el mundo.

Por su lado, *Memorias* se escribió a finales de siglo XIX cuando el positivismo era una de las corrientes filosóficas más importantes. A través de este influjo, impulsado por Comte, se proclamaba que el desarrollo de la historia la encaminaba hacia una fase positiva. La culminación del proceso histórico se obtendría cuando se hallará la aspiración de la humanidad que, entre otras cosas, se caracterizaría por el encuentro de la ciencia positiva que rechaza toda la sobrenaturalización y convertía al filósofo en un generalista. La atmósfera que imperaría, entonces, sería la del altruismo. El positivismo se constituyó en una religión que tenía como objeto 'la Humanidad en su pasado, presente y futuro como el Gran Ser' (Ferrater Mora 316).

No obstante, es interesante notar que aunque la escritura de *Memorias* fue mediatizada por la efervescencia del positivismo, *Memorias* no lo glorifica, por el contrario, lo parodia. De manera tal que mientras que por un lado el positivismo aseguraba que la humanidad se encontraba en su momento de mayor esplendor (Maia Neto 95), Blas con su filosofía de la miseria postula lo opuesto. También, según las palabras de Maia Neto, 'Quincas Borba's doctrine caricatures precisely the excessive pretension, enthusiastic optimism, and strong dogmatism that most of Machados's contemporaries draw from the evolutionary philosophies of the nineteenth century' (92). En otras palabras, a través de Quincas y su filosofía, *Memorias* critica el culto que se le rendía a la razón y a la ciencia y compara a los filósofos con locos que poseen un conocimiento que, por su exceso, los vuelve locos.

Memorias también ridiculiza el supuesto del positivismo de que

en la sociedad imperaría el altruismo. Por todos lados hay instancias del egoísmo del hombre en esa obra. La ambiciosa Marcela y Virgilia son dos ejemplos de esto. Del mismo modo, estas dos mujeres satirizan el lugar especial que la mujer ocupaba en esa filosofía. Ahora bien, otro ejemplo que niega el altruismo del positivismo es Quincas y su filosofía. A través de su filosofía Quincas ve la guerra como algo sublime y apoya la lucha y el amor propio como medio para asegurarse un lugar en el entorno. Aunque el nombre de su filosofía humanitas, tiene sugerencias altruistas, el yo es el centro de la misma; eso se convierte en la práctica que contradice a la teoría. De esa manera, el humanitas y, a través de un efecto especular, el positivismo y su deseo de hacer de la humanidad el centro de su predicación se convierten en teorías irreales. Viéndolos de esa manera, el humanitas y el contexto verdadero del momento en el Brasil (el positivismo) también se convierten en adulteraciones del humanismo del Renacimiento que, en una de sus vertientes, abogaba por un cristianismo práctico basado en el amor y la paz. Mientras que el humanitas de Quincas promueve la violencia como medio de obtener lo deseado, el humanismo que, por ejemplo, Erasmo exponía, se pronunciaba en contra de la guerra y alentaba al sacrificio. Según Héctor Subirats, Erasmo pensaba que 'la guerra es el mal por excelencia, el peor de los crímenes contra la humanidad y contra la ley de Cristo' (9). Esa ley de Cristo era una ética que predicaba un cristianismo en espíritu y la caridad, la simplicidad y la pureza (Subirats 9).

Elogio de la locura también tuvo un impacto ridiculizador durante su tiempo. A diferencia de *Memorias*, ese libro se inscribe dentro de la corriente más fuerte de la época: el humanismo.⁵ Sin embargo, apoyándose en el humanismo, critica los influjos filosóficos que todavía circulaban. Me refiero al estoicismo y la escolástica. De acuerdo con Sampayo, 'el *Elogio de la locura*... es una tremenda sátira dirigida contra la escolástica y sus pretensiones científicas' (15). Por otro lado, Bataillon afirma que la filosofía de Erasmo era un 'desafío a la escolástica, esa filosofía racionante que se proclamaba llave de la ciencia de Dios' (88). La Locura cuando habla también hace sus planteamientos de una manera directa, por ejemplo, cuando asevera que 'los estoicos afirman que la sabiduría no es otra cosa que seguir los consejos de la razón; y la locura, por el contrario, en obedecer las pasiones' (46). Aunque ellos proclamaban lo anterior, afirma Locura que para dedicarse a filosofar, aunque no lo admitan, tienen que ser poseídos por ella (38).

Por otro lado, a través de *Memorias* también se critica a la escolástica. Sin embargo, esa crítica tiene un efecto especular que incide sobre el positivismo (igual que sucede con la filosofía de Quincas). La crítica se lleva a cabo a través de la transformación de Blas en *Summa Theologica*, la cual es una de las principales obras de la escolástica. Como sabemos, durante el humanismo se criticaba fuertemente la escolástica, por la misma razón que la Locura lo hace, por su uso excesivo de las palabras abstractas y por su enciclopedismo. Los filósofos confiaban en el poder de sus palabras y con ellas querían captar y representar las cosas. Sin embargo, le

otorgaban el primer lugar a las palabras y a los grandes discursos y se olvidaban del verdadero cristianismo. Pero, ¿cómo *Memorias* critica esto? La crítica se puede observar en la culminación del delirio de Blas. Una página de la *Summa*, o sea, las palabras y el espacio que ellas ocupan terminan siendo en esta obra un objeto de juego. Se convierten en una bola con la cual el gato juega. Retomando, pues, la metáfora del hombre como texto, con seguridad se puede afirmar que él, en última instancia, se convierte en esa página (sinécdoque) y en un objeto de juego de las palabras. Esas palabras, como bolas, giran sobre sí y terminan siendo vanas e inútiles con relación a su propósito inicial, pues no rescatan al hombre sino que lo dirigen hacia esa función de juguete. Esta representación, como anticipé, tiene un efecto especular a través del cual no sólo se critica a la escolástica sino que también se critica a los filósofos del tiempo de Blas que hicieron de las palabras y su uso excesivo tanto un instrumento de juego que envolvía al hombre, como un poder que lo recluía en la celda de la opinión pública.⁶ Hay varios ejemplos que ilustran esto último. Sin embargo, uno de ellos es el caso de Eugenia. Aunque ella le agradaba ciertamente, Blas la rechazó por su defecto físico y por lo que pudieran decir los demás. Otro ejemplo es el de Cotrim, ya discutido al principio de este ensayo. A través de su reacción ante el periódico de Blas, demuestra que le interesa la opinión pública y por mantenerla de su lado, es capaz de traicionar a su familia.

Como puede verse, *Memorias* y *Elogio* tienen muchos aspectos en común y es porque *Memorias* 'con-cita' a *Elogio*. La intertextualidad y el diálogo entre estas obras son muy evidentes. Ante esto surge la siguiente pregunta: ¿por qué? Es que *Memorias*, al igual que *Elogio*, crítica la sociedad de su tiempo y partiendo de esa semejanza, aprovecha los recursos temáticos y retóricos de *Elogio*. Es decir, de igual manera que Quincas dice que hará con el pasaje de *Elogio*, *Memorias*, a través de su lectura y referencias a *Elogio*, comenta ese texto y amplía y hace extensivo sus planteamientos

a su momento presente. Consecuentemente, por medio de esas apropiaciones *Memorias* enfatiza que la vida y sus miserias son como un eterno retomo; son como Blas, sólo ediciones diferentes de lo mismo. Todo es repetición y siempre el hombre incurre en los mismos errores, en las mismas locuras una y otra vez sin tomar en cuenta la experiencia.

Aún más, tanto *Memorias* como *Elogio* ridiculizan las pretensiones del iluso hombre, del loco o de la humanidad, y nos dan un retrato moral del hombre y de su tiempo. A través del humor y de un 'loco o loca' que habla, invitan a reflexionar sobre la vida y las filosofías y les proveen al hombre un espejo en el cual éste pueda ver su propia naturaleza. Se sabe que *Elogio* tenía el propósito de contribuir en la reforma del hombre de su tiempo para convertirlo en un verdadero cristiano. Quería que el énfasis se les quitara a las palabras y se pusiera en la práctica de los principios cristianos. Por otro lado, *Memoria* se inscribe dentro del marco del positivismo y de la confianza en el hombre. Invitaba a sus contemporáneos a reformar a su vana sociedad, llena de intrigas amorosas y políticas y filosofías huecas, y donde la opinión de los demás sobre los demás tenía gran importancia. En última instancia, ambas obras nos remiten a la cueva de Platón. Nos hacen pensar que la humanidad loca es como los hombres que sólo ven las apariencias de las cosas, lo invisible, lo subterráneo, las siluetas, dentro de la cueva/vida donde viven. Ambas obras, sin embargo, alientan al hombre a no curiosear demasiado y a no proclamar con confianza extrema su representación de la razón, del conocimiento. Después de todo, razón y locura están mezcladas. Lo mejor es un conocimiento sin pretensiones, un conocimiento que no quiera sobrepasar la medida del hombre. De lo contrario, el exceso de razón, como el exceso de luz del sol, pudiera cegar a los hombres y convertirlos en seres que no perciben la *realidad* en su *realidad*, sino a través de la ilusión o una quimera.

NOTAS

¹ Según la opinión de Paula K. Peck, *Memorias* es una obra maestra por haberse constituido en 'a turning point in Machado de Assis's Fiction' y porque 'it anticipates many of the experiments of the "new novel" in twentieth-century Latin American' (7). Por otro lado, Julia Ramos expone lo siguiente:

Hasta la publicación de *Memorias*... la narrativa brasileña—inclusive la novelística machadiana de los 1870- se inscribía en los marcos determinados por el romanticismo europeo. *Memorias* evidencia un desbordamiento, la fuga machadiana del territorio que hasta entonces delimitaba su práctica literaria. Esa discontinuidad ha sido explicada por la crítica en términos de la fundación de una literatura 'sicológica' o de introspección' (79).

² 'Pero agrego con placer que entre éstos figura la inmensa mayoría de la humanidad, pues pocos son los que están libres de alguna forma de locura' (74).

³ Uno de los más grandes exponentes de la relación entre la locura y los humores fue el Dr. Juan Huarte de San Juan. El escribió un tratado que tuvo gran influencia en Europa. Su título es *Examen de ingenios* para la ciencia y fue publicado en 1575. En ese libro Huarte señala que la inteligencia normal resulta de un desequilibrio entre los humores y las características asociadas con ellos. El equilibrio entre los humores causaba que la persona fuera tonta. Por otro lado, el ingenio superior es causado por un desequilibrio masivo entre los humores, el cual se asocia con la demencia.

En otro tratado escrito por Andrés Velázquez, *Libro de Melancolía* (1585). El dice que el 'term melancholy appears here in its generally accepted sixteenth-century sense: a disturbance or alienation of the faculties of understanding or reason, without fever' (Johnson 16). Por otro lado, otro tratado escrito por Alfonso Ponce de Santa Cruz, *Diagnostico et cura affectum melancholicorum* (1699), dice que el humor de la melancolía se asociaba con la bili negra (Johnson 17).

⁴De acuerdo con Maia Neto, las filosofías del momento eran: el positivismo, el darwinismo y evolucionismo social de Spencer (94).

⁵'All historians agree that the word humanism is closely related to the Latin humanista, and also to the English noun humanity. Again, it is agreed that all humanists were especially interested in the study of classical literature. The Italian humanists were noted as a rule for their aim to exalt human nature, to exult in physical power and pleasure, to attack scholastic philosophy and ecclesiastical tyranny and to magnify the importance of the world of physical man as compared with life hereafter, where the soul or spirit will reign supreme' (Hyma 2).

Con relación al erasmismo y el humanismo Menéndez Pelayo, en una ponencia titulada *Contestación al discurso de ingreso de Al Bonilla y San Martín en la Real Academia de la Historia*, dijo lo siguiente:

[El erasmismo] fue una escuela de las dos antigüedades, en que el helenismo servía como de tránsito al cristianismo, y las lecciones de los filósofos y moralistas profanos encontraban su perfección

y complemento en las Sagradas Escrituras y en las obras de los Padres griegos y latinos, que Erasmo comenzó a depurar de los estragos del tiempo y de las copias bárbaras e infieles... fue un despertar de la conciencia religiosa. (Villanova 8)

⁶Según Foucault, hasta el siglo XIX las palabras que pueblan las lenguas siguen siendo aun lo que eran en la época clásica: representaciones duplicadas -representaciones cuyo papel es designar las representaciones, analizarlas, componerlas y descomponerlas para hacer surgir en ellas, con el sistema de sus identidades y de sus diferencias, el principio general de un orden [Dios]' (*Las palabras y las cosas* 217).

Las palabras eran la imagen de Dios, del centro. Sin embargo, durante el nacimiento de las ciencias humanas, y de la sociología, de la cual Comte es el padre, las palabras pasaron a ser instrumentos a través de los cuales se examinaba al hombre como objeto y sujeto y centro del mundo. Las palabras, así, se convirtieron en lo que permitía dar fe del conocimiento que se encontraba en el hombre.

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"La patria es impecable y diamantina": Performing *Diamantina* in Cristina Rivera Garza's (Non)Fiction

Thania Muñoz Davaslioglu
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

ABSTRACT: Cristina Rivera Garza's (non) fiction trajectory is a dialogue of interests threaded by her passions for translation, history, poetics, among many other topics. In this article, *Diamantina*—a repetitive character in the author's corpora—is traced to analyze how gender and cultural memory are portrayed in *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) *Ningún reloj cuenta esto* (2002) and *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido* (2011). By commenting on Ramón López Velarde's famous stanza "La patria es impecable y diamantina" in "Suave patria" (1921), Rivera Garza proposes an alternative way of performing nation by women who resist the virtuous adjectives exalted by Velarde in post-revolutionary Mexico, which can be threaded to the glitter used in recent public demonstrations against femicides and gender-based violence. *Narrative memory* is proposed to name the intersections of intertextuality and cultural memory in her literary cultural production that goes beyond the borders of a nation. This article centralizes the short-story, "La alineación también tiene su belleza" in *Ningún reloj cuenta esto*, which is set in San Antonio, Texas and New York City, to analyze Mexican canonical representations of women as Patria from a transnational lens.

KEYWORDS: Latin American literature, Mexican literature, canon, narrative memory, intertextuality, translation, nation, glitter revolution.

Cristina Rivera Garza is an award-winning Mexican writer, historian, translator, a Distinguished Professor in Hispanic Studies¹, and a 2020 distinguished McArthur Fellow. As an author and scholar, she is well-known for her historical academic work on 20th Century mental hospitals in Mexico City, her extensive literary trajectory, and for her commentaries on Mexico/United States border politics published on social media platforms, academic journals, and international newspapers. Rivera Garza's 2002 compilation of short stories *Ningún reloj cuenta esto* (*No clock tells this*²) in particular offers narratives that are particularly noted for their exploration of the cultural and literary meanings of borders, migration, translation, and writing that *tells us*, as the title of the collection makes clear, stories that are not normally *told*. This article centralizes one of its stories, "La alineación también tiene su belleza"³, *Diamantina*—a repetitive character in the author's fiction—along Rivera Garza's nonfiction, to analyze how these represent patria/nation, within the literary and political contexts of Mexico from a transnational lens.

To explore these praxes, *narrative memory* is proposed to critically name the intersections of intertextuality and cultural memory in Rivera Garza's literary cultural production. The term guides the analysis on the gendered and patriotic Mexican literary tradition from the 20th century confronted by the author from the coordinates of New York City. The convergence of these topics will be expounded first through the characteristics of the short story's protagonist, a translator who identifies herself as a Mexican

immigrant. This will be followed by an analysis of how *Diamantina* challenges the representation of "nation" in "Suave Patria" – a poem published in 1921 by the Mexican poet Ramón López Velarde – across fiction, poetry, and essayistic texts by Rivera Garza– from her first published novel, *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) to *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido* (2011) – a multi-genre compilation.

"Suave Patria" marks the centennial celebration of Mexico's independence from Spain and it was published by the prestigious cultural literary magazine *El maestro* directed by José Vasconcelos – Dean of the National University of Mexico at the time. In 1921, López Velarde was already well-known writer in the most important political and literary circles of Mexico City (Mendiola 70). Once published, "Suave patria" was hailed as a poem that moved away from the imagery of Mexico City and invited the reader to Mexico's provinces and its stanzas have been deemed by critics as intimate, celebratory, and a portrait of everyday life in Mexico's provinces (Granados 38). Throughout this poem, Velarde rejects the grandiloquence of past national epic discourses, as the poetic voice declares with the use of "sordina", "muted", in its first stanzas: "Diré con una épica sordina: la Patria es impecable y diamantina" (304). "Diamantina" can be translated into English as "diamantine", "glittering", and Velarde's consecutive stanzas are imbued with nationalism; "patria" is the homeland, a woman, the "motherland":

Inaccesible al deshonor, floreces;

creeré en ti, mientras una mexicana
en su tápalo lleve los dobles
de la tienda, a las seis de la mañana,
y al estrenar su lujo, quede lleno
el país, del aroma del estreno (304)

The commemorative tone of "newness" is melodically embodied and scented by the Mexican woman wearing a "tápalo" (a shawl) carrying home fresh dough. The clamor these poetic scenes received by major literary and political figures at the time of publication and decades after, led to Velarde being labeled "national poet" by Mexican president Luis Echeverría in 1971 (1970-1976) (Waldron 59). Velarde's poem built an imaginary of the nation that has been lauded, critique, re-appropriated, and confronted through generations as Carlos Monsiváis exemplifies: "Ya para 1922-1923, 'La suave patria' era un poema que circulaba profusamente como parte del canon de la mexicanidad, cosa que hasta ahora se repite y que todavía seguimos explotando y explorando sin término" (Monsiváis 1996); for example, Jose Emilio Pacheco's "Alta traición" (1969) – which is also dedicated to the Mexican nation – has been argued to be a continuation of patriotic poetic tradition initiated by Lopez Velarde (Higashi 91). Octavio Paz, Mexico's 1990 Nobel Prize winner in literature, wrote one of the most famous essays about his poetry in 1965, "El camino de la pasión – Ramón López Velarde" in *Cuadrivio*, in which he celebrates this poem and praises it for its musicality and difficult aesthetic: "Nadie sino López Velarde podría haber escrito esas líneas [...] López Velarde es un poeta difícil y proclama una estética difícil" (90). Rivera Garza's positionality has been to reimagine the poem's adjectives, tones, and images in multiple instances; to undertake a critique of a "patria" that has been deemed a "virtuous woman" and to question if Mexico's history is still worthy of celebration and "diamantina". Her contemporary reading and interpretation of this poem also unfolds transnational representations of "patria" beyond its geopolitical borders as it will be argued in the analysis of "La alienación también tiene su belleza" and *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido* [Dolerse].

Ningún reloj cuenta esto offers a textual form at the borders of genre: poetry, novel, essay, and historical research. This is Rivera Garza's second collection of narratives that are particularly noted for their exploration of the cultural and literary meaning of borders and migration, which is a critical point for "La alienación también tiene su belleza". At the beginning of this twenty-two page short story, the nameless protagonist describes a job interview conducted in San Antonio Texas by Diamantina Skvorc, the owner of "Diamantina Beauty Products Inc." Diamantina, a Texas native married to an American of Croatian heritage, inherited nine letters from her grandmother and is looking for a person to translate the them from Spanish to English. Diamantina needs both a translator and a cultural intermediary, as we can infer from the following avowal: "Yo no las entiendo, la letra es muy irregular y habla de cosas que no conozco. México. La familia. Secretos" (Rivera Garza 2002,

47) This quote alludes to the double task of the translator, who must be fluent in both Spanish, and the history and culture of Mexico itself. The task of the cultural translation seems unproblematic to Diamantina, especially after the protagonist tells her about her studies in Mexico, her repertoire of Spanish practical jokes, and mastery of the romantic tongue twister: "[...] para qué quiero que me quiera el que no quiero que me quiera si el que quiero que me quiera no me quiere como yo quiero que me quiera" (Rivera Garza 2002, 44). The narrator demonstrates her linguistic and cultural proficiency with respect to Mexico, and consequently Diamantina hires her. Yet from the moment of the first exchange between the translator and the businesswoman, one can distinguish cultural tensions arising from the apposition of Mexican and U.S cultural paradigms, and from the positions of English and Spanish as languages spoken in the United States. The translator places the spotlight on these tensions by showing herself to be critical of Diamantina for being a woman of Mexican origin, born in Texas, who speaks no Spanish.

This critique is extended through the text's representation of the job interview, which emphasizes economic and cultural divides. The business owner, in contrast to the translator, is an embodiment of excess, carelessness, and economic privilege:

Estábamos a orillas del río, viendo pasar a través de los cristales el lento trotar de los turistas y los reflejos del sol sobre el lomo imperceptible del agua. Aún si no conseguía el trabajo, esta comida me resarcía de dos meses de hambruna vegetariana, y otros más de paseos nómadas y solitarios sobre la pasarela del río sin más de dos centavos en las bolsas (Rivera Garza 2002, 44).

At the same time, during the interview, the internal monologue of the narrator reveals that Diamantina is not a unique case: "Diamantina tenía el mismo rostro moreno y todas las buenas maneras de las damas enriquecidas que me habían mantenido con becas y préstamos escolares hasta el buen día en que recibí mi título y me encontré sin trabajo" (Rivera Garza 2002, 44) The affluent women of Latina/Latin American origin with whom the narrator is familiar hide their heritage, like the owner who hides it under the luster of her name and makeup. In recognizing intersecting practices of concealment, the story also emphasizes that these practices boast strategic merits in the U.S. environment, as Diamantina confirms: "La costumbre, ya sabes, querida, y esto de andar en negocios donde los López Ramírez no suenan ni tantito como los Jameson o Smith [...]" (Rivera Garza 2002, 45). Like her prosperous cosmetics company, which one of its characteristics is to redefine faces, for Diamantina the covering up – "passing" and/or whitewashing" – of her "Latin" surname is a savvy business strategy.

While this strategy of "passing" rewards Diamantina well in the business environment, it fails her when she tries to understand her family's past. It is relevant to point out at this moment that the

Spanish name *Diamantina* derives from an adjective that describes objects that sparkle or shine like diamonds, without necessarily being diamonds. In addition to the sense of dazzling appearance this name encodes, in the story it also stands for a cultural and familial legacy, because it is a name the owner shares with the grandmother whose letters she wishes to have translated. But, the legacy of the name is not only part of the narrative economy of the short story, but also of Rivera Garza bibliography and Mexico's literary history.

When she accepts the translation commission, the protagonist also consents to move to New York for nine weeks, where *Diamantina* is doing business. During their first night in the city, *Diamantina* gives the narrator the pack of letters to translate. The letters recount the unraveling of the grandmother's clandestine romance in the early 20th century. The translator did not expect the tenderness and melancholic tone of the letters to make such a strong impression on her and their descriptions intensifies their effect on her:

Eran cortas y tristes, de esas cosas que se escriben con el alma en un hilo, a escondidas de uno mismo, bajo la luz de una vela. Tan íntimas que daba pena verlas. [...] Leyéndolas una tras otra a toda prisa llegué a pensar que, tal vez, Pessoa había estado equivocado: las cartas de amor no eran ridículas (Rivera Garza 2002, 50).

While they reveal family secrets, the letters also create a pathway to discourses of another era. Through the motifs of the epistolary form and the practice of translation, Rivera Garza also stages a different kind of "passing", a crossing between different contexts and genres to echo a *narrative memory*.

During the second day of her stay in New York, the translator is invited to attend a cultural festival for the former Yugoslavia. For *Diamantina*, the festival represents merely a commercial space in which to promote her cosmetic products and exercise her influence. The translator wryly remarks that *Diamantina* is not alone in recognizing the social and economic capital she holds: "Tanto demócratas como republicanos la llamaban de cuando en cuando para que endosara las candidaturas de unos o de otros y ella, pensando en la propaganda para su negocio, lo hacía dependiendo de los riesgos y las ganancias" (Rivera Garza 2002, 49). It is for this reason that, much like her cosmetics, *Diamantina* uses the translator to attract praise and promote herself; during the event, she introduces the protagonist as her niece, and announces that "Su español es perfecto –decía como nota introductoria a quien la quisiera escuchar" (Rivera Garza 2002, 53).

The festival reflects the exploitation of cultural spaces for economic gain. The translator rejects the exploitative dynamics of this space and retreats to the hotel's bar, where she meets *Diamantina*'s son, José María Skvorc and Federico Hoffman. After watching José María seduce a woman in the bar, Hoffman exclaims: "Todo es resultado de esta maldita alienación – continuó

-, se conocen aquí, se desconocen allá. Todo empieza, todo acaba y nada pasa en realidad" (Rivera Garza 2002, 55) While listening to Hoffman, the protagonist is affected by the sudden eruption of the grandmother's words into her consciousness, starting with the command "–Escúchalo bien, querida –me susurró la mujer marchita desde su lejano aposento" (Rivera Garza 2002, 55). The voice of the elder *Diamantina* does not surprise her; on the contrary, it persuades her to converse with Hoffman and she spends the night wandering in the streets of New York with the man who spurns alienation. From this moment onwards in the story, the grandmother's letters exert a guiding force on the actions of the translator and transform her use of language.

On her second date, the narrator cannot find the words to spark Hoffman's interest. She describes him as a man who belongs to another era. The translator understands this inability as the effect of a distance or gap she characterizes as *temporal*. To breach this verbal barrier, she turns to the grandmother's language:

Fue tan fácil, tan sencillo, querida *Diamantina*; de la misma manera que me enamoré de tus cartas, así caí dentro del amor de Federico Hoffman [...] Y, *Diamantina*, lo siento, pero para acercarme yo no tenía más que tus palabras, no te tenía más que a ti [...] *mi amor, carne mi carne*, los copos de nieve cayendo sobre su abrigo, *sangre de mi sangre*, deshaciéndose sobre sus mejillas blancas, *amor mío*, entretejiéndose con los besos y los abrazos y las ganas de que esto nunca acabará (Rivera Garza 2002, 59).

The phrases in italics, which are those of the elder *Diamantina*, emphasize a relevance of romantic discourse in this text, which the translator does not feel able to produce herself. The usage of this type language calls to mind terms identified by Roland Barthes in *Lover's Discourse – Fragments* (1978). Barthes' relevant work provides discussions on "love", but also on other intersecting terms ("anguish", "absence", "declaration", among others), which echo the sentiments italicized in Rivera Garza's passage above. Barthes comments on the dialogical qualities of the "letter" stating: "[t]his figure refers to the special dialectic of the love letter, both blank (encoded) and expressive (charged with longing to signify desire)" (157). I am interested in the system of codification the philosopher proposes, since this system can be recognized in the narrative logic of Rivera Garza's story: the plot centers around the need for a translator-narrator who can decode letters of desire from one *Diamantina* and deliver them to another. The expressive power and performative effect of romantic discourse is what induces the translator to make the grandmother's words her own by performing them. The everyday life of the protagonist is gradually reconfigured by her performance of the "old" *Diamantina*. Despite the differences between 20th century Mexico and 21st century New York, the narrator's present requires her to echo a specific memory, that of a Mexican woman.

This performative praxis evokes cultural components of a distant past to dialogue with the narrative's present, and as a result, produces an innovative way of converging multiple literary worlds. At the same time, by using the name Diamantina, Rivera Garza points to her novel *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999), which lead us to explore the literary ramifications of the name in the context of this novel that centers post-revolutionary Mexico. My use of *narrative memory* aims then to critically approach how the author simultaneously invokes past discourses and literary traditions in her text while at the same time providing a critique on gendered discourses. My approach of the function of "memory" it is through Bakhtin's propositions on dialogism and intertextuality within different literary genres. In his essay "Discourse of the novel" (1981), Bakhtin extensively delves into the trajectory of this genre and its mnemonic components. His focus on the development of the novel extends to other concepts analyzed in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). His propositions on genre and memory also consider how re-interpretations of a text's "images and language" are re-contextualized as cultures change over time (Bakhtin 1981, 420-421); in the final section of his essay, Bakhtin uses the term "re-accentuation" to discuss these changes, he claims:

Every age re-accentuates in its own way the works of its most immediate past [...] Thanks to the intentional potential embedded in them, such works have proved capable of uncovering in each era and against ever new dialogizing backgrounds ever newer aspects of meaning (Bakhtin 1981, 421).

Narrative memory echoes these propositions to analyze how Rivera Garza re-accentuates the characters named Diamantina in her own fictional trajectory. The experience of shifts between different time periods, spaces, and representational systems in "La alienación también tiene su belleza" pulls it into a direction of a critique of the literature been re-accentuated. The dialogue with the past in "La alienación también tiene su belleza" — *narrative memory* — is not only discursive, but also performative through the characters named Diamantina and the literary memory echoed.

We can explore this performativity by attending to the specific political and literary geography of this narrative. The narrator attempts to establish an intermediate space at the border of translation and creation by performing the grandmother's language in present-day New York, but this choice involves difficult cultural and political ramifications. In the short story, Federico Hoffman is the opposite of the present-day Diamantina. The nameless translator's new lover belongs to a socialist organization — he is an electrician by trade and quickly recruits her as a translator for the organization. The process of recruitment highlights once again the opposition of the translator with Diamantina. For instance, when the translator meets the other members of the organization she lies about her job position as a love letters' translator:

[...] esa noche, cuando me preguntaron acerca de mi trabajo, me dio una pena enorme decirles que traducía cartas de amor para una cosmetóloga capitalista en un *penthouse* ubicado en el corazón de Manhattan. En su lugar, inventé que cuidaba niños para una matrona irregular de nombre Diamantina Skvorc (Rivera Garza 2002, 58).

The translator's performance goes beyond the language of the old Diamantina; she also performs a counter identity to what the present-day Diamantina (the entrepreneur) represents and emphasizes two opposing ideologies in the short-story. The protagonist joins the socialist organization as a pamphlets' translator, continues her lust filled relationship with Federico Hoffman, and marries him as it was professed in "Spanish", she claims: "Una mañana de abril, antes de las diez, como el destino en español lo había dicho" (Rivera Garza 2002, 61). *Narrative memory* in this text brings into view the unfolding of the name Diamantina across different temporalities and spaces. Rivera Garza comments on the contemporary relationship between the two homelands of the protagonists, and their cultural disjunction, which she makes present through the way they both embody Diamantina.

This name also inhabits the author's 1999 novel *Nadie me verá llorar* (*No One will See Me Cry*), where two characters named Diamantina also make an appearance; in this novel centered on post-revolutionary Mexico and La Castañeda — a veridic insane asylum in the outskirts of Mexico City — Diamantina is embodied by a pianist, who is also a labor activist. Ligia, a prostitute of the brothel "La Modernidad" in the novel is also given the nickname "Diamantina". Matilda is one of the Diamantina's lovers before she leaves Mexico City to continue her revolutionary activist efforts. This *narrative memory* is crucial to highlight the contrasts between these characters across Rivera Garza's texts and the intertextuality she utilizes. One of the common threads between the fictional Diamantinas is the portrayal of independent, revolutionary (each in their own way), solitary, strong women: "Tenía sólo un par de zapatos y un sobretodo, ambos negros. No había un solo adorno sobre las altas paredes amarillentas de la habitación. Además de la mesita de noche y la cama, el lugar estaba vacío. Un cuarto sin muebles: eso era Diamantina" (Rivera Garza 1999, 47). This description in the voice of Joaquin, one Diamantina's lovers in *Nadie me verá llorar*, highlights the type of life she lives. Her ideologies resemble the austerity of her life as she makes clear to Joaquin not long after they meet:

Entre sus muchas ensoñaciones, una de las más recurrentes consistía en prenderle fuego a un banco. El banco de Londres y México. O a una cárcel, la de Belén. Quería ocasionar un incendio monumental que arrasara con todo para que, después de la destrucción, el mundo empezara a rodar de nuevo (Rivera Garza 1999, 47).

Her ideologies will eventually take her out of México city to support labor movements— her character disappears from the novel at this point, but allusions to her by former lovers continue.

Across Rivera Garza's work the *Diamantinas* portray alternative representations of performing nation, beyond what has been celebrated by Lopez Velarde. In *Nadie me verá llorar* the historical context echoed is that of Mexico, specifically of Mexico City between 1900–1920. Although the novel centers on the political issues of this period, it also spans out to cover the life of one of the protagonist Matilda Burgos, from 1885-1958, who is madly in love with the revolutionary *Diamantina*. Brian Price in "Cristina Rivera Garza en las orillas de la historia", argues the author's fiction seeks to unveil untold stories during the post-revolutionary period, specifically:

[...] ésta se dedica a contar las historias periféricas que han sido arrolladas por la narración hegemónica que surge en los años posteriores al triunfo constitucionalista

[...] ella efectivamente afirma que hay historias olvidadas, ignoradas, paralelas e igualmente mexicanas (1)

Price bases his analysis within the literary context of the Mexican revolution and the canon that emerged from it. Rivera Garza's reevaluation of this period has been analyzed from political and sociological perspectives, especially due to Rivera Garza's scholarly interests on the mental hospital "La Castañeda"⁴. Departing from this type of narrative strategy, the politically and literary charged name *Diamantina* and the way Rivera Garza uses it within the transnational context of "La alienación también tiene su belleza" emphasizes the ways she contests patriotic and celebratory national discourses during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period.

Ramón López Velarde's "Suave Patria" is an extensive rendition to Mexico — a total of thirty-four stanzas. In 1921's, López Velarde's poem, Mexico's daily life is pictured against the image of chaste and properly dressed women: "Suave Patria: te amo no cual mito,/ sino por tu verdad de pan bendito;/ como a niña que asoma por la reja/ con la blusa corrida hasta la oreja/ y la falda bajada hasta el huesito"(Velarde 304). As Raúl Leiva argues in his critical analysis of the poem, "la patria" is portrayed as a woman: "Es, pues, un poema en donde la patria posee todas las virtudes de la mujer, una creación poética colmada de música, color, dimensión, olor y táctiles esencias;" (Leiva 11). As it is also argued by Leiva, Lopez Velarde's portrayal seeks to celebrate a nation that is still growing and looking inward (12). The poem emphasizes a period disrupted by the revolution, but also commemorates Mexico's first independent century from Spain. The portrayal of this period's complexity can be found through the thirty-four stanzas, but it is at the end of the poem—in the second and final "act" and its final stanza— where the poet elevates his prideful dedication and connection to the nation as erotic and as that of a desired woman:

Si me ahogo en tus julios, a mí baja
desde el vergel de tu peinado denso
frescura de rebozo y de tinaja,
y si tiritó, dejás que me arroje
en tu respiración azul de incienso
y en tus carnosos labios de rompopé.

[...]

Sé igual y fiel; pupilas de abandono;
sedienta voz, la trigarante faja
en tus pechugas al vapor; y un trono
a la intemperie, cual una sonaja:
la carretera alegórica de paja.
(304)

This is the junction where Rivera Garza deviates from and posits an opposition; Lopez Velarde presents commemoration through thrones and fresh rebozos; a prideful nation and women's eroticism to be admired in the midst of a changing country after a violent revolution. The poem's final stanza proposes fidelity and stability: "sé igual y fiel [...]" , Rivera Garza, on the other hand, portrays a country where no such reasons to celebrate exist and discontent prevails.

Rivera Garza has commented on this poem, not only through her fiction — as it has been asserted — but also in her cultural criticism. In *Dolerse – Textos desde un país herido* (2011) Rivera Garza explores the role violence has played in Mexico and how the Mexican government has handle understanding, condemning, and taking actions against this violence. In this book, the author considers the role of the verb "to be in pain" (*doler* in Spanish) as a way of acknowledging the systematic "numbness" of the State when it comes to the "pain" of its citizens; in the introduction Rivera Garza demands that actions should be taken to reconstitute empathy – to understand the pain and horror its society has endured throughout many decades of drug cartels, kidnappings, and senseless violence. The book is comprised of different genres and as it has been argued by the author that is a call to action; the texts included in this collection of essays, poems, and cultural criticism, follow the tradition of Latin America's citizen-led social movements:

Se trata de que, mientras otros tantos con nosotros demandemos la restitución de un *Estado con entrañas* – el mismo objetivo tenían, por cierto, Madres de plaza de Mayo ante las atrocidades de la Junta Militar en Argentina, y el movimiento de las Arpilleras en Chile cuando trataban de contradecir el horror de Pinochet, entre otros tantos movimientos generados por grupos alternativos de la sociedad – podamos articular la desarticulación muda con que nos atosiga el estado espeluznante de las cosas a través de estrategias escriturales que en lugar de promover la preservación del

poder, active más bien el potencial crítico y utópico del lenguaje (Rivera Garza 2011, 14).

In line with this statement — the relevancy of voicing demands against oppressive and violent regimes — in the inaugurating section of this book titled "Los sufrientes", Rivera Garza echoes the voice of a citizen to counterpoint the inactions of the Mexican government when it came to a violent killing of teenagers at a party in the Northern city of Ciudad Juárez; in this poem of many voices titled "La reclamante", Rivera Garza cites López Velarde as she makes clear at the end of it by including a footnote and citing him in the bibliography of her book, although there are no in-text citations of his poetry: "*Textos de Luz María Dávila, Ramón López Velarde, Sandra Rodríguez Nieto y Cristina Rivera Garza" (Rivera Garza 31, 2011); in its stanzas, the author inserts selections of phrases by Luz María Dávila — the mother of two of the boys killed in the party — addressed to the ex-president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón in a forced visit to the city where he talked to the citizens about the violent crimes:

Discúlpeme, Señor Presidente, pero no le doy
la mano
usted no es mi amigo. Yo
no le puedo dar la bienvenida
Usted no es bienvenido

nadie lo es.
Luz María Dávila, Villas de Salvárcar, madre de Marcos
Y José Luis Piña Dávila de 19 y 17 años de edad
(Rivera Garza 2011, 29).

The public appearance of the president was perceived as "minimal" to counteract the gruesome assassinations by "sicarios" (hired assassins) of the group of teenagers. Rivera Garza rescues the voice of the mother, which amid a media storm that deemed the teenagers as members of organized crime — she forcibly asks for justice and accountability for all those dead and disappeared during Calderón's presidency⁵. The voice of the mother is intertwined with references to López Velarde, Sandra Rodríguez Nieto — a prominent journalist that reported on these events — and Rivera Garza, but only "Suave patria" is included in the bibliography of the book. The reference to the poem — in addition to Rodríguez Nieto and the author herself — is only through tonality. There are no direct quotations from the poem. The *narrative memory* of the poem seeks to highlight the voice of Dávila and reimagine a patriotic poem of López Velarde to Mexico within the context of cartel violence and 21st century México. In the collaborative essay about Rivera Garza's poetry, "La ficción más grande: la poesía de Cristina Rivera Garza" the authors argue that in "La reclamante":

Esta voz que enlaza organiza transportes de imaginarios,

de palabras, de sonidos, registra fragmentos y los modela en la colindancia con un ritmo nuevo, recurrencias, vueltas de palabras, de versos: fértil colisión semántica y sonora de lejanas profundidades entre las cuevas afloran también palabras y tonalidad de Ramón López Velarde (Castro Palma, Galland Boudon and Torres Ponce 169).

The reoccurrence of this poem in Rivera Garza's oeuvre is a constant point of critical reflection for the author. The tonality and adjectives used in "La reclamante" is a new reading of the poem as the author clarifies: "Luz María Dávila, una trabajadora de una maquiladora de bocinas, había pronunciado palabras que, siendo como eran poderosas y trémulas, también eran básicas y certeras. Por esa razón, decidí entonces resaltar esas palabras suyas, mezclándolas con las de Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, una de las periodistas que reportó los eventos; así como con algunos adjetivos de Ramón López Velarde el poeta que releía por enésima vez en ese entonces" (Rivera Garza 2010). "Suave Patria" is read by Rivera Garza through a contemporary imaginary of homeland and women, *Diamantinas*, and poetic voice.

The *narrative memory* of the name confronted in "La alienación también tiene su belleza" by Rivera Garza is essential to understand the ways gender has functioned in Mexican national discourses. The author extends this critique across geopolitical spaces in this short story — through Houston and New York City — and we can explore this performative discourse by attending to the specific political and literary geography of this narrative. The translator strips her own identity to become somebody else. To highlight these praxes of embodiment and performance in this short story we can draw from Diana Taylor's proposals on performing cultural memory in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003).

On her chapter, "Memory as a Culture Practice" the academic Diana Taylor challenges notions that individuals or groups are a stable identity for transmitting events that happen around them. She argues, instead, bodies participate in the transmission of knowledge and memory, that is impossible to separate cultural memory, race, and gender: "The bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems. Gender impacts how these bodies participate, as does ethnicity" (Taylor 86). Considering this, it can be argued that in the literary space of the short story the translator through an association to a literary past, attempts to establish herself. This alignment exposes the ideological and political differences that separate the two *Diamantinas* in the story, but also the "other" *Diamantinas* in Rivera Garza's texts. The translator accomplishes this task by appropriating the language of the elder *Diamantina* through her relationship with Hoffman. By performing the epistolary memory of the grandmother, the narrator distances herself from and embodies a different kind of imagery of the nation. It is one that is not gendered pristine and glittering as the translation of the letters will reveal.

The translation and transposition of romantic discourse in this story seduces Federico Hoffman, but it also generates dilemmas. If translation cannot act as a physical bridge, it does function as an intermediate position between linguistic spaces, and as an intermediate position between reflection and liberation. In *Illuminations* (1986), Walter Benjamin argues that the task of the translator is to liberate another language through one's own: "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (80). The translator accomplishes this task by recreating and imitating the language of the elder *Diamantina* through her relationship with Hoffman. It is thus through an association to a literary past, and through an act of reading and performance, the translator attempts to establish herself. Yet through these acts, the narrator also distances herself from and confronts the emblem of an American political and economic ideology: a capitalist who whitewashes her Mexican heritage to promote cosmetics and politicians indiscriminately. For this reason, the translator continues her relationship with Hoffman, since unlike *Diamantina*, he does not seek to profit from the privilege of association with a European surname or heritage. He is a part-time volunteer electrician for a socialist organization. The translator prefers this world instead of the corporate one *Diamantina* both inhabits and embodies.

The interconnection between body, performance, and *diamantina* goes beyond Rivera Garza's (non)fictional corpus as the "Glitter Revolution" exemplifies. As the role of gender and "patria" have been traced in this article, through Lopez Velarde's post-Mexican revolution nation building poetry and Rivera Garza's contemporary texts, it is essential to highlight that "*diamantina*" has also appeared in the concrete streets and monuments of México. "La revolución diamantina" or the "Glitter Revolution" as it became known during the summer of 2019 in Mexico City was a movement to protest institutionalized sexual violence perpetrated by police forces in the country. On August, 16th 2019 over three hundred demonstrators gathered to demand public accountability for Mexico's long history of femicides: "The protestors spray-painted graffiti on the building [Mexico City prosecutor's office] and the historical monument "El Angel de la Independencia," painted the word "rapists" on the wall of a nearby police station, and covered Security Minister Jesús Orta Martínez in pink glitter" (Poole). Their public outcry for justice was in glitter. This revolution was "bright", as the use of "*diamantina*" was meant to be seen everywhere, to be hard to miss, and as in Rivera Garza's "*La reclamante*", it was a public act. Glitter in "*la revolución diamantina*" serves as a tool to denunciate acts of gender-based violence and demand accountability for acts of impunity. As this event exemplifies, "*diamantina*" is not only part of the literary memory echoed by Rivera Garza, but it is also an essential component of Mexico's recent cultural memory and feminist's movements in this country.

After eight weeks of performing and living through the writing

of the elder *Diamantina* the translator in the short-story must hand over her translations. The letters recount the story of the grandmother's clandestine romance at the age of seventeen and describe the "surrender" of her heart – and body – to her lover Pedro González Martínez. Crucially, the letters also detail his crossing of the border into the United States to forge a future for him and his lover. The present-day *Diamantina* is not surprised by the content, but by the tears the translator cries after she shares her grandmother never married Pedro. But what most captures the translator's attention is the eventual strategic use the grandmother made of these letters: she never reunited with her lover, but emigrated to San Antonio de Coahuila, Texas, where she married a lawyer named Ignacio López Castro for whom no background information is given in the story; though the marriage was unhappy and abusive –the short story details– the court did not grant the initial divorce the grandmother requested claiming mistreatment and adultery by her husband. Undeterred, the grandmother brought a suit against herself, and offered her letters to her young past lover as proof of adultery, becoming one of the first divorced women in Texas (Rivera Garza 2002, 63). These revelations re-contextualize the letters for the translator, but also the backdrop of the story.

Through its emphasis on the city of New York, the story alludes to the historical-cultural past of Latin American immigration⁶. The exploration of the epistolary genre and the history of a Mexican woman from the start of the 20th century living in Texas, highlights cultural tensions and rifts. *Diamantina* attempts to resolve these tensions through translation, hiring someone fluent in both the history of Mexico and the Spanish language. However, resolution proves to be impossible, because the letters present not only a language, but ideological postures that require translation. The grandmother stayed single until the end of her life, and lived happily as the translator expresses: "Sin casarse y sola, como ella quería, toda la libertad para ella solita en San Antonio, Texas [...] Sin nadie que la parara. De una persona a otra, sin ningún lazo de sangre, flotando ligera de aquí a allá, sin respetar fronteras" (Rivera Garza 2002, 64). The events that lie beyond the frame of the letters do not evoke the same love story, but it too represents a heritage that has effects on the literary present: towards the end of the story, the narrator abandons Hoffman, and New York City. She chooses to leave the circumstances that had allowed her to perform along the edges of linguistic, political and cultural borders. The translator, unlike Hoffman, does not spurn the state of alienation, because according to her, it also possesses a certain beauty (Rivera Garza 2002, 59).

By presenting the effects of *narrative memory* through the translator, Rivera Garza stages a critical exploration of literary canonical memory and patria. Though the story initially traces the trajectory of migration and assimilation represented by the cosmetics entrepreneur, its narrator (the translator) aligns herself with the grandmother, a rebel figure who portrays a defiance against cultural and social norms. This portrayal presents an

opposition to the images of Mexican women lauded in "Suave Patria"—the reflections on this literary past is done by embodying its adjective "diamantina". Rivera Garza's strategy to reimagine a literary discourse that was instrumental to memorialize an image of post-revolutionary Mexico provides oppositional representations. The multiple representations of *Diamantina* in Rivera Garza's "La alienación también tiene su belleza" and *Nadie me verá llorar*

establish her continuous engagement in this endeavor; it also becomes a tool of protest in *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido* (2011), which can be threaded to the physical *diamantina* used by protestors in recent public demonstrations against femicides and gender-based violence. In "La alineación también tiene su belleza" this critique crosses borders and centers New York City as a space of reflection of a now transnational literary history.

NOTES

¹Distinguished Professor in Hispanic Studies, University of Houston

²There is no English translation of this book.

³"Alienation Also Possesses Beauty", there is no English translation of this text. The translations of this text in this article are mine.

⁴ Cristina Rivera Garza's publication on "La Castañeda": "Dangerous Minds: Changing Psychiatric Views of the Mentally Ill in Porfirian Mexico, 1876–1911.", "Por la salud mental de la nación: vida cotidiana y Estado en el Manicomio General de La Castañeda, México, 1910–1930.", "She neither Respected nor Obeyed Anyone": Inmates and Psychiatrists Debate Gender and Class at the General Insane Asylum La Castañeda, Mexico, 1910–1930." and *La Castañeda. Narrativas dolientes desde el Manicomio General. México, 1910–1930*. Mexico City: Tusquets, 2010.

⁵ "The number of people who went missing in Mexico during the six years of former President Felipe Calderon's administration stands at 26,121, government officials said Tuesday, a figure that would rank

among the worst episodes of "disappearances" in Latin American history" (Sanchez); "According to the National Commission on Human Rights, more than 7,000 people killed in Mexico in the past six years lie unidentified in morgue freezers or common graves." (Booth).

⁶ It is productive to point out that since the 19th century, New York has been a privileged space for the unfolding and articulation of cultural and political conflicts between Latin America and the United States. Historically the city has been an important site for reflecting on the cultural and political fate of Latin Americans. As prime example of this, the Cuban writer and intellectual José Martí is an essential figure from this period. Martí left an immense journalistic, literary and political corpus documenting not only his trips to New York, but also his political exile in the city from which he supported the liberation of Cuba from Spain during the 1880's. Between 1880 and 1893, Martí published more than 400 chronicles about Spanish America, the United States, and Europe. The legacy of Martí's writing about the city has been widely acknowledged by contemporary writers.

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Alimentar el espíritu, alimentar el cuerpo: marginalidad, lectura y cultura literaria en *Patíbulo para un caballo*, de Cronwell Jara Jiménez

José R. Chávarry
Franklin & Marshall College

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la representación del libro y la lectura en la novela *Patíbulo para un caballo* (1989), del escritor peruano Cronwell Jara Jiménez, y su función frente a la marginalidad. La novela forma parte de la narrativa de la barriada, un espacio urbano periférico erigido por migrantes de provincia y caracterizado por la precariedad, la informalidad y la violencia. Mientras que otras obras del género se aproximan a este espacio desde los lentes de la miseria y la otredad, Montacerdos, la barriada en *Patíbulo para un caballo*, es una población que lee y que se vale de sus prácticas lectoras para imaginar y crear futuros alternativos y propios. Sugiero que los personajes de la novela hacen de la cultura libresca una experiencia íntima y cotidiana, y que al hacerlo trascienden los parámetros impuestos desde una comunidad imaginada nacional que los criminaliza. En su lugar, surge una múltiple y heterogénea experiencia lectora, en donde el libro y la lectura, entendida a nivel espiritual y corpóreo, devienen formas de afirmar la potencialidad creadora de sujetos en los márgenes. El hambre de lectura de los pobladores de Montacerdos presenta no una falta o ausencia que debe ser explicada desde fuera, sino la posibilidad de autoafirmación y control sobre sus propias narrativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativa urbana, barriadas, lectura, hambre, Cronwell Jara Jiménez.

En su nota "El libro en la calle" de 1977, publicado en un número especial de la revista *Runa* dedicado al estado del libro en el Perú, el escritor y periodista Jorge Salazar lamenta el deterioro de las condiciones lectoras del país y el inminente desplazo de la lectura "lenta y pausada" hacia la "esquizofrenia" de la venta ambulante de libros. Si bien, para Salazar, la causa de la erosión del valor formativo y estético de la lectura yace en la emergencia de la sociedad del consumo, la razón socioeconómica más inmediata en el Perú tiene que ver con la llegada a Lima y las ciudades de poblaciones migrantes del interior, quienes, obligados por un sistema desarrollista a dejar sus tierras y "tomar por asalto" las esquinas citadinas, hacen de la venta de libros una forma de subsistencia. Al hacerlo, transforman los "modales" de la lectura de antaño (caracterizada, según el autor, por la experiencia de la librería de viejo) en mera transacción, generando un comercio ambulante en donde "la sed de conocimiento" es remplazada por "el gusto vacío e insípido" que caracteriza al desarrollismo y que las masas migrantes contribuyen a fomentar (20-21).

La nota de Salazar revela las ansiedades citadinas respecto a lo que el sociólogo José Matos Mar llamó el "desborde popular", o la incorporación social, económica y cultural de vastos números de migrantes provenientes de provincias, particularmente de la región andina, a las ciudades costeñas y en especial Lima en la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Estas migraciones masivas se dieron, desde los cuarenta, por la decadencia del agro y el desempleo que esto trajo, y luego a raíz de la violencia causada el conflicto armado interno

entre Sendero Luminoso y el estado peruano a partir de los ochenta (Vilanova, "The Emerging Literature" 2). Desde la literatura, estos procesos migratorios (y sus causas socioeconómicas) habían sido retratados en una creciente obra que incluía la narrativa de Julio Ramón Ribeyro en *Los gallinazos sin plumas* (1955), de Enrique Congrains Martín en *Lima, hora cero* (1954) y *No una sino muchas muertes* (1958) y de José María Arguedas en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971), además de la ensayística de Sebastián Salazar Bondy en *Lima la horrible* (1964), entre otras. Con un enfoque realista y a través de miradas sociológicas o antropológicas, estas obras se acercan a la condición migrante, y la vida en las barriadas o asentamientos humanos fundados en las afueras de las ciudades por estas poblaciones, para examinar la marginalidad causada por el desarrollismo industrial y capitalista en el país. Salazar, escribiendo más de una década después de estas tempranas obras, ve ya no una sociedad en las afueras de la ciudad que la literatura puede captar y explicar, sino un esquizofrénico y desenfrenado embate por parte de las masas migrantes en contra de la ciudad letrada. Para Salazar, pareciera que la lectura, aquella práctica sosegada de conocimiento y comunicación, peligró al contacto con el desborde popular.

La novela *Patíbulo para un caballo* (1989), del escritor peruano Cronwell Jara Jiménez, propone una mirada alternativa a la relación entre lectura y marginalidad, una anclada en la práctica lectora como forma de afirmar la heterogeneidad y la capacidad creadora de una población migrante.³ A través de la mirada de la joven protagonista Maruja, la obra muestra aquellos primeros años de las fundaciones

barriales, oscilando entre una representación realista a una mirada más estilizada, de un registro popular y oral a un lenguaje barroco y atravesado por referencias provenientes de una alta cultura. La novela de Jara Jiménez narra la historia de Montacerdos, una barriada de migrantes de distintas regiones del país, quienes han ocupado tierras en las afueras de Lima y reclaman sus derechos sobre el espacio ya que su supuesto dueño, la Hacienda Muñoz Quintana, no ha presentado pruebas de posesión. A lo largo de la trama, los habitantes se enfrentan tanto a las fuerzas policiales, que regularmente entran al territorio con la misión de desalojar a los pobladores, como a las violencias internas y los conflictos entre los mismos habitantes. Montacerdos representa una pluralidad de comunidades, las cuales no conforman una identidad única sino una multiplicidad de proveniencias geográficas, culturas y formas de entender la sociedad y la afirmación política. O, sugiere Antonio Cornejo Polar, una realidad de los bordes, marcada por "figuras polimorfas de la nacionalidad" que imposibilitan todo discurso armónico del mestizaje y apuntan hacia la caótica y abrumadora heterogeneidad del país (298). En la novela es esta heterogeneidad quien toma la palabra: los márgenes pasan de ser concebidos como un territorio que debe ser auscultado, entendido y representado por la ciudad letrada, a un espacio desde donde sus sujetos pueden afirmar sus propios deseos, tensiones y violencias. En mi lectura, *Patíbulo para un caballo* hace del libro y la práctica lectora elementos centrales de la barriada, dinamitando la supuesta oposición entre marginalidad y cultura libresca.

Sugiero, por un lado, que las escenas de lectura colectiva en la novela, donde los pobladores de Montacerdos se reúnen para leer y analizar los recuentos periodísticos de sus luchas, generan una conciencia comunitaria de su exclusión social por parte del estado y la nación peruana. El periódico, base de la "comunidad imaginada" en la formulación clásica de Benedict Anderson, marginaliza a los pobladores de la barriada, quienes se oponen a las representaciones hechas por los medios de comunicación. Por otra parte, mientras el periódico criminaliza y enajena a los migrantes, la lectura literaria les permite a los habitantes de Montacerdos afirmar una relación íntima y personal con la cultura letrada y libresca. Montacerdos, y esto marca una diferencia significativa con otras obras sobre la experiencia de los márgenes, es una barriada que lee, donde los libros circulan libremente y sirven como formas de escape a las violencias que ciernen a la población. A la vez, la novela se pregunta por cómo la lectura literaria se puede enfrentar a las necesidades materiales de los habitantes de la barriada. En particular, me interesa indagar sobre la relación entre lectura y hambre: en Montacerdos la lectura es una práctica corpórea, y el libro sirve, de manera metafórica y literal, para llenar los estómagos. De esta forma, los personajes encuentran en la lectura literaria un vector de afirmación personal y colectiva, rechazando formas de legibilidad impuestas desde fuera, por los centros de producción letrada oficial, y proponiendo maneras de leer que surgen desde las necesidades y los cuerpos propios de lectores en los márgenes.

Mi lectura parte de previas aproximaciones a la novela y propone nuevas líneas de investigación en torno a esta. En gran medida, la crítica en torno a *Patíbulo para un caballo* se ha enfocado en la relación entre mito y realidad como parámetro de interpretación del mundo marginal de la barriada. James Higgins califica a la novela como un "mito fundacional" de las nuevas comunidades migrantes, ya que los habitantes de Montacerdos logran exitosamente defender su población hasta que el estado la legitima y autoriza el derecho de los pobladores sobre el terreno (*Myths of the Emergent* 114). Por otro lado, Cynthia Vich sugiere que la contraparte realista de la novela revela los límites de este mito fundacional y de la visión heroica de una comunidad cohesionada que emerge victoriosa del enfrentamiento por la supervivencia. Para Vich, las violencias entre los mismos habitantes de Montacerdos demuestra que la novela no propone una versión idealizada de la barriada sino cómo la ignorancia y la represión interna fracturan e impiden cualquier ideal comunitario (149). Esta complejidad viene de que *Patíbulo para un caballo*, a diferencia de las obras pertenecientes a la narrativa urbana antes mencionadas, como las de Congrains o Salazar Bondy, muestra una mirada desde dentro: Jara Jiménez, proveniente del departamento norteño de Piura, migró a la capital de joven y vivió en una barriada en las afueras de la ciudad, tal como los protagonistas de su obra. Por esto, su obra se aleja de lecturas miserabilistas o reivindicadoras de la marginalidad, y el énfasis yace en la heterogeneidad de la barriada. Como señala Nuria Vilanova, Jara Jiménez,

siente y vive en carne propia la dad de este submundo urbano que está evocando y al hacerlo desaparecen de esta narrativa el paternalismo, la denuncia, las reivindicaciones, los juicios de valor y los mensajes intencionados que subyacen implícita y explícitamente en otras obras que abordan la subalternidad desde la hegemonía, desde un centro que mira a la periferia" ("La ficción de los márgenes", 205).²

Siguiendo estos acercamientos previos a la novela, propongo que la presencia del libro y de la práctica lectora pueden ayudarnos a entender la heterogeneidad que una novela como *Patíbulo para un caballo* visibiliza.

En los márgenes de la comunidad imaginada

Desde finales de los años cuarenta y principio de los cincuenta, las barriadas de Lima se formaron con las "invasiones", de carácter organizado o paulatino, por migrantes provinciales en las afueras de la capital. Estos asentamientos humanos se constituían a medida que estos pobladores iban dividiendo los terrenos y asignando lotes para viviendas, por lo general construidas con materiales precarios como esteras y palos, y espacios públicos como escuelas y mercados (Collier 35). Si bien los regímenes militares de Manuel A.

Odría (1948-1956) y Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975) apoyaron, de manera oficial o encubierta, el desarrollo de estos espacios populares con el fin de legitimar sus mandatos a través del apoyo público, en un principio las tomas y edificaciones de barriadas resultaron en largos y arduos enfrentamientos con la policía, ya que muchos de estos lotes eran propiedades municipales o privadas. Más allá de la continua amenaza de desalojo, las barriadas también carecían de necesidades vitales, incluyendo electricidad, agua potable o acceso a productos alimenticios, además de instituciones como escuelas y postas médicas. Como describe Vilanova, una vez que las primeras oleadas de migrantes ya se habían integrado a la vida citadina (periférica), poco a poco, y a través de una creciente economía informal, se pudieron procurar recursos básicos, así como servicios de transporte hacia la ciudad. A mediados de la década de los setenta, durante el gobierno reformista y populista de Velasco, algunas de estas poblaciones, como Villa El Salvador, recibieron apoyo estatal y privado, lo cual propició el desarrollo y la cada vez mayor incorporación de las barriadas a Lima (*Social Change and Literature* 19-21). Cabe mencionar, sin embargo, que estos espacios siguen siendo, al día de hoy, económica y socialmente marginales, y que muchas de las mismas violencias de décadas anteriores (ficcionalizadas en la narrativa urbana ya mencionada) continúan vigentes.

Los habitantes de Montacerdos viven en un constante enfrentamiento no solo con las fuerzas policiales, quienes tienen órdenes de desalojarlos, sino con el estado y la nación peruana en general. Como ha señalado Vich, la violencia a la que se enfrentan los pobladores no es solamente la fuerza militar, sino también de carácter simbólico: en el discurso policial, esgrimido por el comandante Dantón Pflucker, Montacerdos es un basural o vertedero, una amenaza a la salud física y moral hacia la capital, y sus habitantes sujetos sucios y contagiosos (144). Sin embargo, esta caracterización proviene no solo de los policías (de los cuales, en cualquier caso, los pobladores no esperan otro trato), sino de la sociedad civil y de la esfera pública, representada en la novela a través de los medios de comunicación, en especial el periódico. Según Benedict Anderson, la circulación del capitalismo impreso, es decir del periódico, hizo posible la creación de un tiempo horizontal y simultáneo, en el cual lectores separados geográficamente empezaron a compartir un sentimiento de pertenencia a la nación y sus valores. Esta "comunidad imaginada" surgió, señala Anderson, sobre la base de un lenguaje común y fijo, que aplanó diferencias entre distintas variedades eligiendo a aquella más dominante para funciones administrativas como la lengua oficial del periódico (74). En Montacerdos, la función del capitalismo impreso no es aceptar o incorporar a los nuevos pobladores ciudadanos a la nación sino, precisamente, de construir una barrera entre ambos, representada en la novela por el cerco policial que rodea a la barriada (Higgins, *Myths of the Emergent*, 115). En otras palabras, si según Vich el discurso de basurización opera desde el estado y a través de las fuerzas policiales, a partir de la circulación del periódico se hace

también manifiesto un intento de excluir a estas poblaciones migrantes de la nación.

La lectura de periódicos en Montacerdos se hace de manera colectiva, y en estos los habitantes de la barriada se ven retratados – y se desconocen – en la comunidad imaginada peruana. Estas escenas de lectura se dan cuando los pobladores se hacen de periódicos y comparten y analizan sus contenidos. La primera de estas escenas ocurre cuando los pobladores de la barriada consiguen un periódico que relata el reciente enfrentamiento entre Montacerdos y la policía; en este, se hace un recuento de la batalla campal y de la captura de Pompeyo Flores, el héroe de la novela, un ser cuasi mítico de una fuerza y tamaño descomunal, quien se convierte en una de las principales armas de los pobladores en su lucha contra el estado. Tras la batalla, Pompeyo es abaleado y arrastrado por la policía hacia un centro de salud en la ciudad, donde presuntamente muere a causa de las heridas. El periódico que consiguen los pobladores narra la brutal represión de los habitantes y la muerte de Pompeyo de la siguiente manera:

Falleció uno de los reyes del hampa. Tras larga agonía dejó de existir uno de los implicados en la toma ilícita de tierras, Pompeyo Flores Flores...luego de la emboscada propiciada por una horda de hampones negros e indios contra guardias civiles que llegaban a imponer justicia y orden, donde tuvieron que defenderse en gran batalla campal para no perder sus vidas, lográndolo, más no pudiendo desalojar a los facciosos (103-104).

Mediante el binarismo en la caracterización de los migrantes (una "horda" de "facciosos" que tiende una "emboscada") y los policías (quienes deben "defenderse" y defender la ley del país), el reportaje demuestra el posicionamiento de los periódicos del lado de la oficialidad, reforzando la otredad de la barriada y su ilegalidad. Al hacerlo, ubica a los habitantes migrantes de Montacerdos como sujetos que amenazan la integridad la nación, la cual deberá ser defendida mediante su represión y extirpación. Queda claro, más aún, la racialización de esta contienda, donde "negros e indios" componen las masas que atentan contra la sociedad civil. Si como apunta Anderson, el capitalismo impreso sienta las bases de una comunidad arraigada en un tiempo y una lengua compartidas, en Montacerdos estas características sirven para aislar a su población (especialmente comunidades no blancas) de todo sentimiento de pertenencia a la nación. Además, que el periódico no circule libremente en la barriada, sino que debe ser adquirido por contrabando, demuestra que su supuesta simultaneidad temporal no puede tener lugar.

La lectura colectiva, por lo tanto, es una forma de enfrentarse a estas limitaciones, ya que, con un solo periódico y a través de un solo lector, un conjunto de habitantes de la barriada puede cuestionar y rebatir los discursos impuestos sobre ellos desde los centros de producción letrada y oficial. En estas escenas, los pobladores

se niegan a creer en lo que leen: "Los periódicos inventan", se ríe Sansón, un vecino, "Cómo puede usted creer en ellos" (105). En otra instancia, cuando el cura del pueblo, el padre Villalobos, recrimina a los pobladores y les dice, "los periódicos dicen que aquí se arraiga el infierno", éstos desmienten las acusaciones y muestran su hartazgo con las denigrantes descripciones de los medios de comunicación (253). Y en otro momento, cuando un médico voluntario llega a la barriada para ayudar a controlar el tifus y otras enfermedades contagiosas, este piensa que podrá gestionar ayuda de las autoridades de Lima: "iré a los periódicos y ante el propio Ministro de Gobierno y Policía intervendré por ustedes". A lo cual los habitantes de Montacerdos le contestan que será acusado de subversivo por intentar interceder por ellos (280). Así, para la barriada es evidente que los medios de comunicación son una extensión del aparato estatal y que, tal como las fuerzas policiales o la burocracia gubernamental, forman parte de la maquinaria excluyente de la nación. Las escenas de lectura colectiva, en las que se reúnen los pobladores, sirven como espacios donde aquellos discursos son rechazados. De esta forma, Montacerdos afirma su propio valor comunitario, no uno otorgado por la comunidad imaginada de la nación, sino, precisamente, en aquel que se burla y desconoce su autoridad en la barriada. Por eso otro vecino, el Gringo Pérez, luego de que la población ha leído la nota sobre la captura y muerte de Pompeyo, pregunta, riéndose: "¿quién cree en [los periódicos]?" (110).

Cabe señalar que la radio juega un papel similar al periódico en la novela, y los mismos discursos que los noticieros imparten de manera escrita circulan a través de otras tecnologías. Si bien con la radio no estamos, técnicamente, frente a escenas colectivas de *lectura*, los efectos son los mismos. Como señala Michelle Hilmes, la llegada de la radio prometía, aún más que el periódico, la horizontalidad y la homogeneización de un público oyente a través del borramiento de las distancias y físicas y sociales. Desde luego, añade, esta horizontalidad también generaba distinciones de registros lingüísticos y normas sociales, privilegiando a unos y deslegitimando a otros (352-356). En *Patíbulo para un caballo*, la radio comparte los noticieros que, al igual que los periódicos, acusan a los habitantes de las barriadas de haber tomado tierras privadas de manera ilegal y violenta, brutalizando a los oficiales. El reportaje radial describe a los pobladores como "malhechores y mujeres de mal vivir" y como "vagabundos y facinerosos", una vez más representando su lucha como una afrenta no solo a las leyes sino a los modales de la comunidad nacional (82). Al igual que con la lectura del periódico, después de escuchar los mensajes radiales los habitantes se rechazan a aceptar las caracterizaciones impuestas sobre ellos. El Matabueyes, un vecino, se queja: "¿Malhechores? ¿mujeres de mal vivir? ...Carnicero soy desde ñeño, y Gringo Pérez el Transparente, mecánico electricista es; y mi mujer la Eulogia, negocia carnes y vende puercos... ¿Dónde estamos los bandoleros, los asesinos?" (83). Y, cuando se enteran, también por un noticiero de la radio, que el comandante Pflucker organiza el desalojo de Montacerdos, rechazan el nombre impuesto a la barriada

por los medios de comunicación: "¿Y quién demonio le dio ese apodo de Montacerdos? ¡No es decente, suena feo, a muladar y chiquero!" (200).

Así, la recepción de los medios de comunicación fomenta momentos de indignación colectiva, donde la lectura, del periódico y de los discursos oficiales, genera una respuesta comunitaria y solidaria entre los habitantes de la barriada. Tanto el periódico como la radio, vehículos de una comunidad imaginada excluyente y alienante, imponen la nación en base a límites, geográficos, lingüísticos y culturales, criminalizando a aquellos quienes han sido obligados a dejar sus provincias por el sistema desarrollista impuesto desde la misma ciudad capital. En respuesta, los pobladores organizan sus propias asambleas, y en contra de los discursos oficiales se conciben como parte de la nación por su honradez y su conocimiento de las leyes y reglamentos del país. Después de todo, como la vecina Juana Almontes señala, ellos saben que la Hacienda Muñoz, supuesta dueña del terreno, no tiene sus papeles en orden tampoco, por lo cual nadie tiene un reclamo más "real" que el otro (200). Se pone en tela de juicio, de esta manera, al capitalismo impreso, que a pesar de su discurso a favor de la legalidad no está al tanto de las ordenanzas del conflicto, mientras que los pobladores de la barriada, criminales para la nación, sí lo están. En otras palabras, a pesar de la marginalización y el analfabetismo, Montacerdos es una población que críticamente entiende su lugar dentro de la nación.

Hambre de lectura

Si el capitalismo impreso potencia una comunidad imaginada que se construye mediante la marginalización y criminalización de poblaciones migrantes, es a través del libro y la lectura literaria, que los personajes afirman su capacidad creadora y conciben discursos alternativos de participación social y cultural. De hecho, Montacerdos es un espacio atravesado por bibliotecas que dotan a la barriada de distintas tradiciones literarias, coloniales, modernas, realistas y fantásticas, nacionales y universales. La relación entre los habitantes y los libros son íntimas y variadas, y diversas prácticas lectoras se hacen evidentes en los hogares de los personajes, pero también en prostíbulos, Casas de la Poesía y, como haré énfasis, en los cuerpos mismos de los sujetos. Desde estos espacios, los libros circulan y cumplen distintos usos para cada personaje, pero siempre relacionados a las necesidades de cada uno. A la vez, las prácticas lectoras y la relación con la cultura literaria no permanecen estáticas, sino que se transforman a lo largo de la novela; a través de estas tensiones y negociaciones, los habitantes de Montacerdos hacen suya una tradición letrada y afirman su capacidad para participar de ella y movilizarla. En este sentido, si en la nota de Salazar la migración interna y el crecimiento demográfico de las ciudades es la causa del deterioro de prácticas lectoras y su remplazo por un consumo caótico y caprichoso, la novela de Jara Jiménez cuestiona y desafía la separación entre cultura librería y marginalidad.

En Montaceros, los personajes hacen de los libros vehículos de sus propias subjetividades. Al inicio de la novela, Maruja y su hermano Yococo conocen a Pompeyo, quien en señal de afecto les regala los libros de su "biblioteca" personal, que lleva en sus bolsillos sin fondo de su abrigo: a Maruja, quien más adelante en la trama demostrará un interés por husmear a las prostitutas de la barriada, le da el Kama Sutra, aún cuando los otros niños le advierten que ella se come las hojas de los libros (volveré a esto más adelante); a Yococo, el Códice sobre el vuelo de los pájaros, de Leonardo da Vinci. El efecto que tiene este sobre el niño es representativo de una de las funciones que cumplen el libro y la lectura: como manera de imaginar futuros posibles más allá de la violencia y la marginalidad. Y no solo imaginar, sino también de movilizar a los personajes a hacer de este sueño una realidad: Yococo, obsesionado con los cantos de las aves, usa el Códice como guía para construir una máquina que vuela, con la cual los niños cruzan sobre la barriada. Cuando su hermana y los otros jóvenes ven a la máquina surcando los aires, estallan en algarabía y asombro: "empezaron a ascender y vagar por el cielo del barrio...hasta que la máquina se perdió de vista sumergiéndose bajo una montaña de algodón bajo la luz perpleja del sol" (147). Como señala Vich, la escena del vuelo de la nave muestra que la barriada "recupera su autoestima y se imagina legitimada dándose el lujo de proclamar la gloria de su hazaña" (147). Esta hazaña se hace posible precisamente a través del libro, puesto que la lectura no está solo ligada a la imaginación, sino que la materializa, convirtiéndose en un literal vehículo del deleite.

Más significativamente, la función del libro está al centro de los debates entre los pobladores de Montaceros, en tanto su potencial como arma de concientización y lucha.³ La figura emblemática de estas discusiones es la profesora Celia Ordoñez: asesinada por su labor política a través de la difusión de libros y mediante programas de lectura, y por su presunta afiliación marxista, es frecuentemente evocada como representativa de la necesidad de hacer de la lectura una herramienta en la mejora de las condiciones materiales de la barriada. En particular, sus preocupaciones giran en torno a la falta de alimentos en Montaceros. A causa del estado de sitio y prohibido el ingreso de comida y víveres, el hambre se va apoderando poco a poco de los habitantes, que hacen lo que pueden para meter alimentos a escondidas. "Somos el hambre", dice Pompeyo (171). La enseñanza de la profesora era, justamente, que la lectura debía servir como forma de procurar la comida – y que, a la vez, sin comida no podía haber aprendizaje. Juana, presidenta del Club de Madres de la barriada, les dice a las otras mujeres de la comunidad: "También lo decía la Celia: *'al lado de mi libro, ¡viva mi plato de frijoles!*' Pues sin comida, decía, no habían ganas de aprender" (192, cursivas en el original). Esta equivalencia se vuelve un dilema de la gallina y el huevo para los pobladores, algunos de los cuales piensan, como Juana, que la lectura y la reflexión es la base del desarrollo de proyectos sociales en la barriada. Otros, sin embargo, ven en la lectura un lujo frente al problema principal, que es la falta de alimentos y la malnutrición: "Y yo quiero vivir

con la barriga llena", dice la Ojos Lindos, al oír a Juana (191). La conversación se interrumpe cuando llega un joven a quejarse de que un camión con víveres ha logrado entrar a la barriada, pero que debajo de una magra capa de verduras había "puras carpetas y pizarras...Puros libros y ollas vacías". Cuando se preguntan qué le van a echar a las ollas, Hilda, otra vecina, responde irónicamente: "Échele libros" (192).

Estas discusiones acerca de la relación entre lectura y hambre son evidentes a lo largo de la novela.⁴ En otra instancia, cuando Isabel, la Santísima, recuerda a la profesora, dice que esta les "despertó el hambre de leer" a los niños, y que había sido asesinada por su "inteligencia sabia y profunda". A esto, otra joven le espeta: "¿Y nunca te habló que la inteligencia empieza por el vientre?" (89). No se trata, en efecto, de buscar una respuesta única a la función del libro: por el contrario, lo más significativo acerca de la relación íntima que los personajes de la barriada establecen con la lectura es que, al hacerla suya, surgen debates y posturas distintas. En otras palabras, se hace evidente la heterogeneidad de Montaceros, donde cualquier visión esencialista o totalizante de comunidad se topa con las tensiones internas que vienen de las múltiples y divergentes interpretaciones, y usos, de la cultura letrada y libresca. En la novela, las dos salidas que se presentan giran en torno a los protagonistas, Maruja y Pompeyo, para quienes el libro y la lectura presentan una forma de saciar el hambre, tanto físico como afectivo, que propicia la marginalización. Como señala Alfredo Quintanilla, a través de las resoluciones de las tramas de estos personajes la novela conduce a una ambivalencia entre una propuesta científicista y otra literaria y mágica, ya que la profesionalización de la niña (quien de adulta se convierte en socióloga) y el abandono de la literatura por Pompeyo parecieran entrar en conflicto con la existencia de esta novela en sí (16). Podemos añadir que estas aparentes contradicciones surgen de un impulso por hacer de la barriada, un escenario al margen de la comunidad imaginada de la nación, un centro de producción y debate intelectual.

Maruja y Pompeyo, para quienes la lectura es una práctica corpórea, encarnan aquella tensión entre la alimentación mental o espiritual y la nutrición física. En efecto, el apodo de la joven, "la tragalibros", no es metafórico. En varias ocasiones, la niña es objeto de burla por parte de los otros personajes, quienes se ríen de ella porque se come los libros que tiene al alcance. Por eso, cuando Pompeyo le regala el Kama Sutra, le dice juguetonamente: "Sé que devoras hojas de libros...que leías mucho en la escuela de la profesora Celia. Pero te gustaban como lechugas..." (34). Aquí, lectura y comida se equiparan: las hojas de los libros son para Maruja como hojas de lechugas; el acto de leer (de dar vuelta a las páginas) se compara con el acto de deshojar la verdura. El hambre de la niña se impone sobre su capacidad cognitiva de aprender a procesar y "digerir" el conocimiento en los libros que le daba la profesora. La lectura de Maruja, entonces, es una práctica física que, por su hambre y su falta de socialización lectora, empieza en el estómago. En otro momento un muchacho del grupo, Pablo el Malo, le saca

en cara con sorna más que en juego: "ella sí se come las hojas cada que va leyendo un libro. Me debe Las Mil y Una Noches. En su panza de araña Alí Babá y los cuarenta ladrones todavía deben estar buscando la salida de la cueva, sin hallarla" (89). De esta manera, los otros habitantes de esta barriada lectora ven a la tragalibros como un personaje extraño, no entrenada en aspectos básicos de la lectura (el libro se lee, se procesa y luego se comparte) e incapaz de separar sus necesidades corpóreas de su desarrollo mental y social.

Según Thomas McLaughlin, es curioso que leer se compare con uno de los procesos físicos más íntimos y abyectos del ser humano, por la conceptualización del libro como una fuente de sustento mental y cognitivo antes que fisiológico y mundano (143). La lectura, señala parafraseando a Norbert Elias, es una práctica "aimed precisely at raising human beings above their bodily functions, but in a return to the repressed, perhaps, reading is associated through daily habit with the 'pre-civilized,' animalistic, mortal human body" (23). Sin embargo, y a pesar de toda forma de racionalizarla como un alimento mental, la lectura es antes que nada resultado de una serie de adaptaciones y tecnologías del cuerpo (de los ojos, los brazos, la espalda); la más "mortal" y "baja" de estas actividades es el comer, puesto que implica la destrucción y la asimilación de lo comestible al cuerpo – y finalmente su excreción (142). Como el retorno de lo reprimido, sugiere McLaughlin, el uso de la metáfora de la comida demuestra que la lectura es, antes que una práctica analítica, una experiencia del cuerpo.

El desarrollo del personaje de Maruja a lo largo de la novela está basado en su socialización lectora, precisamente porque la niña se "civiliza" a medida que aprende a distinguir lectura de la alimentación. Al principio, come desmedidamente, sin reflexionar sobre los contenidos del libro, solo para saciar sus instintos y apetitos corpóreos: "se sorprendían al verme siempre leyendo un libro y deshojando sus hojas para llevármelas a la boca" (51). Sin embargo, al final de la novela, Maruja vuelve a la barriada de adulta, como estudiante universitaria de ciencias sociales, para escribir una tesis sobre las migraciones internas y la explosión demográfica urbana. Entrevistando a una de sus antiguas vecinas acerca del más reciente enfrentamiento con la policía, le dice, emocionada: "¡Tiene que resultar una tesis universitaria perfecta! A las ciencias sociales le interesa este acelerado proceso de migración dese los Andes y la selva hacia Lima" (331). Al dejar el asentamiento y educarse en la capital, Maruja se ha concientizado en la práctica lectora: se ha "civilizado" porque ya no se come los libros, sino que los entiende como herramientas para el estudio, serio y comprometido, de las condiciones socioeconómicas del país. Ha dejado, también, las lecturas (y comidas) fantásticas de la niñez, de tradiciones clásicas y extranjeras, y ahora se dedica al análisis de la realidad nacional. La alimentación de la mente reemplaza a la necesidad del cuerpo.

Respecto a esta resolución, Vich ha señalado que la evolución de Maruja representa el abandono de una aproximación a la barriada a través del mito (y de una estética y un lenguaje fantásticos), y la afirmación de su compromiso intelectual con la historia y la

realidad social del país (153). A la vez, podríamos leer esta escena y esta transformación en el personaje de Maruja como un rechazo de aquella lectura física y encarnada, o una forma de reprimir las patologías y los afectos producidos por el contacto con el libro, antes literalmente inscritos en el cuerpo de la joven. Vale la pena preguntarse, entonces, cuál será el efecto de su tesis doctoral para los habitantes de la barriada: si, en efecto, al venir de una persona que ha vivido su experiencia, el libro cumplirá su función explicativa, reivindicativa y política. O si no, por otro lado, terminará en las ollas y los estómagos de los montacerdos. La novela, en cualquier caso, deja la posibilidad abierta, pero queda claro que la resolución del personaje de Maruja apunta hacia la entrada de cuerpos y saberes marginales en la ciudad letrada.⁵

Mientras Maruja representa la socialización de la práctica lectora y la necesidad del discurso científicista y comprometido de la sociología, Pompeyo Flores encarna la búsqueda de la función de la lectura literaria como arma en contra del hambre y la marginalidad. Pompeyo es el héroe de la lucha de Montacerdos por la dignidad, ya que su personaje revela "la miseria ocasionada por la injusticia y por las condiciones de subdesarrollo en que viven las masas peruanas" (Higgins, "Mitos de los sectores emergentes" 104). Pompeyo es la personificación de la barriada en sí: su resistencia ante la muerte, luego de los numerosos intentos por parte de la policía de eliminarlo, es también un paralelo con la manera en que los pobladores de la barriada afirman sus derechos a la tierra y la vida. Y, en particular, representa el hambre, desesperante y abrumador, que sufre la barriada a raíz del estado de sitio que impide el ingreso de alimentos. El joven come de todo para satisfacer su "hambre despiadado, pantagruélico, más abismal que él. Un hambre para morirse. Que lo arrastraba a comer también tierra, guano piedras. Que lo torturaba" (36-37). El hambre lo define: los juegos que inventa son formas de imaginar banquetes fabulosos, de hacer de las migajas y sobras que encuentra manantiales de sabor y nutrición. En estas actuaciones, crea espacios de diversión entre los jóvenes, quienes se imaginan degustando alimentos a los que finalmente pueden acceder. En la mágica Casa del Té, Pompeyo y los otros niños se sientan a la mesa, "levantando las cucharas embutimos haciendo que comíamos, alzando los cachetes, eructando con moderación, bajando y subiendo los dedos extendidos, si eran tenedores; a dedos en pozo, si eran cucharas" (266).

Más adelante, cuando los personajes vuelven a la Casa de Té, la hallan convertida en una Casa de la Poesía, en cuyo Huerto de Poemas ven, detrás de vitrinas, una exhibición de poesía surrealista y dadaísta. Frente a esta, los niños se aburren al no entender los "estrabóticos" poemas, mientras que Pompeyo queda "hechizado... ¡¡maravilloso!", le hacían musitar, '¡súmmum de la cultura universal!'" (309). Los niños quedan fascinados, por lo tanto, cuando en su abrigo encuentran, además del poema "España, aparta de mí este cáliz", de César Vallejo, "un pergamino de seda rosada" escrito en el lenguaje de las flores, el cual Pompeyo usa para comunicarse imaginariamente con Liliana Leyva, su amada (208).

El lenguaje de las flores, un sistema esotérico de comunicación en código, se popularizó en el siglo XVIII como forma de enviar mensajes de amor y erotismo que debían ser decodificados a través del significado otorgado a distintas plantas y flores (Kranz 195). Este lenguaje, representado en la novela por una escritura orientalista, funciona como el vehículo de la imaginación y el deseo de Pompeyo, mediante el cual proyecta su mundo poético y sensual sobre el espacio basurizado de la barriada.

Esta devoción a la alimentación del espíritu y el alma, sin embargo, cambia cuando Liliana lo rechaza. En este momento, el lenguaje de las flores es desplazado por una poesía diferente, una que celebra los frutos comestibles de la tierra. Sumido en la lectura profunda y amplia de todo cuanto puede consumir, a manera de saciar su inacabable hambre, Pompeyo tiene un "arrebato profético" y un "descubrimiento feliz" acerca de las "ciencias y artes del cultivo y la cosecha de legumbres y menestras" (313). Se encuentra, en los libros de botánica de la profesora Ordoñez, con una literatura sobre plantas comestibles y cómo producirlas. Así, el deleite de la poesía da lugar a la posibilidad de usar la literatura como arma contra el hambre. Rápidamente, arroja los ejemplares de la poesía surrealista y los reemplaza con las "Odas a la zanahoria" y "Poemas al Agro", "para después continuar con espinelas vinculadas a la vaca, la anacreóntica al bife y las octavillas al queso y sus derivados; sin obviar otras formas poéticas elogiando el sabor y las cualidades nutricias de las menestras, el frijol, la quinua..." (313). La mirada de Pompeyo hacia la función de la literatura cambia, dándose en vez a la búsqueda de la alimentación del cuerpo.

A diferencia de Maruja, quien aprende a reprimir su impulso de comerse los libros para saciar su hambre y se socializa en una práctica lectora "civilizada", Pompeyo no renuncia a la necesidad del cuerpo. En vez, hace de la lectura una forma de vencer el hambre, no comiéndose los libros, sino creando una biblioteca que eduque a la barriada en cómo alimentarse. Así, va colocando, al lado de cada poema algún vegetal en la Casa de la Poesía, "plantitas de verduras, apios, repollos y de caiguas frescas y florecientes, conseguidas no sé de dónde y regadas no sé cómo", añadiendo además breves reflexiones y sus propios versos (319). La lectura literaria se vuelve un instrumento del bienestar de los pobladores, no porque los reivindica sino porque les proporciona formas de subsistencia y vida. Los habitantes, al principio desconcertados y reacios hacia el magnífico plan, poco a poco empiezan a tomarlo en serio y a plantar semillas y a llenar las ollas en base a las enseñanzas de Pompeyo y su reinaugurada Casa de la Poesía. Así, y aún en medio de la constante amenaza de la policía, los habitantes de Montacerdos,

hallaron algún sentido a sus vidas y se les vio, aunque hambrientos, de momento, menos desesperados por el futuro; tampoco faltó quien, como lo hizo la Eulogia Garrido, puso las primeras semillas de maíz en un ancho cilindro y en una tierra días antes abonada, con la firma esperanza de que pronto llovería...Y se repartiría,

dichoso, como esos dioses de la tierra, como el la lluvia y el sol, por igual a todos (320).

Es en este momento que, facilitados por la lectura, los habitantes de Montacerdos hallan su propósito común: de trabajar juntos para garantizar la comida a todos.

Al final, la utopía de Pompeyo no llega. Los alimentos continúan "flotando arriba, inalcanzables, imposibles de coger" (321). A pesar de esto, concibe una biblioteca comestible, que hace de la lectura una forma de saciar el hambre y de la literatura algo propio e íntimo a la barriada. Dejando de lado sus libros y lecturas de tradiciones universales y, en vez, haciendo una selección basada en la necesidad inmediata, Pompeyo arraiga la práctica lectora en el cuerpo. De esta manera, concibe una respuesta tangible a la propuesta de la maestra Ordoñez, quien creía en la necesidad de hacer de la lectura un instrumento en la lucha contra la pobreza y el hambre. De esta manera, al final del proyecto literario y alimenticio de Pompeyo, lo que queda es menos aquella hambre infinita, monstruosa, y más las formas concretas en que los habitantes de Montacerdos se unen para cultivar y tomar control de su futuro. Para lograrlo, Pompeyo recurre a las posibilidades de la lectura y la poesía para alimentar, metafóricamente y literalmente, los cuerpos de la barriada.

Conclusión

Como apunta José Morales Saravia, el personaje de Pompeyo "está más allá de todo criterio de representación mimética" (131). De igual manera, *Patíbulo para un caballo* no propone una aproximación realista a las prácticas lectoras en zonas marginales ni, por ejemplo, las condiciones de bibliotecas populares. A pesar de que, como señala la crítica, la novela de Jara Jiménez expone o captura las violencias que afectan a estas poblaciones en los márgenes, en mi lectura lo novedoso de la obra yace menos en su capacidad representativa que en la transgresión del género, ya establecido, de la narrativa de la barriada, así como las interpretaciones de la barriada hechas desde la cultura letrada. Al hacerlo, rechaza la idea de comunidad imaginada que se impone a través del capitalismo impreso como base del tiempo horizontal de la nación, y quizás también cuestiona la sociología como ciencia explicativa de la realidad. En vez, hace de la relación íntima y física con el libro una forma de afirmar la potencialidad creadora de la barriada, de su hambre por autodefinirse a través de la práctica literaria. En otras palabras, si los habitantes se enfrentan a la policía que mantiene un cerco alrededor de la población e impide el ingreso de comida, la novela a su vez desafía que los parámetros que hacen que esta vida sea legible exclusivamente a través del lente de la abyección y la violencia. Por eso, si la nota de Salazar ve en la migración interna y la proliferación de los sectores marginales una amenaza a los valores de la literatura y la lectura seria, Pompeyo y *Patíbulo para un caballo* afirman que los placeres del libro y la literatura no son ajenos a la vida en las periferias urbanas.

La presencia del libro en la novela es una experiencia orgánica que existe para el consumo y placer de los habitantes de la barriada. En esta marea de lecturas, que incluyen desde autores latinoamericanos hasta corrientes literarias europeas y asiáticas, de libros de cocina a poesía surrealista y manuales de educación sexual, a medida que la trama central de *Patíbulo para un caballo* avanza de enfrentamiento en enfrentamiento también se perfilan formas concretas de encauzar estas prácticas lectoras, de conceptualizar la función del libro respecto a la violencia del hambre. Y es el hambre lo que define la experiencia de la lectura en la novela: un hambre tanto espiritual como física, un hambre devastadora que obliga a los niños a comer lo que sea para sobrevivir. En el caso de Maruja, esto se ejemplifica a través del consumo literal de las hojas de los libros que otros le prestan con el fin de educarla o deleitarla. La evolución de su personaje la conduce a dejar esta "lectura", puesto que representa una forma de instinto corpóreo básico e incivilizado que no le permite entender o procesar cognitivamente lo que consume. La instrucción del cuerpo lector a dejar de lado su necesidad física para enfocarse en el desarrollo mental y analítico resulta en su tesis universitaria, un documento explicativo de la condición social de la barriada. Pompeyo, por su parte, quien también come de todo, no logra saciar su hambre a través del alimento mental, por lo cual, como última lucha vital, se sumerge en las bibliotecas infinitas que tiene a su disposición y concibe un proyecto fantástico para generar alimentos a través de la lectura. Los poemas de su huerto se vuelven celebraciones de la comida, pero también instrucciones de cómo cultivar verduras y cuidar animales; a través de su labor antológica,

conduce a los pobladores de la barriada a trabajar colectivamente en el cultivo de alimentos.

En mi lectura, estos deseos, búsquedas, tensiones y contradicciones en torno a la cultura letrada y literaria hacen de Montacerdos un espacio propicio para el desarrollo de una sensibilidad lectora y artística. De esta manera, la novela rechaza aquel modelo de nación que se impone desde los centros oficiales del poder, y en su lugar plantea uno propio. Esta visión también está anclada en una práctica lectora compartida y comunitaria, pero que no impone un modelo esencialista o cerrado sino múltiple y heterogéneo. Es una idea de nación que se aleja del consenso, y que por lo tanto propone formas, a veces opuestas, de concebir el valor material y simbólico de la lectura. Siempre, sin embargo, estas apropiaciones de la cultura libresco vienen de las mismas necesidades materiales y espirituales de los habitantes de la barriada. Las discusiones en torno a los mensajes de los noticieros, los debates entre los alumnos de la profesora Ordoñez, la socialización lectora de Maruja, el huerto de poesía de Pompeyo, hacen de Montacerdos un escenario que no acepta una lectura externa, sino que propone sus propios y múltiples parámetros de legibilidad. En *Patíbulo para un caballo*, el hambre de Maruja y Pompeyo presenta una oportunidad para que ellos mismos encuentren la manera de saciarse; más que una falta, por lo tanto, el vacío de sus estómagos puede leerse como un ansia productiva, la cual propone salidas materiales o resoluciones utópicas, pero que en todo momento apunta hacia la autoafirmación.

NOTAS

¹ *Patíbulo para un caballo* ha tenido una segunda edición en 1994 y una tercera en 2019, publicada como homenaje al Premio Casa de la Literatura Peruana que Jara Jiménez recibió ese mismo año. El presente artículo toma como fuente la segunda edición del texto.

² Para una bibliografía completa sobre esta novela y la obra de Jara Jiménez en general, ver la compilación de Red Literaria Peruana, a cargo de Edith Pérez Orozco.

³ Señala José Morales Saravia que las labores de Pompeyo pueden leerse también como una alusión a los debates literarios y filosóficos acerca de la función de la literatura en los años sesenta y setenta (131).

⁴ Frank Otero Luque apunta que en 1987 Jara Jiménez viajó a Brasil para estudiar producción de guiones de telenovelas. Aquí, sugiere, es probable

que haya sido influenciado por la estética del hambre de Glauber Rocha y otros cineastas del *Cinema Novo* (331).

⁵ La segunda edición de *Patíbulo para un caballo* incluye, al final de la novela, un apartado titulado "Colina de los helechos (Poemas)", "el racimo de poemas" escritos por Pompeyo en la última sección de la historia (335). La inclusión de los poemas, además de una nota explicativa de Maruja (la compiladora), muestra que, a pesar de su profesionalización, la niña aún mantiene una nostalgia y fascinación por Pompeyo y su lenguaje literario y enigmático. Este colofón a la edición original nos permite entender que, a pesar de profesionalización, Maruja no ha abandonado la lectura literaria del todo. Estos poemas pertenecen al mismo Jara Jiménez, y habían sido publicados anteriormente en otras fuentes, como en la misma revista *Runa*. Agradezco a mis lectores por señalar esto.

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The Railways as a Character. Representations of Conviviality in Brazilian Literature¹

Luciane Scarato

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

ABSTRACT: Stemming from the early railway system in Brazil, this article builds on conviviality in Latin America. Scholarship traditionally looks at railroads to analyse economy, architecture, and labour. However, the extent to which railroads changed everyday interactions within the smallest contexts remains overlooked. To fill in this gap, it draws from novels, plays, and short stories written between the late-nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century. This timeframe corresponds to the “railway boom” in Brazil and includes renowned authors such as Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, and Júlia Lopes de Almeida but also glossed over authors as Adolfo Caminha. Literary sources allow the analysis of the impact that trains had on the everyday that would, otherwise, remain unknown. This article brings railways and its surroundings, particularly its outcasts, to the forefront of Brazilian [hi]stories. The connection between railways and socioeconomic development in Brazil is critical in this presentation, alongside women’s pivotal role in the convivial environments that the railway engendered. It aims to demonstrate that the colonial discourse of civilization against barbarism crystallised, adapted, and changed with the implementation of the railway system in such an unequal society as Brazil.

KEYWORDS: railways – Brazil – literature – history – conviviality – 19th and 20th centuries

Introduction

Stemming from the railway system, this paper sets out to deepen our understanding of conviviality in Brazil. I use the term “conviviality” as “interactions observed in the realm of common life” (Costa 27). Scholarship traditionally looks at railroads to analyse economy, architecture, and labour movements. However, the extent to which railroads changed everyday interactions within the smallest contexts remains overlooked. To fill in this gap, I draw from novels, plays, and short stories written between the late-nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century. The key criteria I used to select the texts was adequacy to timeframe rather than explicit mention of railways. In doing so, I bring to the forefront a secondary character that remains glossed over despite its historical importance. Literary sources reveal the impact that railways had on the everyday that would, otherwise, remain unknown. The connection between railways and “progress” in Brazil is on the background of this essay, alongside women’s role in the new convivial environments that railways engendered. The implementation of the railway system in Brazil crystallised, adapted to, and changed the colonial discourse of civilization versus barbarism.

Regarding the theoretical framework, this essay draws from French literary critic Roland Barthes’s theory of “the death of the author” (Barthes 50). How, then, can we read a text against the grain without relating it to its author? We examine everything internal to the text, such as semantics and syntax, not external. In other words, the emphasis is not on “the spirit of the time” or on authors’ biographies as these are an “intentional fallacy” (Winsatt and

Beardsley 647). This essay looks at books, plays, and short stories focusing more on internal elements, such as figures of speech, than on external elements. However, since this is a history essay, not a piece of literary criticism, it situates texts into the broader context of the implementation of the railway in Brazil between late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. There is one major exception to the “death of the author,” because Lima Barreto is analysed in the light of his biography. This exception relates to the fact that, as Schwarcz contends in *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* (183), Lima inserts alter egos in his texts that are crucial to understand his stories. To a lesser extent, this article also offers a short biography of Júlia Lopes de Almeida.

The article is divided into three parts, beginning with a summary of each analysed text. On the following, there is a reflection about how railroads connected cities with their suburbs and the countryside.² These reflections shed light to and challenge the notion that cities were enlightened civilisation clusters while suburbs and the hinterlands remained in the “dark ages.” The third and final part looks at train stations as places of interactions where diversity coexisted, and shaped relations. It throws weight behind the argument that conflict, negotiation, and cooperation build conviviality in unequal contexts (Heil 3; 27). The social role of women is at the intersection of convivial relations that pervaded the railway. In the end, it contributes to the debate about conviviality from a diachronic perspective.

The Plots

Machado de Assis published *Evolução* (Evolution) in 1884. The short story narrates the encounter between Inácio and Benedito in a train from Rio de Janeiro to Vassouras. This meeting changes Benedito's life after Inácio asserts that Brazil was a crawling baby that would walk only after having railroads spread over its territory (Assis 157).³ Inácio and Benedito bump into each other in Rio and Europe, to where Inácio travels to negotiate the construction of a new railway in Brazil. Benedito is then running for deputy. When they meet again in Rio, Benedito (now elected) reads his inaugural speech to Inácio. Inácio is surprised to find out that Benedito appropriated his discourse on material progress and railway development.

Pobre Menino (Poor Boy) is a short story written by Visconde de Taunay in 1901. It is about Alberto, an ill boy that travels from Caxambú to Rio de Janeiro with his family (Taunay). The narrator stops to observe the family because he has nothing else to do and is bored with the newspapers and a book he has brought on board. As the story unfolds, the narrator grows fond of the boy who, despite being rich, has a poor health.

Correio da Roça (Countryside Mail) is one of the most famous novels by Julia Lopes de Almeida. It tells the story of Maria and her daughters, who find themselves in a tough economic situation after the death of her husband and father (Almeida *Correio da Roça*). As it becomes hard to make ends meet in Rio de Janeiro, they move to their virtually abandoned estate. Maria starts corresponding with her friend Fernanda, who continues to live in Rio. At first, Maria complains about everything in the countryside. However, after much insistence from Fernanda, Maria and her daughters slowly start to devote themselves to the development of their farm. They plant flowers, seek to improve the roads, and breed animals. The oldest daughter opens a small school for the neighbours in their back garden.

Julia Lopes de Almeida's *A Intrusa* (1908) tells the story of widower Argemiro, his daughter Glória, and her preceptor, Alice (Almeida *A Intrusa*). After mourning for months, Argemiro decides to bring his daughter back home. The girl has been living in a cottage with her grandmother, the Baroness, since her mother's death. Argemiro is eager to properly educate Glória, because she became a tomboy. For this reason, he must pick up the girl and take her to Rio de Janeiro, where he hires Alice as a preceptor.

In *Cemitério dos Vivos* (Cemetery of the Living), partially published in the early-1920s, the stories of Mascarenhas, the narrator, and of Lima Barreto's intertwine, and not only because both men spent a couple of years in an asylum (Barreto *Diário do Hospício. O Cemitério dos Vivos*).⁴ Their stories also intersect at the discrimination that both experienced because of their African ancestors. Mascarenhas and Barreto sought social recognition and integration through education. It is, thus, to study that Mascarenhas moves to an inn at Marrecas Street, near the promenade in Rio de Janeiro's city centre.⁵ At Marrecas Street, he falls in love with Efigênia,

daughter of Clementina, the pension's owner. However, Clementina falls ill, must sell the inn, and moves to the suburbs with her daughter. After this, Mascarenhas starts visiting them.

A Normalista (Caminha) is a story of violence against women that mainly occurs at *Rua do Trilho* (Rail Street), in Baturité, a village in Ceará. Adolpho Caminha guides the reader through the story of Maria do Carmo, an orphan who lives in the company of her godfather, officeholder João da Matta, and his partner D. Therezinha. Maria do Carmo is a young woman faced with the death of her parents, in need of sharing a house with an abusive godfather and a jealous godmother who turns a blind eye to the sexual abuse inflicted on Maria do Carmo. In addition to being a woman and an orphan, Maria do Carmo studies at a "State Normal School," or *Escola Normal*, hence the title *The Normalist*. Normal Schools were state schools that prepared women to be teachers, one of the only socially acceptable professions that a woman could have at the time. However, there was prejudice against *normalists*, who were usually depicted as immoral and sexually liberated (De Luca).

After being raped, Maria do Carmo gets pregnant. Her godmother grows increasingly suspicious of her and disdains the girl. João da Matta, worried, takes his goddaughter to the countryside to have the baby. On her way, Maria do Carmo feels better as she breathes in the fresh air of the meadows (Caminha 267).⁶ The baby, however, is stillborn. Maria do Carmo's return to Normal School coincides with the Proclamation of the Republic (1889). From this moment on, her life interweaves and benefits from a national event because everybody is busy minding their own business. Maria do Carmo marries a military officer and, since the army played a pivotal role in the Proclamation, she becomes part of one of the most important social groups in the country, contrary to the monarchists.

The next section delves into these and other texts to analyse the role of trains as cultural mediators in Brazil. At the same time, it examines how the railway either consolidated or changed convivial modes in cities, suburbs, and the countryside.

The City, the Suburbs, and the Countryside: trains as cultural mediators

This section explores how trains appear as intermediaries between the city and the suburbs in coeval literature. The association of socioeconomic progress with the railway pervades most of the texts while it reveals writers' perception about the city and the suburbs. These views vary according to characters' social standing, occupation, and gender. The analysis begins with the relationship between urban centres and the countryside as registered by Machado de Assis, Taunay, and Antônio de Oliveira. On the following, it sets up to understand how trains influenced convivial interactions between city centres and their suburbs in the words of Júlia Lopes de Almeida and Lima Barreto.

Public transport creates favourable opportunities for the emergence of conviviality more than others, as they "facilitate mingling"

(Nyamnhjoh 360). In the short story *Evolução* (*Evolution*), renowned Machado de Assis places the railway as one of the leading characters (Assis 157 [1884]). The last sentence of Benedito's speech is the same that Inácio mentioned when they first met on the train going to Vassouras: Brazil is a crawling child and will start walking only when it has railways. To this, Inácio calls for a psychological evolution, as in Hebert Spencer.⁷ In this short story, interactions between people, mediated by a machine, change not only the environment but also individuals. *Evolução* describes a convivial context that reveals the complexity of interactions that took place in a nineteenth-century Brazil that was fighting for its space in the new capitalist world.

A similar viewpoint appears in *Correio da Roça*. According to Fernanda, Brazil's future as an agricultural power depends on the expansion of both roads and railways: "in my opinion, the modern farmer must prepare their roads, not for oxcarts, but to cars destined to overcome locomotives and trains" (Almeida *Correio da Roça* 39, own translation).⁸ She foresees what would happen decades later, in the 1950s, when the Brazilian government opted for automobiles against trains. The improvement of communication should also avoid the *jeitinho brasileiro*. The "Brazilian way" of doing things precariously, for as long as it works is, in Fernanda's opinion, a petty saving that causes a lot of difficulty and unnecessary expense in the future (Almeida *Correio da Roça* 39).⁹ To convince Maria of the profits accruing to the railway development, Fernanda uses the United States as a stellar example: "[...] in the year of 1907 only, these profitable orange trees sent to external markets nothing less than 413.696 tons of fruit, that loaded 81.640 wagons on the railroads!" (Almeida *Correio da Roça* 27, own translation).¹⁰ The Brazilian agricultural "gift" lingers on until today.

In *Correio da Roça*, "conciliatory feminism," or moderate feminism, as De Luca (2011) calls it, combines with positivist patriotism and Spencer's evolutionism. Its writer, Ana Júlia Lopes de Almeida, alas Écila Worms, belongs to the Brazilian women's writing boom that occurred in the turn of the nineteenth century and was associated to "conciliatory feminism" (De Luca). She is one of the main representatives of the second wave of Brazilian feminism, called "moderate feminism" (De Luca). The main characteristics of this movement were: patriotism connected to the everyday; Rousseauian Enlightenment; Utopic Socialism, "social romanticism"; and Spencer's evolutionism (De Luca). Born in Rio Janeiro, Júlia enjoyed unparalleled success as a writer at her time and continues to be one of the most important names in Brazilian women's writing (De Luca).

According to De Luca, *Correio da Roça* marks Júlia's "green cycle," because ecology is a pervading theme in her writings from this period. The "ecological" theme appears in other texts, but *Correio da Roça* is a literary masterpiece of positivist agricultural economy. As an epistolary novel, this book has a dubious tone. On the one hand, it celebrates women's wit, force, industriousness, and adaptability. On the other hand, it crystallises the docile and gentle posi-

tion where society wanted women to remain. Idealisation of women as heroes and crucial to the development of society was inspired in Rousseau's ideas about the role of women in society and influenced numerous nineteenth-century writers (De Luca).

The development of agriculture in Brazil also depended on women's ability to being autodidactic (De Luca). The entire book is, in fact, an ode to it. Fernanda, Maria, and her daughters learn as they put into practice information they read in specialised magazines and share in their letters. This is a practical and positivist education that aims at personal evolution, as in Comte and Spencer. Women's material progress moves in tandem with the progress of the country, shaping positivist female patriotism (De Luca). Technological innovation, such as the railway, improved women's mobility in unforeseen ways.

The train spurs the creation of convivial spaces between the countryside and the city even when its destination is an urban centre, as in *Pobre Menino* (Taunay). The train between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro is one of the leading characters in this short story like it is in *Evolução* (p. 3). *Pobre Menino* reveals the material conditions of travelling on a Brazilian train at the beginning of the twentieth century, at least according to its narrator: dirty and dusky toilets, people's habits inside a train (eating, reading), different types of travellers (chatty, grumpy). It also points to the direction that casual encounters on a train trip – such as that between Inácio and Benedito – change lives. According to Nyamnhjoh (357) conviviality seeks a balance between intimacy and distance to negotiate conflict. The encounter between Inácio and Benedito pays testimony to Nyamnhjoh claims, as Inácio wavers between proud and uncomfortable each time he meets Benedito. So does Alberto in *Pobre Menino*.

Boy's health and the narrator's mood move in tandem with their surroundings while Taunay employs powerful metaphors, personification, and anaphora. When Boy has a fever episode, train sounds are monstrous, agonising, and the landscape is spooky:

"What an endless journey! What time! All so gloomy around us! The rain shall pass; but the damp, weeping darkness condenses in a sulky, callous way, almost tangible. And at each station honks and whistles pierced our ears, or harrowing outcries and a melancholic bell tolls, eerily, tolling the dead."¹¹ (Taunay 18, own translation)

Finally, Taunay transforms the train journey in a euphemism for death, in a frenzy:

"Another train of the suburbs chugged making a raucous din: Listen, listen! There it comes... What fear! And it was as if he was already alone... he saw himself in a shallow grave covered with loads of dirt on his small, ill, knocked down little body..."¹² (Taunay 20-21, own translation)

These excerpts demonstrate how railways connected the countryside with the city, opposing backwardness and progress, idleness, and opportunity. In romantic literature, the train usually is a powerful element that mingles with narrators' feelings and state of mind. The impact of the train upon society went, thus, beyond its economic importance.

Up to this point, analysis has concentrated on the relationship between cities and the countryside, having trains as mediators. From this point on, I will focus on the connection between downtown and the suburbs, beginning with *A Intrusa*. Crowds that catch a train at Rio de Janeiro's central station towards the suburbs are described as hasty and clumsy; they carry parcels while dragging children behind them (Almeida *A Intrusa* 13).¹³ The train that stops at *Central do Brazil* reconnects widower Argemiro with his daughter Glória. On his way to the suburbs with a friend, it is possible to note the same literary recourse that Taunay uses in *Pobre Menino*, as the deafening winches move in parallel with a child's cry, and young, yellowish, toothless men talking about politics (Almeida *A Intrusa* 14).¹⁴

The landscape pays testimony to the paradox that pervaded the suburbs despite their backwardness when compared to urban centres. Their muddy trails, dry grass, and scorching sun contrast with scattered golden orange trees that cheer up the fields.¹⁵ The reader identifies, at this point of the narrative, one of the main elements that stands out in Júlia Lopes de Almeida's production years later: the importance of nature and agricultural education to the development of Brazil.

"Argemiro: This is devastating.... – noted Argemiro, pointing to the fields, where ugly small houses grouped every now and then.

Caldas: And this train could trundle through odoriferous fruits farms. Brazil is the land of odd flowers and delicious fruit. If we had countrymen with a good taste, we would see, Argemiro, beautiful orchids on fruit trees. Look at that! Such a crooked fence can only be the result of bad taste and lack of instinct in the land of bamboo! The beautiful bamboo!"¹⁶ (Almeida *A Intrusa* 15, own translation)

Differently from Júlia Almeida in *A Intrusa*, Lima Barreto sets an optimistic tone about the suburbs in his texts, despite their pervading poverty. In *The Station* (Barreto "A Estação"), he writes about Méier:¹⁷

"There are patisseries, busy bars; there are bakeries that make treasured and wanted bread; there are two cinemas [...]; there is a circus/theatre, rough, but existent; there are casinos beyond suspicion, there are second-hand bohemian, and other urban imperfections, both honest and dishonest."¹⁸ (Barreto "A Estação", par. 7, own translation.)

Irony and nostalgia seem to grow stronger in Barreto's latest writings, particularly in *Cemitério dos Vivos*. Mascarenha's journey on the suburban train interests me most, as it is more realistic and less romantic than the texts analysed so far.¹⁹ The noises on the train do not disturb the narrator, nor does he establish any parallel between his feelings and the landscape. This does not mean, however, that his description lacks affection, since the landscape is the only thing that interrupts his thoughts, as the grotesque and improper architecture of the suburbs seems posh and pretentious. Mascarenhas criticises the absence of gardens and trees, a mimicry of fancy neighbourhoods. It does not resemble the suburbs of a city as rich as Rio de Janeiro, but a series of pedantic hamlets, big cities wannabes. Mascarenhas misses the graciousness and freshness of a "half-countryside" (Barreto *Diário Do Hospício. O Cemitério dos Vivos* 169-70).²⁰ In a previous book, (Barreto *Vida e Morte de M. J. Gonzaga de Sá* 41), the character Gonzaga de Sá makes a similar critique to the suburbs, which he hates because they are neither a city nor a countryside.²¹

Mascarenhas' description of the suburbs does not befit the economic situation of Efigênia and her mother. It befits an area where a Baroness would live, as in *A Intrusa*. However, after disembarking at the station where both women live, Mascarenhas notes that their house is far from the station. Their street is improvised and poorly designed, with scattered houses and wastelands where secondary vegetation grows. The houses near the station are pretentious and look like a mini-Rio de Janeiro, whereas their street resembles a countryside trail (Barreto *Diário do Hospício. O Cemitério dos Vivos* 170).²² It is plausible to contend that Lima Barreto, through the voice of Mascarenhas, considers the suburbs more authentic when they do not try to look like an urban centre.

Lima Barreto's background and ethnical origins may explain his increasingly ironic tone. His grandmother, Geraldina, was a manumitted enslaved woman; his mother, Amália, was probably the result of a relationship with Geraldina's owner (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 31). His father was also the son of an enslaved woman, probably a natural offspring, too (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 42). Does this have anything to do with the fact that Lima Barreto lived in the suburbs (Schwarcz "Da Minha Janela Vejo o Mundo Passar: Lima Barreto, o Centro e os Subúrbios")? Is there any connection between Barreto's (and Mascarenhas') desire, or necessity, to change to be socially accepted? An affirmative answer to both questions does not seem far-fetched, as Lima Barreto studied in elite schools and colleges, among the best of Niterói and Rio de Janeiro (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 98-101; 08-19). However, he did not feel like he belonged, his ethnic background playing a major role in his feeling of rejection (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 474). What stands out from Barreto's descriptions of the suburbs is the inequality that pervades them, as they are home for the (aspiring) rich and the poor. From Barreto's viewpoint, the suburbs are not homogenous, and he highlights the importance of not generalising his criticism (Barreto "O Trem Dos

Subúrbios" 182; Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário*; Schwarcz "Da Minha Janela Vejo o Mundo Passar: Lima Barreto, o Centro e os Subúrbios").²³

At the time, the population had reasons to believe that the railway was going to bring not only economic but also social development to Brazil. The train that Mascarenhas caught at the central station towards the suburbs was part of the *Estrada de Ferro Central do Brasil*. The Estrada de Ferro Central do Brasil (EFCB) started in 1858 when Emperor Pedro II inaugurated the *Estrada de Ferro Dom Pedro II* (EFDPII), three years after a concession to British engineer Edward Price (Graham 52-51; Figueira; Transportes 4-38). El-Kareh argues that EFDPII was a capitalist enterprise that benefited from enslaved labour. There were shareholders, stock market, interest payments, and free labour-hire; however, EFDPII also used enslaved men who toiled in railway construction (El-Kareh 36-37; 66-67).

Central do Brazil is a character in numerous texts of Lima Barreto. It is more than a station, a route, and a background: it has a story and twists plots (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 163). Such prominence makes sense, as all trains to the suburbs necessarily arrived and departed from the Central (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 172-73). At the Central, people could take a carriage or hop on a tram to move around Rio de Janeiro. Lima Barreto ironically describes the allure of the railway (Barreto "O Trem dos Subúrbios"). According to him, the dream job of poorly educated young men was at the Central do Brazil Railway. Suburban candidates to public service always thought of the Central to save them and provide economic stability.²⁴ Barreto continues, claiming that they felt like generals when they wore small conductor's or ticket inspector's caps.²⁵ Despite Barreto's criticism – that might be linked to his dubious and conflictive belonging to middle class – his youngest brother had a career at Central do Brazil (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 176).

Conductors and ticket inspectors played an important role in the complex railway structure, although their salaries were among the lowest (El-Kareh 79). They were the face of the company, as they dealt directly with the public. The success of the railway relied on good service, to which the behaviour of conductors and inspectors was key (El-Kareh 80). All employers were, moreover, subject to rigid discipline codes and tight control, and their allegedly pedantry might have unfolded from such demand (El-Kareh 80-81). The railway worked with a reward policy for good employees, who could be promoted to higher positions – although promotion, in many cases, did not correspond to higher wages (El-Kareh 80-83).

The ambiguous image of the suburbs and the countryside shifts from backwardness to innocence or redemption, and it mingles with the submission of women in *A Normalista*. The negativity that pervades the "rail house" culminates with the rape of Maria do Carmo. Caminha's description is so realistic that, in one of the copies I analyse, the corresponding pages have been pulled out. Everything related to their house at *Rua Trilho* has a grim and decadent appearance. It is sooty, poorly lit, and scary. João da Matta is a cock-

eyed, liver-leafed, creepy man, and his house is decadent, albeit aspiring to luxury. It is striking that society looked down at people who lived by the railway, since it was a benchmark of progress. However, people from higher social groups, such as law student Zuza and his father, also frequented the house. Maria do Carmo falls in love and she is, to a certain extent, corresponded. However, once Zuza meets important politicians, he starts to spend long periods outside Baturité and his letters become scarce. In a way, the train takes away Maria do Carmo's hope that Zuza would return to rescue her. She is left at *Rua do Trilho* at the mercy of her godfather.

The outcome of *A Normalista* presents João da Matta, a monarchist, as the impersonation of ancient evil, someone whose future as a public servant is uncertain. Maria do Carmo marries a military officer and foresees a bright future. It is important to note that the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889 was a military coup d'état. The military officer, thus, represents the future, while civil service was the past. The birth of a new regime represented a new beginning. It brought hope of justice for all, including petty personal tragedies. At least for some and, perhaps, for a while.

Writing during the republican regime, Júlia Lopes de Almeida portrays a more positive view of women than Adolpho Caminha. In Júlia's narrative, women are still restrained but not victimised. She does not describe men as obnoxiously as Caminha does, neither does she expose the sexual violence that women suffered before the republic and continued to suffer after it. Caminha shows individuals from lower social groups, while Júlia writes about middle-upper class groups. As mentioned earlier, Júlia belongs to "social romanticism," according to which women acted upon the public sphere and were no longer secluded to domestic affairs. Caminha, in his turn, represents realism and naturalism, placing women as individuals guided by affections and passions, either torn between pleasure and social duty or degenerated in consequence of society, as Maria do Carmo (De Luca).

Train Stations as Convivial Interactions Hubs

Stations appear in the selected texts as places where interactions between multiple characters take place. Former enslaved people, merchants, women, and politicians shared stations and had to deal with the intimacy of physical proximity. Although those interactions were mostly brief, they reveal conflict between different social groups and unexpected cooperation. Police records about violence at train stations amount. For example, passengers unhappy about warnings from conductors and inspectors sometimes resulted in death threats.²⁶ The presence of destitute individuals in the stations was recurrent, being up to conductors and inspectors to provide first aid, take them to the hospital and warn the police.²⁷ The convivial space of train stations was, thus, violent but also solidary.

Perhaps the best summary of train stations and their importance to its neighbourhoods in the early-nineteenth century has been written by Lima Barreto. He adds up to the characterisation

of stations as works of art (Meeks). A railway station is more than a place where passengers wait for trains, as it must effectively combine ticket selling, waiting rooms, embark and disembark platforms, in addition to arrival and departure tracks (Meeks 28-30). In the 1830s, nobody knew how a station had to look like, and it took years of engineering improvement and architectural polishing to figure it out (Meeks 39). Train stations slowly became hubs and reference points. The reader gets from Lima Barreto a glimpse of what train stations looked like in the early-1920s, not in terms of architecture, but interactions.

Train stations were places for flirting in a time when cinemas and gardens were uncommon or did not exist in the suburbs. As such, it was a convivial space that promoted encounters not only among suburban citizens but also between them and people from various parts, not only Rio de Janeiro:

"In suburban life, the train station plays a key role: it is the centre, its backbone. Once upon a time, when there were no gardens or cinemas in those areas, it was the favourite spot for girls and boys looking for marriage, willingly or not, during Sunday walks."²⁸ (Barreto "A Estação", par. 1, own translation.)

Lima Barreto immortalised what a train station looked like at his time. His description is poetic, albeit not romantic: "nowadays, the suburban 'gare' has not lost this characteristic of being a recreational, meeting, and chatting point (Barreto "A Estação").²⁹ The author reconstructs how various types of food are sold in the warehouses that surround the stations; haberdasheries; pharmacies; butchery shops; and *quitandas* – shops where biscuits and sweets of all sorts are available to make train journeys more enjoyable (Barreto "A Estação").³⁰

Barreto's description is both poetic and sarcastic. He argues that the "true" suburban station reveals itself in the second half of the morning, between nine and eleven o'clock (Barreto "A Estação"). That is when public servants, military officers, and small lawyers go downtown. According to Lima, they are always complaining about God and the government, in a typical attitude of people who, in consequence of their monotonous jobs and domestic problems, lack taste and spirituality.³¹ Hence, in Lima's opinion, the negative characteristic of the suburbs unravels from aspiring middle classes, not from the working class that goes earlier to the city centre. He further adds that Brazilians are vain and love a meaningless title, even if it is not really a title.³² Barreto writes a guide to identify civil servants who, despite their mediocre jobs, behave like big shots.

"A low-rank officer that got his job in consequence of dodgy business behaves as if he was an important director. He pushes others on the queue when buying his ticket – when he buys. He scorns on scruffy people and throws the coins on the counter violently. Such a vain and igno-

rant scum cannot wait for an old black poor lady to buy a second-class ticket. He is in such a hurry that it seems that Brazil will face bankruptcy if he is not served immediately."³³ (Barreto "A Estação", par. 35, own translation)

Barreto also criticises civil servants who think that graduated workers are better than those who are not. Is Barreto's fierce criticism related to the fact that he was a non-graduated civil servant (Schwarcz *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 143-48)?³⁴ If so, could this be a reason for the genius, yet troubled mind of a man who, in order to belong to society and overcome racism, had to attend the same space of those that he despised most?³⁵ According to L. Schwarcz (2017, p. 144), Lima never thought that his job as a notary had been an honoured solution to unemployment. From this perspective, Lima Barreto criticises himself each time that he complains about public servants. Or, perhaps, he felt different, like he did not belong to the same group.

Up to this point, Lima's description is extremely detailed and offers multiple elements that allow us to define the station as a convivial stage where people lived in intimacy and got along, but also experienced power asymmetries and clashes. The following excerpt leaves little doubt about how the advent of the railway was a step towards the integration of poor and black people that stopped at structural prejudice and racism. A girl walks past Lima with a violin box, music sheets, and a Portuguese version of *La Fauvette du Moulin*, by Émile Richenbourg. He observes: "poor girl! Reads Montepin³⁶ and goes to the Institute of Music? For what? At the institute, only rich and well-related girls have talent" (Barreto "A Estação", par. 50-51).³⁷ Poor girls were, then, accepted in the institute. However, it did not matter how talented and educated they were, because they would never have the same opportunities of those who were rich and had contacts. Is it implied that rich girls who succeeded at the institute were not as smart as the poor?

The final paragraph is sublime and melancholic. By resorting to personification, anaphora, and simile, Lima Barreto brilliantly transforms the train into a metaphor of himself:

"It is meant to run miles, fly on the rails, and move distances, [...] it has failed its destiny. It cannot run free; it cannot fly, spreading on the soil as an acacia; it cannot conquer space. It ought to save its energy and speed to be ready to stop at every station, every fifteen minutes, always at the mercy of a timetable. How shall this locomotive endure such a mediocre life?"³⁸ (Barreto "A Estação", own translation)

To Lima Barreto, locomotives and trains are meant to be free. However, just like him, the black and non-graduated civil servant, the black monster is a prisoner of a nine-to-five boring job, that ultimately drains his willingness to live and write.

Concluding Remarks

This essay contributes to the field of historical and literary studies. It brings to light details of the seemingly unimportant ebb and flow of the everyday. By focusing on texts more than on authors, it demonstrates that literature is a representation of reality that helps historians to reconstruct the past.

I look at the railway as an intermediary that changed the course of people's [hi]stories while connecting them between two geographical points (the city and the countryside). The railway also bridged the gap between cities and their suburbs, transforming big cities such as Rio Janeiro in more complex and heterogeneous places in unforeseen ways.

The railway was on women's minds and daily activities. Women talked about and lived on them. In a way, the railway personified the battle between progress and backwardness. It speeded up

the unprecedented patriotic role that women should have in society, upon which they were supposed to act and not just observe. Moderate feminism appears in some texts as conciliatory feminism that, even when advocating for freedom of speech, reinforced the ideal of women as gentle and humble. In some cases, the railway only added up to the numerous spaces of violence against women.

In the selected texts, train stations are more than mere changing points. They are places where interaction leads to daily conflict and cooperation, flirting and gossip. They are observation points for chroniclers and pay testimony to the small things that allow people to continue living despite politics and crisis.

This paper adds up to the idea of conviviality as an analytical tool that focuses on interactions among people and between people and things. In doing so, it reconstructs the history of a character that has lost its importance in Latin America, but still pervades its present: the railway.

NOTES

¹ I wrote this article while working as a postdoctoral researcher at the Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean. I thank Dr Barbara Potthast for her suggestions and comments.

² I use the term suburb to identify newly populated areas near city centres. During the nineteenth century, although there were poverty and misery in Brazilian suburbs, middle classes and elites lived there. The idea of suburbs as the most impoverished areas in a city is a twentieth century invention. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, "Da Minha Janela Vejo o Mundo Passar: Lima Barreto, o Centro e os Subúrbios," *Estudos Avançados* 31 (2017).

³ "Eu comparo o Brasil a uma criança que está engatinhando; só começará a andar quando tiver muitas estradas de ferro." The original orthography of all quotes have been maintained when possible.

⁴ In *A Triste Morte de Policarpo* Quaresma (The Sad Death of Policarpo Quaresma - 1915), Lima Barreto reveals the devastating effects of asylum over a man. Policarpo had also lived in an asylum, and when they let them out, he moved to the suburbs, being a frequent passenger in the suburban train. Lima Barreto's father used to work in the asylum, where Lima spent his weekends. There is a record of mental disorders in Barreto's family. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2017).

⁵ Lima Barreto lived at Marrecas street when he enrolled at the Polytechnic School. Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 111.

⁶ "Fazia-lhe bem, como um tônico, o ar fresco da manhã que lhe bafejava o rosto. Sentia-se melhor respirando aquele ar, bebendo toda a selvagem frescura do campo, todo o delicioso, inefável perfume que se levantava dos crotons e das salsas bravas."

⁷ Hebert Spencer was a philosopher who thought about evolution not only in terms of biology, but also psychology, ethics, and sociology. His most famous book is *First Principles*, published in 1862. Spencer read Charles Darwin.

⁸ "Na minha opinião, o fazendeiro moderno deve preparar as suas estradas não para carros de bois, mas para automóveis, destinados a

desbancar as próprias locomotivas e comboios das vias férreas."

⁹ "Nós temos o habito das economias mesquinhas, dando a tudo que fazemos o ar de provisório, sem cogitarmos em que esse sistema nos acarreta dificuldades e grandes despesas futuras, como bem disse o nosso informante e amigo."

¹⁰ "Só no ano de 1907 esses benéficos laranjais mandaram para mercados estrangeiros nada menos de 413.696 toneladas de frutas, que encheram 81.640 vagões das vias férreas!"

¹¹ "Que viagem interminável! Que hora aquela! Tudo tão sombrio em torno de nós! Cessára a chuva; mas as trevas humidas, gotejantes, se condensavam carrancudas, caliginosas, como que paupaveis. E a cada estação eram apitos e assobios a perfurarem os ouvidos, ou então clamores angustiosos e um bater de sino melancólico, lugubre, a dobrar finados."

¹² "Passou mais um trem dos suburbios com assustador estampido:

Ouvisse, ouvisse!... Ahí vinha ella... Que medo! E já estava como que sósinho... via-se na cova estreita com um mundo de terra por cima do seu corpinho tão batido pela moléstia..."

¹³ "O trem dos subúrbios ia partir, quando Adolfo e Argemiro entraram na gare da Central. Adiante deles corria uma multidão pressurosa e atrapalhada, sobraçando embrulhos e arrastando crianças."

¹⁴ "O trem corria de estação em estação, com os seus guinchos ensurdecadores. Uma criança chorava no colo da mãe aflita; um grupo de rapazes amarelos e desdentados falava de eleições do Clube Riachuelo, ao pé de uma senhora de cabelos grisalhos, bem vestida, e que viajava só."

¹⁵ "Lá fora a paisagem estendia-se larga, banhada de sol escaldante. Um véu fino de pó dourava a atmosfera. Laranjeiras pequenas, de grandes frutos dourados, alegravam aqui e acolá um ou outro ponto dos campos mal tratados, onde em gramados secos trilhas barrentas descreviam linhas tortuosas."

¹⁶ "– Isto é desconsolador... – observou Argemiro, apontando para a extensa pradaria, onde em vários trechos se agrupavam casinhas feias.

– E este trem poderia rolar entre pomares cheirosos. O Brasil é a terra

da flor esquisita e da fruta saborosa. De um lado e de outro destas estradas, se tivéssemos camponesas e agricultores de bom gosto, veríamos, Argemiro, lindas orquídeas suspensas na galharia de árvores frutíferas. Olha bem para aquilo! É preciso não ter absolutamente gosto nem instinto, para se fazer uma cerca assim, de paus tortos, aqui no país do bambu. Do lindíssimo bambu!”

¹⁷ Lima was, however, a fierce critic of Meyer, for considering it a pedantic suburb. Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 177; 79.

¹⁸ “Tem confeitaria decentes, botequins frequentados; tem padarias que fabricam pães, estimados e procurados; tem dois cinemas, um dos quaes funciona em casa edificada adrede; tem um circo-theatro, tosco, mas tem; tem casas de jogo patentadas e garantidas pela virtude, nunca posta em dúvida, do Estado, o tem bohemios, um tanto de segunda mão; e outras perfeições urbanas, quer honestas, quer desonestas.”

¹⁹ According to De Luca (2011), *A Intrusa* belongs to Realism.

²⁰ “Uma tarde, tomei o trem dos subúrbios e fui em demanda da casa das pobres senhoras. Viajei despreocupadamente, sem dar nenhuma importância ao caso. O meu pensamento ia vagando para todos os lados, sem me deter em coisa alguma. A observação mais demorada que fiz, foi da grotesca e imprópria edificação dos subúrbios, com as suas casas pretensivas e palermas, ao jeito dos bairros chics, a falta de jardins e árvores realçada pelos morros pelados, pedroucentos, que, de um lado, correm quase paralelamente ao leito da estrada e quase nele vêm tocar. Não parecia aquilo subúrbios de uma grande e rica cidade; mas uma série de vilarejos pedantes, a querer imitar as grandes cidades do país. Totalmente lhe fazia falta de gracilidade e de frescor de meia roça.”

²¹ “Assim vivendo todo o dia nos mínimos detalhes da cidade, o meu benévolo amigo conseguira amá-la por inteiro, exceto os subúrbios, que ele não admitia como cidade nem como roça, [...]” *Vida e Morte de Gonzaga de Sá* was the last book that Lima Barreto published in life Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 181, Marcos Vinícius Scheffel, “Estações De Passagem Da Ficção De Lima Barreto,” Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2011.

²² “Destarte, cheguei à estação em que moravam e fui ter à casa de dona Clementina Dias. Ficava longe da estação, numa rua improvisada, mal delineada pelas casas escassas que se erguiam, tendo de permeio terrenos baldios, onde cresciam árvores de capoeira de certo porte. [...] Se os arredores da estação tinham um ar pretensioso, de pretender-se um pequeno Rio de Janeiro, aquela rua longínqua, simplesmente esboçada, ensombrada de grandes árvores, atapetada de capim e arbustos, tinha a aparência de uma estrada, ou antes, de um trilho de roça.”

²³ “Não generaliso, porque, nessas cousas, erra quem quiser generalizar. Registro o aspecto saliente que fere o immodesto; porque o modesto paira na sombra e ninguém o nota.”

²⁴ “De uma instrução descuidada, se não rudimentar, elles não se querem sujeitar às colocações de que são merecedores naturalmente. Querem mais, acima do que sabem e do que podem desempenhar na vida. O alvo delles, em geral, são os diversos departamentos da Estrada de Ferro Central do Brasil. O candidato suburbano a emprego publico pensa sempre na central, para salvá-lo e dar-lhe estabilidade na existência.

²⁵ “Um bonezinho de auxiliar (conductor de trem) ou de conferente é a meta dos seus sonhos; e é, para elle, quase como o chapéu armado de general com o seu respectivo penacho.”

²⁶ Arquivo Público Mineiro (APM), Polícia (Pol.) 8, Caixa (Cx.) 36, pacote (pc.) 3, 1898; APM, Pol. 8, Cx. 36, pc. 6, 1903; APM, Pol. 8, Cx. 31, pc. 10, 1889.

²⁷ APM, Pol. 8, Cx. 42, pc. 3, 1896.

²⁸ “Na vida dos subúrbios, a estação da Estrada de ferro representa um grande papel: é o centro, é o eixo da vida. Antigamente, quando ainda não havia por aquelas bandas jardins e cinemas, era o lugar predilecto para os passeios domingueiros das meninas casadouras da localidade e dos rapazes que querem casar, com vontade ou sem ela.”

²⁹ “Hoje mesmo, a ‘gare’ suburbana não perdeu de todo essa feição de ponto de recreio, de encontro e conversa.”

³⁰ “De resto, é em torno da ‘estação’ que se aglomeram as principaes casas de commercio do respectivo subúrbio. Nas suas proximidades abrem-se os armazens de comestíveis mais sortidos, os armarinhos, as farmacias, os açougues e – é preciso não esquecer – a característica e inolvidavel – quitanda.”

³¹ “A ‘estação’ é verdadeira e caracteristicamente suburbana, na segunda metade da manhã. São as horas em que descem os empregados publicos, os militares, os pequenos advogados e gente que tal. § então é de ver e ouvir as palestras e as opiniões daquela gente toda, sempre a lastimar-se; a queixar-se de Deus e dos governos, gente em cuja mente a monotonia do officio e as preocupações domésticas tiraram toda e qualquer manifestação de inteligência, de gosto de intelligencia espiritual, enfim, uma larga visão do mundo.”

³² “O brasileiro é vaidoso e guloso de títulos ôcos e honrarias chôchas.”

³³ [...] “um simples terceiro oficial, que a isso chegou por trapaças de transferencias e artigos capciosos nas reformas [...] impa que nem um director notável quando compra, se o faz, a passagem no ‘guichet’ da estação. Empurra brutalmente os outros, olha com desdem os mal vestidos, bate nervosamente com os nickeis... A sua pessoinha vaidosa e ignorante não pode esperar que uma pobre preta velha compre uma passagem de 2ª classe. Tem tal pressa que pensa que se elle não for atendido logo, o Brasil estoura, chega-lhe mesmo a esperada bancarrota...”

³⁴ Lima Barreto never graduated from the Polytechnic School. Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário*.

³⁵ The Brazilian Literary Academy (*Academia Brasileira de Letras*) never nominated Lima Barreto, something that the author resented Schwarcz, *Lima Barreto: Triste Visionário* 465-66.

³⁶ Montépin, however, is not the author of *La Fauvette du Moulin*.

³⁷ “Pobre moça! Lê Montepin e vai para o Instituto de Música! Para quê?”

³⁸ “É feita para correr kilometros, voar sobre os trilhos e tragar distancias, [...] falhou o seu destino. Não pôde correr à vontade, não pôde voar, resvalado-se pelo solo como as amas, não pôde rasgar o espaço. Tem que economizar a sua força e a sua velocidade afim de estar sempre pronto a parar nas estações, de quinze em quinze minutos, às ordens do horário. Como há de soffrer aquella locomotiva, com vida tão mediocre!”

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How to Compose a Landscape: Reflections on Procedure in César Aira's *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*

Anne McConnell
West Virginia State University

ABSTRACT: In César Aira's short novel, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, the narrator describes the work and travels of German landscape painter, Johann Moritz Rugendas, in the Argentinian countryside. Rugendas, a landscape painter inspired by the work of naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt, commits himself to a strict procedure that attempts to document not only the variety of organisms in a given landscape, but also their relationship to one another. Rugendas and his fellow painter, Robert Krause, practice the Humboldtian procedure while reflecting upon and discussing matters related to artistic representation and composition. Those conversations also reflect the perspective of a contemporary Argentinian novelist, who also happens to obsess over the procedures and tools that define the work of art, and writing. While the novel begins as a biographical account of a specific trip Rugendas took to South America, it changes course near the middle when the painter is struck by lightning, twice, and is subsequently violently dragged across the pampas by his frightened horse. At this turning point, Aira's novel, and Rugendas's life, becomes increasingly surreal, yet the painter never turns his back on the procedure. *An Episode on the Life of a Landscape* remains a meditation on artistic mediation, drawing attention to the eye and hand of the artist in the act of composition.

KEYWORDS: landscape, contemporary literature, contemporary aesthetics, Latin American fiction, Humboldt

César Aira's novel, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, recounts the South American travels of the 19th century landscape painter, Johann Moritz Rugendas. Despite the novel's initial biographical pretensions, it quickly strays from the "known facts" of Rugendas's life and travels, and we enter a world that feels increasingly surreal and strange—specifically at the point when Rugendas suffers two lightning strikes, and is subsequently dragged, face-first, across the pampas by his frightened horse. Yet, despite the dramatic, fictionalized turn in the text, Aira's novel remains focused on issues of artistic observation, documentation, and representation, and how specific procedures might allow one to capture the complexities of a landscape. Rugendas bases his approach on naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt's, notion of the physiognomy of nature, which emphasizes the role of the observer's vision and ability to perceive the relationships between organisms in a landscape. That awareness of the human eye, mind, and hand in the representation of the natural world presents a paradox that drives the work of Humboldt and Rugendas: the artist's perception and framing of the world demonstrates the inescapability of our own mediation as we interact with and represent the landscape; at the same time, it is through artistic representation—a process that, according to Humboldt, involves selection, condensation, magnification, and repetition—that we might come closer to "apprehend[ing] the world in its totality" (Aira 5).

It bears mentioning from the beginning that Aira writes his

novel about Rugendas through the lens of a contemporary writer and critic—one whose prolific body of fiction leans towards the surreal and literary experimentalism, rather than anything we would normally associate with the aesthetics of naturalism. That said, Aira deliberately chooses Rugendas and his mentor, Humboldt, as figures through whom he can explore questions relating to artistic representation and what it means to see art as a set of tools and procedures that mediate our relation with the world. While Aira's novel certainly takes interest in the notion of procedure that arises out of the work of Humboldt and drives the work of Rugendas, it also clearly appropriates the life and work of Rugendas, transforming it into something with contemporary relevance. Aira's portrayal of artistic mediation in the novel—and the ontological and epistemological issues relating to the perception and representation of any "totality"—reflects contemporary critical thought, and resonates, specifically, with the work of Bruno Latour. In *Paris ville invisible*, Latour and photographer Emilie Hermant address many of the questions that interest Aira in *An Episode*, as they travel the streets of Paris in order to investigate whether or not they might find a view that allows them to take in the whole of Paris, at one glance. After trying a few famous spots that boast panoramic views, they ultimately conclude that one can only approach the landscape of Paris through various mediations—like, for instance, a good map. In other words, there's necessarily something between the viewer and the perception of any "whole." As Gerard de Vries writes in his book on

Bruno Latour's work, "To see the whole of Paris at a glance, we need to divert our attention away from the city, away from reality, and to look at the map. To take it in all at once, to see it at a glance, to see its structure, Paris first had to become small" (7). In *Paris ville invisible*, and many of his other works that investigate modes of scientific study, Latour draws attention to the maps, tools, and structures we use to document and study the world. In doing so, he points to a certain epistemological naivety that leads us to see those constructs as transparent windows onto the world as it is. Latour, in a sense, draws us back to the artist's hand—that of the mapmaker, the technician, the engineer—in a way that resembles what we see in Aira's novel about the work of Rugendas. Both Aira and Latour train our gaze on the tools and processes that mediate our experience of the world and our documentation of what we observe.

Turning to *An Episode*, Aira's narrator introduces his protagonist, Rugendas, by establishing his aesthetic position, and, more specifically, his approach to the work of landscape painting. We learn that Rugendas does indeed come from a line of "documentary painters," but that his specific vocation as a landscape artist veers from his predecessors' battlefield painting and instead takes inspiration from the procedure established by the well-known naturalist, Alexander Von Humboldt. The narrator describes that procedure as "a kind of artistic geography, an aesthetic understanding of the world, a science of landscape" (5). The narrator's language emphasizes the blending of scientific and aesthetic approaches, suggesting that the procedure requires a multi-faceted gaze. He continues:

The artistic geographer had to capture the "physiognomy" of the landscape (Humboldt had borrowed this concept from Lavater) by picking out its characteristic "physiognomic" traits, which his scholarly studies in natural science would enable him to recognize. The precise arrangement of physiognomic elements in the picture would speak volumes to the observer's sensibility, conveying information not in the form of isolated features but features systematically interrelated so as to be intuitively grasped: climate, history, customs, economy, race, fauna, flora, rainfall, prevailing winds... (6)

The procedure therefore begins with careful observation and documentation, empirical research that leads to the identification of the physiognomic components of the landscape—a process that requires training in the natural sciences. Yet, as the narrator describes, the artistic geographer seeks to figure out and to represent the relations between the physiognomic traits, taking the procedure beyond the realm of strict empiricism. Seeing the system requires a different kind of vision—an imaginative approach—allowing one to apprehend the interrelation of the particulars, and thus to see a totality. Thus, the artistic geographer blends techniques that enable him or her to document the details of a landscape with scientific precision and those that allow for a more holistic, or ecological, vision.

Humboldt's procedure figures heavily into Aira's novel as a framework through which we can understand Rugendas's landscape painting, and it also introduces the idea of the landscape artist as *bricoleur*. The piecing-together of a landscape, as described by the narrator, implies a kind of *bricolage*, since the observed facts require assemblage in order to compose the landscape. To develop the specifics of that procedure, we can briefly turn to Humboldt's own work, outside of the context of Aira's novel. His famous *Tableau Physique*, which depicts Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador, demonstrates the way a scientist/artist can synthesize collected observations, creating layers of information and representing the interrelatedness of all the components. Humboldt describes the theory behind his visual representation of Chimborazo:

In this great chain of causes and effects, no single fact can be considered in isolation. [...] [W]hile each series of facts must be examined separately in order to recognize a specific law, the study of nature, which is the main problem of general physics, demands the gathering together of all the knowledge dealing with modifications of matter. (Essay 79)

When we look at Humboldt's image, we see on one side of the mountain a colorful depiction of vegetation that provides a sense of how that vegetation changes depending on the altitude and atmospheric composition. On the other side, the vegetation is "cut away," in a sense, leaving space for inscriptions that identify species and plant communities, along with their corresponding vegetation zones. On both sides of the central figure of Chimborazo, we find additional information compiled in tables.

As Stephen T. Jackson explains, "In the *Essay*, Humboldt integrated a wide array of disparate measures—not only vegetation composition and form, but temperature, geology, atmospheric pressure, atmospheric chemistry, the blueness of the sky, humidity, agricultural practices—into a single view, showing how they varied systematically with altitude and how they were interlinked" (4). The *Tableau Physique* not only demonstrates Humboldt's procedure, but it also depicts the procedure, in the sense that the assemblage of the parts becomes a visible part of the composition. The massive amount of information he has collected and wishes to communicate with his representation of Chimborazo can only be realized through a complex process of cutting apart, layering, and reconfiguring; combining textual and visual modes of representation; and appending tables on each side of the figure. While that might seem to suggest a heavy-handed approach on the part of the scientist/artist, from a Humboldtian perspective, it reflects the complex processes of the natural world and, above all, the interrelation of the components of the system. A representation that reflects only what we can see through direct empirical observation fails to capture a broader sense of the system.¹ Therefore, while Humboldt's Chimborazo figure in some ways strays from a more naturalistic portrayal

of the landscape, one could also say that the figure portrays a fuller, hyper-naturalistic vision of that landscape because it finds a way to represent the invisible facts of the system through a kind of *bricolage*. Naturalistic representation seems, perhaps paradoxically, to demand the hand of the artist, or explicit mediation. Laura Dassow Walls describes the interplay of science and art in Humboldt's work: "Where science must weigh and measure, abstract and bring away, art can make present to the senses and the imagination the fundamental experience of contemplating nature in its wholeness, generating a similar emotional impact" (9).

In her study of Humboldt's five-part tome, *Cosmos*, Walls also considers Humboldt's poetic style and sees it as a textual version of his Chimborazo figure. She writes, "To accept Humboldt as a poet means to view poetics, as Humboldt did, in the Aristotlian sense as *poiesis*, 'making,' emphasizing the process of making over the finished product" (7). She notes that the subtitle to *Cosmos* is "a sketch," a description that encourages us to see the text in visual terms, and also as a work-in-progress. Like *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, which contains the *Tableau Physique*, *Cosmos* blends a variety of kinds of writing, in addition to visual art. In this way, Humboldt's writing, like his visual representations, represent a kind of *bricolage*, and, as Walls suggests, highlight the process or procedure more than the final result. Thus, despite Humboldt's clear interest in apprehending and representing whole systems through the application of his procedure, there remains an openness and sketch-like quality to his work. The work of *bricolage* leaves space for further tinkering—adding more layers, reassembling—in an effort to gain a more complex understanding of the relations of a system. After all, ecosystems are not static, and an ecological approach, focusing on the interplay of the parts of a system, must have the capacity to adapt.²

Turning back to Aira's novel, we can see the way that Rugendas devotes himself to Humboldt's procedure, documenting his travels across Argentina with fellow artist Robert Krause. While Rugendas's thinking diverges from Humboldt's in a few important ways, he faithfully relies on the procedure throughout the novel, even after his devastating injury in the pampas. We can see the procedure in action as the narrator describes Rugendas and Krause riding through various settings early in the novel:

It should be remembered that the bulk of the work they were doing was preliminary: sketches, notes, jottings. In their papers, drawing and writing were blended; the exploitation of these data in paintings and engravings was reserved for a later stage. Engravings were the key to circulation, and their potentially infinite reproduction had to be considered in detail. The cycle was completed by surrounding the engravings with a text and inserting them into a book. (11)

The procedure described here, in the manner of Humboldt, involves many stages and relies upon the assemblage of various notes and

sketches into larger works, thus transforming piecemeal observations and data into a broader picture—a landscape. Furthermore, the work of art, it would seem, does not reside in any one part of the process, but in the process itself. The goal to create an engraving seems especially relevant here, since that particular medium disrupts traditional conceptions of a singular, original artwork, allowing for endless, non-degrading reproduction. To a large degree, the procedure suggests a mechanical process, leading Rugendas to believe, at least in principle, that "genre painting [does] not require talent, since it [is] all a matter of the procedure" (10). At the same time, he has a hard time accounting for the fact that he believes that Krause's "pictures are worthless," despite Krause's mastery of technique (10).

In his short critical book, *On Contemporary Art*, Aira writes about the relationship of art to reproduction in a way that illuminates many of the questions that arise with Rugendas's work. Aira argues, "A work of art has always implicitly contained its own reproduction" (16). In addition to the ways that all artworks leave traces of themselves in the world, which necessarily get repeated or reproduced in other works, the question of reproduction is also literal: "concrete and tangible reproduction has always accompanied the work of art" (16). Aira points to sculpture and photography as reproduction-oriented media, and we could certainly add engraving and print-making to those examples. Rugendas, as noted above, makes at least some of his works with reproduction in mind. Interestingly, though, Aira argues that art is defined by its attempt to "remain one step ahead of the possibility of its reproduction" (18)—a characteristic he first identifies with contemporary art and then suggests applies to art more generally. Of course, Rugendas, far from representing contemporary art, works as a 19th century landscape artist who makes art for reproduction. It seems clear that Rugendas seeks reproducibility, certainly not fleeing from it. Yet, as Aira develops, when we consider art as procedure, the art object exists as a document, resulting from the procedure without capturing or reproducing it. "The painted picture at the end is merely the visible testament to the mad solitary machine that moves around inside artistic activity" (24). The engraving, as well as all of the prints made from that engraving, caters to reproduction and results from the strict practice of the procedure, at the same time that it fails to reproduce the *work* of art, or the unfolding of the artwork over time. Moreover, as Héctor Hoyos explains in his analysis of Aira's story, "Duchamp in Mexico," emphasizing process over product "is about foreclosing the possibility of art itself becoming a commodity" (168). While Rugendas makes art with reproduction in mind, Aira's portrayal of the artist and his process makes clear that no print manifests the ongoing work of art. The narrator uses language like "exploitation," "circulation," and "infinite reproduction," pointing to commodification as the end result of Rugendas's work (11); at the same time, the novel implies that the work of reproduction, despite any economic and practical value it might have, stands in contrast to the work of art, which, as a procedure or process, can't be commodified. Per-

haps for this reason, Aira, a contemporary novelist and critic of contemporary art, takes interest in a genre painter like Rugendas: because Rugendas puts procedure above all else, rejecting the identification of art with a single "auratic," or commodified, art object. Aira dedicates his novel to the unfolding of that procedure, presumably, at least on some level, identifying his own ideas about art and literature with the work of Rugendas.

Interestingly, after his accident, Rugendas becomes preoccupied with the book of lithographs that brought him notoriety, *A Picturesque Voyage through Brazil*, specifically reflecting upon the way the book came together during the publication process. He ruminates over the fact that he allowed French journalist, Victor Aimé Huber, to write the text in the book, considering it, at that time, a secondary task. The narrator explains, "He had thought of the text as an accompaniment to the images; but what he had not seen at the time, and was now beginning to realize, was that by considering it an accompaniment or a complement he was separating the text from the 'graphic' content. And the truth, he now saw, was that both were part of the same thing" (51). Rugendas now conceptualizes the book as an assembled work of images and texts, all of which document the procedure, challenging his previous assumption that the writing existed outside the main purpose and artwork of the book. As Brett Levinson clarifies in his discussion of the novel, "Rugendas does not conclude that the *nègre* [Huber] is as much an artist, and thereby as much the author of *A Picturesque Voyage*, as he himself is. He recognizes the contrary: art is mechanical, and hence, no one is a rightful author" (53). Yet, all the same, Rugendas clearly resents Huber's involvement in the book, claiming that he "infiltrated the very essence of the work, under the pretext of carrying out a purely technical task" (51). Therefore, paradoxically, Rugendas seems to assert that all art is procedure, *techné*, at the same time that he feels betrayed by Huber's intrusive participation in his book. Rugendas does not feel convinced that Huber's writing plays a "purely technical" role, perhaps because writing largely determines how the pieces fit together and how a story is told—identifying and framing images, making sense of notes, and positing relations between the various documents. Rugendas describes Huber's role as: "making coherent sentences out of the disjointed scraps of oral documentation" (51). The procedure of writing, even at the level of the sentence, implies a certain assemblage of parts, and the construction of a totality from those parts. It parallels what the landscape painter does when representing a system and attempting to demonstrate the relation between its different components.

As he reflects on the role of writing in his book, Rugendas also turns to writing himself, immersing himself in the task of letter writing. According to the narrator, Rugendas's correspondence during this period reflects two main purposes: to maintain contact with family and friends as he routinely did during his travels; and "to clarify things for himself and come to terms with the gravity of the situation" (45). The situation, in this case, refers to the terrible accident that has left him virtually unrecognizable and, it seems, terrifying to

behold—given his mangled, ceaselessly twitching face. Rugendas uses writing as a tool to reconfigure his life after the trauma, in a way that parallels the literal way that those who found Rugendas after the accident "washed his face and tried to put it back together, manipulating the pieces with their fingertips" (36). Perhaps in writing, he can narrate and explain his current state—both to himself and to the intended recipients of his letters. He understands such an effort as a "curious impossibility," yet he still engages in the letter writing, trying to account for what took place and to "find a viable way forward" (46, 44). Rugendas sees the letter writing as a matter of documentation, and thus an extension of the procedure that he practices in his artwork. Yet, in writing to his sister, Rugendas becomes aware that each letter can only document his situation in a fragmentary way: "This was one of those situations in which the whole is not enough. Perhaps because there were other 'wholes,' or because the 'whole' made up by the speaker and his personal world rotates like a planet [...]" (46). Thus, Rugendas reaches out to a diverse set of recipients, repeating the linguistic procedure of documenting his state in order to compose a sort of written landscape, where the different letters, if pieced together, compose a broader system.

While Rugendas remains committed to the procedure throughout the novel, he does seem increasingly aware of that which escapes the procedure, or can't be accounted for. The narrator does tell us early in the novel that Rugendas defies Humboldt's advice to travel to regions with abundant vegetation, believing, instead, that "the mysterious emptiness to be found on the endless plains" could lead him "to discover the other side of his art" (5). Rugendas wants to take Humboldt's procedure to its limit and to keep going; he seeks an experience that exceeds the procedure, one that refuses containment and incorporation. In the pampas, Rugendas thinks, something might "finally emerge to defy his pencil and force him to invent a new procedure" (24). But, in order to get to the limit of the procedure, Rugendas rigorously devotes himself to the procedure, inspiring Humboldt's "highest admiration" (6). One of the central questions that arises in the novel is whether or not Rugendas's art, his procedure, changes after his horrific accident. Does this represent the limit—the moment or experience that the procedure cannot account for, and that forces the invention of a new one?³ We do know that, after he recovers enough to resume his artwork, Rugendas continues to draw according to the procedure, losing "none of his skill" (39). And, by the end of the novel, the narrator insists: "the procedure went on operating through him" (88). In other words, the narrator does not indicate any direct change in approach or procedure—aside from the fact that Rugendas's injuries pose a series of challenges on a practical level, including debilitating migraines, intense nerve pain, sensitivity to light, and dependence on narcotics. Yet, I would argue that the novel's depiction of the procedure—and Rugendas's enactment of it—shifts, emphasizing the play involved in the artistic process and in the act of composing a landscape or scene. The scientific/artistic process of documentation by which we can apprehend the various components of an ecosystem and

their relations begins to feel more like a tool of possibility and openness. The technique of the procedure doesn't change, but the narrator draws attention to the complexities of artistic mediation and the way that a seemingly mechanical process provides a space for countless variations and modes of assembly.

After the accident, Rugendas re-engages with the procedure, making it possible to "[recover] a certain degree of normality," as he focuses his attention on the landscapes of San Luis (42). During this time, he notices something about the physiognomic procedure that offers new insight. The narrator explains:

An artist always learns something from the practice of his art, even in the most constraining circumstances, and in this case Rugendas discovered an aspect of the physiognomic procedure that had so far escaped his notice. Namely that it was based on repetition: fragments were reproduced identically, barely changing their location in the picture. If this was not immediately obvious, not even to the artist, it was because the size of the fragments varied enormously, from a single point to a panoramic view (which could greatly exceed the dimension of the picture). In addition, the fragment's outline could be affected by perspective. (43)

Again, the narrator emphasizes not a change in procedure, but a shift in the way Rugendas perceives the procedure. The recognition of repetition, and, even more, of the difference between repetitions, draws Rugendas's attention to the way the procedure, as a tool, points to the non-correspondence of seemingly like things. Repetition replicates at the same time that it highlights the difference implicit in the "again" or "once more" of the act of repeating. Furthermore, as Rugendas reflects, "the fragments var[y] enormously," depending on size, scope, and perspective. These thoughts eventually lead Rugendas back to Humboldt, whom he describes as having "designed the procedure as a universal knowledge machine" (43). Rugendas, much less interested in generating universals, muses that such a machine "could be dismantled," simply through the faithful practice of the procedure, which necessarily produces non-corresponding repetitions (43). As Levinson points out, such a practice "when crossing an undefined line, generate[s] a new act" (43).

The last third of Aira's novel recounts Rugendas's sketching of a *malón*, as he pursues groups of Indians through the countryside in their conflict with European settlers, and thus fulfills his "cherished dream" of witnessing and documenting such a spectacle (20). As Rugendas and Krause embark on their journey to find the Indians, the narrator emphasizes the aesthetic character of the scene, including the painters, who ride off "as in an illustration" (62). He adds, "The scene was very fluid, very distant, a mere optical play of appearances..." (63). Distance, light, and movement affect the way that objects and actions appear to the artists, providing a multiplicity of perceptions as they begin to observe and document the

scene playing out before them. "The scene [is] picturesque in the extreme," which simultaneously inspires "the stick of charcoal [...] to fly across the paper" and also makes them aware that the aesthetic qualities of what they are seeing might cause them to compose sketches that stray from realism, feeling idealized or contrived (65). "Sketching naturally" and "quickly," though, will help them to avoid the pitfall of succumbing to the picturesque and reproducing a set of ideas rather than strictly using the procedure to document the scene (65).

Despite the painters' commitment to faithful documentation, the scenes of the *malón* unfold before them "much more like pictures than reality," as if, instead of just happening, the scenes were, Rugendas thinks, invented or artistically composed—with the purpose of evoking "strangeness, incoherence and madness" (71). In other words, even when using the procedure and "sketching naturally," Rugendas and Krause find themselves immersed in a situation that feels like an artistic performance, at a remove from a sort of unmediated reality that they could theoretically document. As Levinson writes, Rugendas "paints an indigenous world that seems to have arrived on the scene as, precisely, a scene, a *tableau vivant*. The Indians appear to appear, as models do, for the express purpose of being reproduced" (65). The performative aspect of the situation—especially when one indigenous man carries a salmon on his horse, pretending to carry away a captive—draws attention to the inescapability of artistic mediation, and, in this case, the history of Western ideas about and representation of indigenous peoples. Sandra Contreras, in her book *Las vueltas de César Aira*, provides insight into the cycle of Aira's novels that explore Western depictions of indigenous peoples in the pampas. She argues that Aira puts to use, and then deconstructs, Western travel narratives in the "New World."⁴ For the purposes of this paper, though, we can conclude from these scenes that art precedes and conditions the artistic efforts of Rugendas and Krause; the *malón*, as a repetition of past *malóns*, reproduces a set of ideas and characters, and the Indians take the reproduction to the point of absurdity, where it breaks down and highlights its own artifice.

Regardless of the performativity of the scene, Rugendas remains committed to documenting the confrontation, feverishly sketching as more and more Indians appear. The narrator explains, "As is often the case with collectors, the problem was not a lack but an excess of specimens" (66). Again, the narrator describes Rugendas's work in terms that emphasize the accumulation of objects and implies that perhaps the most difficult part of the task—whether in the act of sketching or later acts of composition—involves sorting through and choosing objects to reproduce from the "excess of specimens." As Rugendas manages to get himself closer to the action in order to sketch the specifics of the figures and their movements, he begins to reflect on the work to come:

Everything sketched in this explosive present was material for future compositions, but although it was all

provisional, a constraint came into play. It was as if each volume captured in two dimensions on the paper would have to be joined up with the others, in the calm of the studio, edge to edge, like a puzzle, without leaving any gaps. (67)

The process of composition here, and its goal, recalls Humboldt's Chimborazo figure, where we can see a puzzling together of different pieces—pieces that need individually to communicate a kind of "volume" of their own, at the same time that they combine fluidly with other volumes that portray different kinds of information from different perspectives. One must capture, perhaps paradoxically, multiplicity in a unified composition. And that composition, though gap-less, will have edges and seams, pointing to the procedure as *bricolage*. Rugendas becomes increasingly aware of the multiplicity and plurality inherent to the procedure: "Rugendas found himself making pluralist sketches. But wasn't that what he always did?" (69). Thus, Rugendas does what he has always done; yet, sketching the *malón* has come to redefine the procedure. Inventing a new procedure—if that is what the near-death, limit-experience of the accident indeed provokes—more precisely involves a sort of redefinition, re-invention, reproduction. Rugendas practices the procedure as a repetition, or reproduction of itself.

As the two artists create a flurry of sketches, amassing documentary evidence of the scenes they witness, the narrator suggests that their work takes them in a direction where the work, in some sense, gets out of the way, allowing the world itself to appear.

Over the course of the day, there was a progression—though it remained incomplete—towards unmediated knowledge. It is important to remember that their point of departure was a particularly laborious kind of mediation. Humboldt's procedure was, in fact, a system of mediations: physiognomic representation came between the artist and nature. Direct perception was eliminated by definition. And yet, at some point, the mediation had to give way, not so much by breaking down as by building up to the point where it becomes a world of its own, in whose signs it was possible to apprehend the world itself, in its primal nakedness. (77-8)

It seems contradictory that a "system of mediations" can lead the artists towards "unmediated knowledge," but the narrator clarifies that the work doesn't simply come to a magical point where it disappears, allowing the world to come forward, with no mediation. Instead, artistic mediation, as it builds, increasingly distances itself from the world, paradoxically becoming a sign of a "primal nakedness." That understanding of artistic mediation evokes a moment earlier in the text, as Rugendas and Krause leave the foothills of the Andes and ride into the vast, seemingly empty plains. The narrator describes the journey in mythic terms: "A ruse against Orphic

disobedience: obliterate all that lies behind. There was no point turning around anymore" (24-5). Rather than trying to call Eurydice forward, in this scenario, Orpheus understands the distance that makes turning around a futile endeavor. And so his art, his song about his wife, becomes an expression of the distance, and a sign of Eurydice in her absolute irretrievability. The narrator's version of this myth provides a means of framing the way that Rugendas sees artistic mediation and uses distance as a tool in his art; paradoxically, his approach appears to open onto something more "primal" than if he were attempting to overcome mediation.

The novel closes with Rugendas observing and sketching a group of indigenous people sitting around a fire, communing after the *malón*. As noted earlier in the paper, by the end, we have decidedly left the realm of historical or biographical fiction. Roughly halfway through the novel, after the narrator discusses Rugendas's prolific letter writing, he admits: "[...] there is no shortage of documentary material for his biographers, and although none of them has tried, it would be perfectly possible to reconstruct his travels day by day, almost hour by hour, following every movement of his spirit, every reaction, every scruple" (45). The narrator, here, does not seem to count himself as one of Rugendas's biographers; and, regardless, he, like them, has little interest in digging through the letters in order to depict with any accuracy what actually took place. Ottmar Ette, in his essay on *An Episode*, refers to the text as "frictional," or playing with the friction between facts and fiction. He notes "nearly imperceptible errors" from the beginning of the novel, where the narrative diverges, minimally but significantly, from known events and dates in Rugendas's life (9). Beyond the question of biographical accuracy, some critics, like Carmen de Mora Valcárcel, focus on what they see as an abrupt shift in style—from realism to something more surreal and sometimes absurd. Mora Valcárcel sees Rugendas's accident as a point of rupture not only for the painter, but for the novel as well (494). Eduardo Thomas Dublé agrees, adding that such a rupture, and the subsequent unfolding of a narrative unbound from historical events and realism, makes space for "the relevance of the 'procedure' in the poetic conception of Aira, which is fundamental to his reinterpretation of the figure and work of Rugendas" (266).⁵ In other words, the explicit break from history and biography—to the extent that Aira's novel ever really invests in either—allows Aira to represent Rugendas through the lens of his own contemporary poetics.

As noted earlier, the emphasis on Rugendas's obsession with process and procedure, from the beginning of the novel, links the painter, despite his period, to Aira's writing on contemporary art. And, when considering what Aira has to say about his own writing process, and about writing in general, it becomes clear that the figure of Rugendas—at least, the version of him that Aira invents—communicates ideas about art that transcend the genre of painting. As Aira writes in the essay, "The New Writing," avant-garde artists, including writers, are "inventors of procedures," clarifying later: "what we think of as the 'work' can be the method by which the

work is made, rather than the actual work itself, the work acting as a kind of documentary appendix which serves only as a means of deducing the process from which it arose." Aira consistently comes back to a set of ideas in his critical writing and his fictions, finding different ways to explore his own obsession with procedure and treating the task of writing as a sort of experiment that must be allowed to unfold, without looking back and retracing one's steps. Mario Ballvé writes, "Aira's procedure, which he has elucidated in essays and interviews, is what he calls *el continuo*, or *la huida hacia adelante*. These concepts might be translated in English as 'the continuum,' and a 'constant flight forward.'" Ballvé explains that such a procedure rejects re-writing and editing, as it presents an interruption of the work-in-progress. That stance at least partially explains Aira's prolific publication habits. He remains committed to the idea that a book represents a sort of "documentary appendix" of the actual work of writing, the procedure. Like Rugendas, Aira seemingly flies through notebooks, in a flurry of movement that favors the potentiality of next page over any past pages. As Reinaldo Laddaga puts it, "Aira's texts tend to give the feeling of being barely finished, the works of an impatient craftsman who, in the midst of completing a piece, couldn't wait to start the next one."

Aira's notion of procedure insists upon forward movement, and it also challenges traditional modes of storytelling. After all, Aira, in *An Episode*, chooses the figure of a visual artist, not a writer, to reflect upon questions of artistic process; and, in interviews and essays, he commonly defines himself as an artist who works with words.⁶ Early in their journey toward the pampas, Rugendas and Krause actually have a conversation comparing storytelling to visual art, where Rugendas proposes that "were all storytellers to fall silent, nothing would be lost" (26). Yet Rugendas is actually advocating for a different kind of storytelling—storytelling without story, in a sense—rather than suggesting that it come to an end. He posits that stories, including histories, serve a purpose, because they provide an "understanding of how things were made" (25). In other words, stories create cause and effect relationships, and thus satisfying explanations, for the world and our experience in it. Without such stories, "the present generation, or those of the future, could experience the events of the past without needing to be told about them, simply by recombining or yielding to the available facts [...]" (26). From that perspective, the facts of the past co-exist with the present, as documents or traces that can be pieced together in various ways—not as a means of providing an explanatory narrative, but as a means of experiencing the past in the present, without the mediation of an already-made story. In his analysis of Rugendas and Krause's conversation in Aira's novel, Aaron Hillyer points out:

This new way of relating to the past in the absence of stories about it would restore an ontological fullness to the past, because any past event itself was contingent; it could have been otherwise. To experience the past without being told about it is to cancel the fixed actuality of

the past in favor of its potentiality; it is to momentarily disrupt linear time altogether and end the time of the type of story that insists on establishing causal relationships. (47-8)

Thus, even when representing the past, Rugendas promotes a kind of "flight forward," dedicated to the unfolding of the past in the present—an unfolding that can happen again and again in different ways, as a repetition of the past.

Rugendas then clarifies what a different mode of storytelling might look like: "The purpose of storytelling could be better fulfilled by handing down, instead, a set of 'tools,' which would enable mankind to reinvent what had happened in the past, with the innocent spontaneity of action" (26). A "set of tools," or procedure, provides a method or mode for storytelling, without providing the actual story. Storytelling with that purpose can be generative rather than prescriptive, and encourages tellers and writers to see history as a kind of *bricolage*—one that involves tinkering with a set of tools when "recombining or yielding to the available facts" (26). That perspective illuminates what we see taking place in Aira's novel, in the sense that he tells a story about a historical figure that playfully veers from the known events of Rugendas's life. While one can see such a gesture as privileging fiction over historical accuracy, it is also important to consider how the novel challenges the ways we write about the past. Perhaps Rugendas has more than one story. And, regardless, the story itself, as a product of storytelling, remains much less important than the procedure of storytelling, or set of tools, that takes shape in the novel. Such a procedure might generate more stories and refuses to limit itself to the dictates of a single, linear history.

Aside from questions of historical accuracy and how we write the past, Aira appropriates the figure of Rugendas and his work, piecing various events and facts together in ways that communicate with his own contemporary poetics. Rugendas, at times, takes on the persona of a contemporary Argentinian writer of experimental novels, as he rides through the plains seeking an experience that forces the invention of a new procedure. That act of appropriation, or re-contextualization, makes the novel itself a work of *bricolage*. As Mariano García writes in *Degeneraciones textuales*, much of Aira's writing functions as *bricolage* and reflects his obsession with Marcel Duchamp. García notes, "Through the reconstruction of an object with prior materials, ends are transformed into means: signifieds become signifiers and vice versa" (97). That sort of approach points to the radical openness of the work of art and writing, since the *bricoleur's* toolbox allows for continual re-invention. Aira's novel, and his framing of the work of Rugendas, in its insistence on procedure and *bricolage*, draws attention to artistic mediation, asking us to notice the unfolding of the *work* of art, the piecing together of different components and documents, and the tools that allow us to construct a broader, fuller vision of what we attempt to perceive.

NOTES

¹ Chunglin Kwa, in his study of Humboldt's approach to landscape, draws attention to the naturalist's notion of the "heath," which differs from his 18th century predecessors and demonstrates his insistence upon relational thinking. Rather than a habitat, or the location where one might find a particular species, Humboldt sees the heath as "an association of species," and, therefore, "transforms the heath in a landscape, in the modern, ecological sense" (9).

² Some of my reasoning here threatens to blur Humboldt's own thought with contemporary thought about the functioning of ecosystems. Yet, Aira's novel invites such blurring, whether considering aesthetic or ecological thinking. I find Timothy Morton's notion of "ecological thought" particularly relevant here, especially since he discusses the obligation of thinking about "totality" in our modern world, while simultaneously em-

phasizing radical openness. He writes, "We may need to think bigger than totality itself, if totality means something closed, something we can be sure of, something that remains the same" (5).

³ Critics differ in their answer to this question. As Levinson points out, Rugendas continues to draw according to the procedure, with no change in skill or approach (Levinson 52). Amanda Holmes, in "Art, Science, and the New World," disagrees, seeing the accident as freeing Rugendas from the limitations and determinism of strict methodology (206).

⁴ See Contreras, p.47-8.

⁵ Translations from Spanish are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ See interview with María Moreno in *Bomb Magazine*.

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The Sounds of the Desert: *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli

Emily C. Vázquez Enríquez
University of California, Davis

ABSTRACT: In the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) by Valeria Luiselli, sounds become narrative tools to underscore the political, historical, and ecological facets of the Desert Southwest. In this article, I contend that by attending to multiple temporalities, the novel addresses ongoing colonization processes that have taken place in the desert, draws attention to environmental challenges faced by the arid ecosystem, and memorializes its weaponization against migrants. To this end, I focus on the projects carried out by two of the protagonists, which are an inventory of echoes and a sound documentary. Whereas the former attempts to record what is left from the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahua Apaches led by Geronimo, the latter focuses on the journey of refugee children in the context of the Mexico-US border. Thus, the novel offers a complex and multidimensional depiction of the biome, which is portrayed as a central device in border-control strategies, an ecosystem, and Native land.

KEY WORDS: Mexican Novel; Mexico-US Border; Refugee Children; Native Lands; Ecocriticism; Ecoacoustics.

In *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Mexican-born author Valeria Luiselli addresses various types of absences that revolve around the Desert Southwest. The narrative focuses on the journey of refugee children in the context of the Mexico-United States borderlands and on the history of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, the last Apache group that resisted colonization from both sides of the border. Because of the centrality of the desert, the novel also underscores a set of environmental losses that are intertwined with the main narrative arcs. Through the representation of sounds, *Lost Children Archive* emphasizes that the desert(s)¹ of the southwest are ecosystems, Native lands, and central devices in border-control strategies.

The story begins with a New York-based family of four, whose names are never revealed and are known as the wife, the husband, the boy, and the girl. The family is getting ready for a road trip towards the Southwestern desert, where each parent will work on a sound project. Whereas the father wants to document what is left of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahuas' battle, the wife is interested in documenting the stories of the refugee children who have had to traverse the desert. However, the parents' endeavors cannot be completed as they imagined them. As has been noted in various reviews,² due to the impossibilities that follow each project, the novel speaks to the limits of archival and historical research. Through the pursuit of sounds that appear only in the elusive forms of echoes and reverberations, both projects turn the novel into an archive of what is missing, has been disregarded, or cannot be apprehended.

In the novel, the violence that often accompanies undocumented migration, which reaches its most brutal heights when it involves children, is addressed through the portrayal of the desert's participation in border-control strategies. Regarding that partici-

pation, in *The Land of Open Graves*, anthropologist Jason de León states: "the best and most lethal weapon the Border Patrol has is nature" (158). Said weaponization is central for developing the wife's project, a sound documentary about lost refugee children. Whereas initially, the wife plans to document the experiences of child refugees from their perspective (19-20), when this endeavor becomes unattainable, she decides to take a different direction: "The story I have to record is not the story of children who arrive, those who finally make it to their destinations and can tell their own story [...] The story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing" (146). The absence of refugee children is highlighted by oral accounts, news transmitted by radio waves, and the reading out loud of a fictional novel about a group of children who are lost in the arid territory. All of them acoustic, those are the main channels through which the echoes of the refugee children's stories are incorporated into the novel and how the narrative underscores the danger posed by the desert.

While the weaponization of the desert against migrants haunts the entire narrative, the novel emphasizes the existence of a longer genealogy of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people in the same territory. Described as an "inventory of echoes," the father's project addresses the dispossession of Chiricahua Apaches from their land. In the words of Latin Americanist scholar Mariana Zinni, "[el padre] quiere reconstruir las presencias de los [Chiricahuas] a través de ecos y reverberaciones" (20). By recording an archive of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahuas' resistance, the father aims to reconstruct the echoes of their presence. Furthermore, through subtle references, the novel draws attention to ongoing forms of violence enacted against Native American people and their territory.

An important contrast between the wife's and the husband's projects is that whereas the former considers the deadly attributes of the desert, the latter speaks to its vulnerabilities. Sounds Studies scholar Alamo Farina recalls that a soundscape "is defined as the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape" (1). Since the soundscape that the father wants to record emanates from the desert, the project is focused on recording sounds made by nonhuman entities. As I argue in the following section, by doing this, the husband's recordings unveil biodiversity loss. In this way, through the inventory of echoes, the novel shows that sound can turn into a medium to assess environmental damage, which is why it can be understood as an *ecoacoustics* project: "ecoacoustics [is an emerging field] concerned with the study of environment pattern and changes through sound" (Barclay & Gifford 54). While both the inventory of echoes and the sound documentary highlight human absences, the former also traces the loss of nonhuman beings.

Given the mechanisms that provoked some of these losses, the story mobilizes certain aspects of the desert that situate it as what I term a border biome. Terrestrial and aquatic, biomes are large-scale ecosystems (Faber, Navarro et al. 2) characterized mainly by their climate, vegetation, and wildlife. In this sense, I understand border biomes as ecological communities that have been divided by national borders and that sometimes are also used as border markers. The lifeforms inhabiting these communities are often endangered by their proximity to the systems and structures that uphold territorial boundaries, such as walls, technology, and patrolling strategies, to name a few. At the same time and as portrayed in Luiselli's novel, because they tend to be inhospitable to humans, border biomes can be weaponized against the people who traverse them. Whereas the desert is the focus of this article, other examples of border biomes in Central and North America also include rivers and forests.³

Besides *Lost Children Archive*, more representations of the desert as a border biome can be found in literary works such as *The Devil's Highway* (Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004) and *The Line Becomes a River* (Francisco Cantu, 2018), or in the film *Desierto* (Jonás Cuarón, 2016). From various angles, these works denounce the cruelty and death generated by the weaponization of the desert and at the same time accentuate its ecological life and environmental vulnerabilities. Although Luiselli's novel situates the aforementioned amalgamation as a central element for the narrative, one of its main distinctions is that it addresses child migration, a topic that defines how the biome is portrayed. In addition, beyond depicting the desert as a border biome, *Lost Children Archive* stresses that the arid territory is Native land.

Echoes and Ecoacoustics

Geronimo, Chief Cochise, and the Chiricahuas, the most important figures in the husband's project, fought the last of the Apache Wars to keep their independence from the US government. As activist and historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz declares: "The longest military

counterinsurgency in US history was the war of the Apache Nation, 1850-86. Goyathlay, known as Geronimo, famously led the final decade of the Apaches resistance" (150). However, although they resisted for decades, as the historian asserts:

When Geronimo finally surrendered -he was never captured- the group numbered only thirty-eight, most of those women and children, with five thousand soldiers in pursuit, which meant that the insurgents had wide support both north and south of the recently drawn US-Mexico border. (150).

That is why the husband wants to go towards the desert. Particularly, he is interested in getting to the Chiricahua Mountains⁴, "where the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white eyes" (Luiselli 26). The husband sees the area not just as the scenery inhabited by the last independent Chiricahua Apaches but as the entity that continues to reproduce the waves of sound that followed them.

According to the wife, the inventory of echoes "was not a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would in fact be impossible—but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost" (141). Sound artist Brandon LaBelle defines echoes as acoustical manifestations that produce ruptures: "the ruptures performed by the echo unfix the temporality of sound to further the integral displacement sound comes to impart onto the senses. In doing so, the echo disorients and distracts; it wanders and returns in the same moment to confuse" (7). For LaBelle, whereas sounds maintain clear temporal linearity that follows an origin point and a horizon of receptors, because of the lingering effect of echoes, they can create a rupture between the past and the future, destabilizing the oscillation of time. Given this characteristic, it is telling that the husband calls his project an "inventory of echoes" instead of an inventory of sounds. However, most of the elements he records are not echoes in a literal sense, but a historical one. Moreover, the temporal disruption that they produce is the main element by which they can be considered echoes in the first place.

When the boy asks his father about the sounds he is trying to record, he replies: "Maybe the rain falling on this tin roof, some birds if we can, or maybe just insects buzzing" (96). These sounds can be considered echoes because even though they do not replicate the soundscape that surrounded Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, they repeat acoustic fragments that have survived from it, as the wife interprets: "his plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and other Apaches, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang" (141). Thus, the reverberations created by wildlife and weather-based phenomena produce a sonorous bond that connects past and present realities. These sounds generate a rupture in the linear temporal logic, or in the words of LaBelle: "the echo diminishes orientation and spatial

clarity; it locates us in the threshold of the dead, as a voice without a body" (24). The lack of clarity is expressed in the novel when the narrator asserts that echoes can be understood "as absence turned into a presence, and, at the same time, as a presence that [makes] an absence audible" (Luiselli 98). By mapping and recording pieces that were part of the acoustic world of the last independent Chiricahua Apaches, the inventory of echoes turns into an artifact that brings back their presence by underscoring their absence. On this characteristic, the wife states:

He's somehow trying to capture [Geronimo and his group] past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches of cedars [...] that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was. (141)

The father's project intends to document the sounds of the desert as a method to seize the audible remnants of the last years of the Chiricahua rebellion. Because the acoustic ecology of the arid biome is central to this endeavor, the aural documentation turns into an ecoacoustics project. During the second part of the novel, when the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy, the latter recalls: "sometimes [the] inventories were just wind blowing and rain falling and cars passing" (203). Since the narrative makes evident that finding sounds of desert wildlife is not always an easy endeavor, the boy's recollection can be read in the context of the detrimental effects that climate change has on desert birds and other species (Albright et al). Furthermore, urbanization processes in the Sonoran Desert have caused the loss of land and biodiversity and have also provoked floods in the valleys, thus damaging the desert ecosystem (Steiner). Besides, border security measures such as the border wall have interrupted migratory corridors for wildlife, to name a few devastating effects⁵. Hence, although brief, the boy's elucidation can be read as an allusion to some of the most pressing environmental challenges endured by the arid biome.

Another element used to underscore the ecology of the desert is the repetition of the word *saguaro*. These cacti are vital for the desert ecosystem because multiple species depend on them for shelter and survival. With the repetitive mention of the cactus' name, the narrative once again gives prominence to the ecological life of the desert. The saguaros become audibly present during the road trip when the father asks the children to learn the names of various desert species: "my husband has given the children a catalog of plant species, and they have to memorize names of things, things like saguaro, difficult names like creosote, jojoba, mesquite tree" (153). Even though the children are challenged to learn several names, only one of them fully captures the attention of the girl.

Attracted to the word, the youngest child points at various plants and other objects, and indistinctly, she affirms that the

name of all those things is saguaro. When mentioned, the word dominates the narrative: "Saguaro! She says the word like she has discovered a new star or planet. But there are no saguaros here, not yet [...] She's not convinced and continues to count saguaros in the wet empty plains, but softly now, to herself" (154). Considering the context of the husband's project, the fact that the girl chooses that word to describe multiple things is significant. Because of the importance of the cacti to the Tohono O'odham' people, while the recorded sounds transmit fragments of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahua resistance, "remind[ing] us of the ones that are lost" (141), the vocalization of the word saguaro reminds us not just of those who are no longer here but also of the ones who still are⁶.

Given the clear separation between a historical and a present event, Luiselli's novel risks confining the Chiricahuas in particular, and Native Americans at large, to a motionless past. However, the incorporation of the word saguaro is a dangerously too subtle yet powerful reference to the ongoing struggles endured by Indigenous people. In the case of the novel, those struggles relate to the context of the Mexico-US border. Saguaros are ancient cacti indigenous to the Sonoran Desert and the Tohono O'odham, or Desert People, consider them sacred. Furthermore, for the Tohono O'odham Nation, saguaros are far more than just a type of cactus, they are people too.

The belief in the inner humanity of saguaros can be found in different creation stories. One of them is described by Tohono O'odham member Susie Ignacio Enos, which recounts the story of a girl who sank into the desert and was reborn as a saguaro. According to this version, in a prophecy, the father of the girl was told the following: "she will live forever to the end of times. She will be known by races of people from far and near. She will be queen of the Taw haw naw Juwut (desert lands). Generations of Aw'awtam will be saved from starvation because of her and her family" (Enos). Another creation story asserts that saguaros come from "the beads of sweat" of the brow of I'ittoi, "Creator of the Desert People" (tohonochul.org). In this way, these narratives underscore certain elements by which saguaros are sacred to the Tohono O'odham people.

Living up to two hundred years and capable of growing almost 45 feet tall, the saguaro cacti participate in circuits of nourishment that affect both human and nonhuman entities. In an interview, Lois Liston, who is a Tohono O'odham citizen and a saguaro harvester, mentions that the tribe's calendar begins with the harvest of the saguaro's fruit. According to Liston, the community collects the fruit only after the animals who need it have eaten enough. In addition, the saguaros' fruit and seeds participate in complex pollination processes, which is why the cactus is central to the sustenance of the desert ecology (Cutler 40). Furthermore, when they die, they are used as building materials and tools, and their bodies feed the non-human dwellers of the desert.

Considering the cultural, historic, and environmental particularities of the saguaros, along with the context of the novel, the rep-

etition of their name acquires a profound meaning. It is notable that even though the girl mentions them multiple times, she does so while referring to other things. The saguaros are not physically present. Consequently, it is sound and not image what keeps their significance alive in the narrative. Every time the girl emits the word, the sound she generates takes over the narrative and becomes an overwhelming acoustic presence. The imaginative endeavor of the child underscores the evocative power of sound, which works as a nonmaterial device that transmits part of the knowledge and creativity of the Tohono O'odham.

Although saguaros are not an endangered species, their population is decreasing. Furthermore, their absence can be read in the context of the environmental destruction caused by border control measures. For instance, the construction of the border wall at Organ Pipe, which is a biosphere reserve located in southern Arizona, has produced deep damage to the desert ecology. In what concerns the saguaros, even though they are protected by the Native Plant Protection Act and are sacred beings to the Tohono O'odham Nation, several have been bulldozed, many of which were more than 100 years old and "older than the border itself" (Adler). Because of the environmental and cultural harm that it creates, the Tohono O'odham have fervently rejected the border wall. In 2017, they released a video titled "There is no O'odham Word for Wall," and a few years later, in 2020, they denounced the border wall construction as a desecration⁷.

Chickasaw Nation citizen and English professor Jodi Byrd states: "there is a long line of continuity between the past and the present that has not been disrupted despite the fact that the stories we tell may or may not acknowledge that continuity" (xiv). In the context of the US-Mexico border demarcation, it is possible to identify at least one example of said line. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asserts: "the Apache resistance was not a military threat to the United States but rather a symbol of resistance and freedom. Herein lies the essence of counterinsurgency colonialist warfare: no resistance can be tolerated" (150). Through the dissolution of the Chiricahua resistance, the nation-state fulfilled its overwhelming effort to dominate the Apaches and to take full possession of the Indigenous territory. This was achieved through the forced removal of their land. Comparably, following this genealogy of violence, through the construction of the border wall, the same state has removed material symbols of the ancestral ties between the Tohono O'odham and the desert -and thus of their claim to their homeland-. In this case, the symbols are not just saguaros but also ancient burial sites that were devastated through warlike practices such as the detonation of explosives.⁸

The combination between the inventory of echoes and the constant repetition of the word *saguaro* work as a reminder of the vulnerability of the desert ecosystem. Whereas through ecoacoustics the father's project can identify biodiversity loss, it is through the sonorous incorporation of the sacred cacti that the story underscores the damage produced by border control strategies. The vio-

lence behind these strategies also shows how even though echoes can destabilize the temporal linearity—at the same time and precisely because of said destabilization—the narrative integrates a line of continuing forms of colonialism. In dialogue with the Chiricahua resistance, the audible presence of saguaros serves as a channel to identify ongoing colonial practices that deprive Indigenous people of "home, land, and sovereignty" (Byrd xxxiii) in an unrelenting cycle that includes past and current temporalities.

The Children

After meeting Manuela, the mother of two undocumented girls who were last seen in New Mexico, from where they were going to be sent to a detention center in Arizona, the wife finds a motive to accompany her husband from New York to the southwestern state. Besides wanting to find the girls, the wife wants to create a radio documentary addressing "the children's crisis at the border" (Luiselli 123). This project is framed by the waves of migrant children that have arrived at the Mexico-United States limit in the last years. In 2014, nearly 70 000 minors were apprehended at the border,⁹ and according to the Migration Policy Institute, in the 2018-2019 period, the number of migrant children exceeded the numbers seen in 2014. Many of them were traversing the desert without any family members. In Luiselli's novel, the narrator describes this mass migration as follows:

More than eighty thousand undocumented children from Mexico and the Northern Triangle, but mostly from the latter, had been detained at the US southern border in just the previous six or seven months. All those children were fleeing circumstances of unspeakable abuse and systematic violence. (19)

In 2014, refugee children's cases were made a priority for the immigration courts, an action that resulted in the prompt deportation of most of those kids. Then, between 2018 and 2019, thousands of children were detained in chain-link cages, many of them located in detention centers in the desert. This is the context surrounding the story of Manuela's missing daughters, and therefore the social and political frame for the wife's documentary project. To carry out this project, the wife seeks to gather information from oral sources. It is in a gas station where she overhears that a group of children are about to be deported.

Trying to find more information about the imminent deportation, the wife turns to the radio, where an immigration lawyer is being interviewed. After contacting the lawyer, the wife learns that the kids will be deported from an airport that is not too far from where the family is located. From this point, the protagonists focus on getting to the airport before the removal takes place. Because the main components to collect and generate information

are voices propagated by airwaves, sounds are once again situated as central elements for developing the story. In this way, whereas the nonhuman elements of the desert are the main source of information for the husband, the radio is situated as the main source of information for the wife's project, "we drive onward, southwest-bound, and listen to the news on the radio, news about all the children traveling north" (47). After hearing news with updates on the refugee children, the wife often records memos to catalog what she learns.

Considering that the novel is situated in the present time and that the protagonists have access to the Internet, it might seem strange that their most important source of information is the radio. Regarding this communication practice, Chicana/o studies scholar Dolores Casillas states: "radio is generally seen as an archaic medium: communication scholars often point to its use in post-socialist or developing countries but do not often address its role within immigrant or communities of color" (Kindle). Casillas refers to Spanish-language radio in the United States, and based on what the wife describes, the family is also listening to this type of radio: "How did you travel to the United States? The reporter asks. His voice calm and composed, the boy replies in Spanish, saying that he came in the Bestia. I translate his response to my husband" (73). Additionally, as Casillas asserts, Spanish radio programs tend to be dominated by immigration topics and often "rally in solidarity" with immigrants' civil rights.

However, even if not all the programming is in Spanish, the reason the wife chooses the radio as the main method to gather information might have to do with its immediacy. For Casillas, immediacy is a characteristic unique to the radio, which allows it to broadcast "live impulsive notices, with little to no trace of their existence." Since the wife is aware of the urgency of gathering information, particularly when she is trying to obtain the airport's location, this immediacy could be the reason she uses the radio as the primary source for her project.

Because the wife plays local radio stations while the entire family is in the car, she is not the only one listening to the reports about refugee children. Throughout the road trip, the siblings are learning about the waves of kids arriving at the border and about the Chiricahuas. At one point, they contend: "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes? –What if he'd won that war? –Then the lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (75). This dynamic exchange shows how, in words of Gaëlle Le Calvez, "El viaje delata el hondo aburrimiento de los adultos -o su incapacidad para conectarse- en contraste con el juego y la vitalidad de una infancia protegida, a punto de ser vulnerada" (65-66). Whereas the adults grapple with their marriage, the children try to make sense of different realities with their imagination.

Still centered on a sonorous dimension but with an embodied component, the episodes that Luiselli considers "reenactments," make up another example through which the novel addresses absence, loss, and refiguration. Thinking about how to approach the

past, the narrator says: "Maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities" (155-156). The reenactments are often performed by the children, who dramatize the stories they hear. In the aforementioned example, aware that Geronimo fought in the past, the boy and the girl imagine a different ending to his story, which in their imagination, would affect the story of the refugee children in the present time. Even though the siblings can differentiate between both temporalities, at the same time, because of the sense of immediacy that the radio produces, they articulate an instant solution for the challenges endured by the child refugees.

Two elements facilitate this conflation. Sound studies scholars Mark Grimshaw et al argue that "imagination is typically discussed in terms of image, as is clear from the root of the word itself" (2) and that sonic imagination is often disregarded. Because the siblings can articulate and reimagine both realities based on what they hear, they are constantly displaying and privileging sonic imagination. Therefore, sounds are the starting point for the imaginative conflation process. The other element is the arid biome. Since what the children hear takes place in the desert lands, it is easy for them to situate their imaginative articulations in the same space.

Another reenactment occurs when the siblings imagine and perform what it would be like to be lost in the desert: "The boy says they're both thirsty, lost and walking in the endless desert, says they're both so thirsty and so hungry it feels like hunger is ripping them apart, eating them from the inside, says that hardship and hopelessness are now overtaking them" (Luiselli 155). While up until this point no character had described the excruciating process of traversing the desert, for the kids, it is enough to know that the desert is the entity being traversed by those they call "the lost children" to imagine the harrowing experiences they endure.

Because the siblings are reenacting this narrative from a privileged position, the wife finds it problematic and frivolous. This critique mirrors the instances in which she reflects on the ethical issues behind her project. For example, thinking about the impact of her project, she states: "it doesn't seem right to turn those children, their lives, into material for media consumption" (96). To that, she adds: "And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering? [...] No one decides to not go to work and start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning" (96). Although this premise is shared in the context of *Lost Children Archive's* fictional world, they reproduce the concerns of Luiselli about the ethical implications of her work.

Different from what the author does in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), a chronicle where she includes parts of migrant children's testimonies, in the novel, Luiselli eludes direct representations. Whereas *Tell Me How It Ends* reproduces the voices of several kids dealing with trauma and the threat of deportation, in the novel, she is addressing the ones who cannot be found: "I am still not sure how I'll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children

[...] whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes" (145). In an interview with Lauren Leblanc, the author states: "[the story of migrant children] is not my story to tell" (44), which is part of the reason she uses fiction not as a way of solving the issues that are being addressed or of answering the questions that are being asked, "but [of] at least understanding how to phrase those questions" (45). Perhaps this is why, instead of directly narrating the journey that many children take to get to the border or across the desert, the author references it through narrative echoes.

In the words of Chicana author Stephanie Elizondo Griest, the narrative techniques that Luiselli uses to address the stories of the refugee children turn into "reverberations of their small but brave footsteps." These reverberations appear in various forms, which include the radio transmissions, the girl and the boy's reenactments, and an invented Italian novel titled "Elegies for Lost Children," which narrates the crusade of a group of children traveling alone through indeterminate lands. Written by fictional author Ella Camposanto and loosely based on the 1212 Children's Crusade (Luiselli 138), the novel tells the story of a group of children facing challenges strikingly similar to those faced by many migrant children:

Mouths open to the sky, they sleep. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked, for the wind whips day and night. They occupy the entire space there, stiff but warm, lined up like new corpses along the metal roof of the train gondola. From behind the rim of his blue cap, the man in charge counts them -six children; seven minus one. The train advances slowly along the racks parallel to an iron wall. Beyond, on both sides of the wall, the desert stretches out, identical. (142)

The first Elegy portrays the desert as a material and menacing presence waiting for the arrival of the children. The fictional novel does not need to describe the characteristics of this border biome to convey the danger it represents. After learning about its presence and attending to the context of the story, the reader can sense the precarious scenario that the children are about to encounter. Thus, "Elegies for the Lost Children" serves as a channel that presents more intense echoes of the desert. Likewise, the portrayal of the lost children from the Elegies along with the news that the family hears about the refugee children, produce intense reverberations of the real stories located behind them:

They travel, alone, on trains and on foot. They travel without their fathers, without their mothers, without their suitcases, without passports. Always without maps. They have to cross national borders, rivers, deserts, horrors. And those who finally arrive are placed in limbo, are told to wait. (47)

This quote is one of many examples where the narrative underscores the coexistence of divergent childhood experiences that arise from profound social and economic disparities. In the safety of their car, the wife's children hear the Elegies and listen to the news about refugee children. Because of this, one of the main conflicts of the narrator consists of determining how to explain the stories of the refugee children to the siblings. For example, during the radio interview with the boy who is narrating his journey in the Bestia, he mentions his little brother, who fell off the train and did not make it to the border. Just as the boy starts sharing the details behind the tragedy, the wife turns off the radio to prevent the siblings from hearing about it. In another instance, the girl asks her mom to explain the meaning of the word "refugee." In an interior monologue, the narrator describes refugees as people who have already arrived at their destination but remain trapped in the custody of the immigration system. Because of this, she wants to say that "a child refugee is someone who waits." However, she tells her daughter: "a refugee is someone who needs to find a new home" (48). These examples accentuate the wife's conflict to rationalize the suffering of other children to explain it to her own, and also the impossibility of that endeavor.

When the family finally gets to the airport, it is too late. The refugee children are boarding the plane. As soon as they see them, the wife contends: "they'll be removed, relocated, erased, because there's no place for them in this vast empty country" (182). Whereas the girl is asleep, once again confronted with the realization that she cannot hide or explain the extent of what is happening to the boy, the wife asks him to be the one to describe that moment. The boy narrates: "The spaceship is moving toward the runway [...] The astronauts are inside the ship now" (184). Knowing that it would be impossible to rationalize that deportation, the boy uses his imagination. However, as the wife explains, "he'd listened to things, looked at them -really looked, focused, pondered-" (185), and hence he is aware of the reality that lingers behind his story. This awareness changes the overall articulation of the last part of the story.

The previous scene also underscores how, besides the boy and the girl, the only other children that form part of the family's narrative dimension are absent or become absent. These are Manuela's daughters, the boy on the radio, and the group of refugee children from the airport. Mirroring the challenges faced by the characters, the author highlights the impossibility of narrating the suffering and hardship of the children she is addressing. Because of this, they appear through the reverberations of their stories, which take the form of radio waves, acoustic reenactments, the Elegies, and the sound and image of the airplane vanishing in the air. Since these reverberations refer to the unspeakable anguish endured by refugee children, in the words of Elizondo Griest, their stories turn into "haunting[s] that will forever echo in our bones." In the novel, these hauntings become the main driving force for the siblings' actions during the last part of the novel and the reason the desert gets fully

incorporated into the story through both its acoustic and material presence.

An Arid Weapon

After seeing the refugee children leave on the airplane, the boy decides to help find Manuela's daughters. At this point, the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy. The temporality is also different. The boy is telling the story in retrospective because he is recording his voice to share it with his sister when she is older. Carrying with them a few objects and the *Elegies*, the siblings leave their parents' side and walk towards the desert:

And south into the heart of light we walked [...] close together and quiet, like the lost children walked somewhere, too. Under the same sun maybe, though I kept feeling all the time that we were walking on the sun's surface and not under it, and I asked you, don't you feel like we are walking on the sun. (Luiselli 319)

That last sentence replicates the boy's words during their reenactment in the car where he stated: "We're walking in the desert and it's like we're walking on the sun and not under it" (156). Even though at that point the siblings had not experienced the effects of the desert on their bodies, its echoes, which they received via airwaves and speech, led them to create a vivid, immediate, intimate, and even painful response to the thought of the biome. Hence, without having been there, during the reenactment in the car the siblings produced an accurate physical and affective register of the desert. The arid biome emerges as an acoustic specter that adheres to the intellect and physical imagination of the children.

Writing about haunted landscapes, María del Pilar Blanco states: "haunting can take many forms: Alongside apparitions of supernatural shapes or beings that otherwise would be imperceptible, it can also mean the disquieting experience of sensing a collision of temporalities or spaces -an experience that is nevertheless riddled with doubt and uncertainty" (1). Following this understanding, the initial manifestations of the desert, which appear through oral stories, the radio, and the reenactments, produce an acoustic collision between the landscape and the siblings' imagination, which destabilizes their present and causes pain and confusion. However, when they finish their reenactments, turn off the radio, or when the projects of the parents are paused, not the acoustic but the material presence of the desert continues to loom over the lost children, as it is imagined in the *Elegies*:

They had walked, and swam, and hidden, and run. They had boarded trains and spent nights sleepless atop gondolas, looking up at the barren, godless sky. The trains, like beasts, drilled and scratched their way across jungles, across cities, across places difficult to name. Them,

aboard this last train, they had come to this desert, where the incandescent light bent the sky into a full arch, and time had also bent back on itself. Time, in the desert, was an ongoing present tense. (312)

Whereas up until before the family arrived at the airport, the danger associated with the desert had been transmitted through its acoustic shadow, when the siblings start their journey, said manifestation changes. Lost in the arid land, the boy and his sister endure some of the same precarity experienced by the lost children they seek. However, they are participating in another reenactment, one that is both verbal and physical. While it is clear that their journey does not compare to the one undertaken by refugee children, what this part of the narrative accomplishes is that it fully draws attention to the weaponization of the biome.

Jason de Leon contends: "in the Arizona desert nonhumans are major players without which [the] system of boundary enforcement could not exist" (61). This tactic responds to the Prevention Through Deterrence scheme, which was implemented in the 90s to close all urban access to the passage of undocumented migrants. Because of this, the anthropologist sustains: "it is obvious that Border Patrol expected the desert to inflict harm on migrants" (61). Dehydration, hypothermia, hyperthermia, sunstroke, and extreme exhaustion are among the deadly effects of the desert on the human body.³⁰ Given said effects, it is possible to draw clear parallels between the desert's weaponization against migrants and the unequal attacks by the Mexican and US armies against the Chiricahua Apaches: "The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo [...] stipulated that both parties were required to fight the "savage" Apaches" (Dunbar-Ortiz 150). The tremendous amount of force used to remove the Chiricahuas from their ancestral land in the southwest is different but parallel to the powerful use of the desert against migrants. In both scenarios, a brutal amount of force is implemented to remove, annihilate, and erase unwanted people.

Part of the desert's brutality is described by the boy: "the heat always getting heavier and the sun on our foreheads stinging us like a thousand yellow bees" (Luiselli 325). This is one example through which the boy articulates some of the desert's excruciating effects. Along with the reenactments and the *Elegies*, another instance by which the novel addresses the dire effects of the desert's weaponization is a folder with "dozens of 'Migrant Mortality Reports' printed from online search engines that locate the missing, which [list] the bodies found on those deserts, the possible cause of death, and their exact location" (23-24). Right before the siblings' departure, the novel incorporates a set of those reports, which include archival information about migrants whose ages ranged from 0 to 15 years old. Regarding the archival process, the wife asserts: "you whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, just sometimes, an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something" (42). The reports operate as a medium to denounce the articulation of the desert as a lethal

weapon, and as a channel to keep present the reverberations of the stories they attempt to document.

Jason de Leon contends that documenting migrant mortality rates is extremely difficult because the desert is inhabited by scavengers that often participate in the erasure of the human remains (74). Concerning this, the boy recounts: "around us we heard too many sounds, strange sounds [...] like animals moving around us [...] and I wondered if we were hearing the sound of the dead in the desert, all the bones there" (Luiselli 324). This quote unveils the significance of the fictional author's last name. Camposanto translates to "cemetery," a characteristic that draws further attention to the desert's role in border-control strategies.

During his journey through the desert, the boy reads the stories of the lost children while he and his sister are also experiencing fear and uncertainty. This collation leads to the overlap of the fictional worlds: "we looked up at the thick clouds getting ready to burst into rain, and at the eagles above us, which are now flying in a perfect circle [...] under those clouds, and the four children see them too" (329). Towards the end, the siblings are unable to find the missing girls, and instead, when the fictional worlds collide, they find the lost children of the *Elegies*. While at the beginning of the novel-within-the-novel there were seven kids, when the boy and the girl found them, only four of them were left.

The collision of these worlds can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, by appearing in two narrative dimensions, the *Elegies*' survivors resist confinement, challenge narrow understandings, and rebel against established forms. However, the material refiguration of the lost children also underscores both the weaponization of the desert and the extent of the disconnection between the lived experiences that have stumbled upon each other. After spending one night together, the lost children part ways with the siblings: "where are the other four children I asked, and you said they had left, they'd left right before sunrise" (336). Whereas the boy and the girl are found by their parents, the refugee children leave and get lost again.

The Archives

Trying to capture part of the soundscape that surrounded the last of the Apache Wars, the inventory of echoes acquires an environmental angle. The husband wanted to record sounds produced by the desert ecology, and as the boy asserts, often the only sounds he found were those made by cars. That is one example of how the inventory of echoes unveils biodiversity loss. However, apart from the inventory of echoes, there are other moments at which the novel adopts environmental concerns. For instance, during the road trip, the wife states: "[we see] a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with modified seeds and injected with pesticides" (177). Another example of how the novel engages with environmental-based interests is

the inclusion of the ancient saguaros' name, which draws attention to the ecological life of the desert. Furthermore, the acoustic incorporation of the saguaros acts as a reminder of how the entanglement between the biome and a border demarcation has devastated central parts of the desert ecosystem.

The acoustic depiction of saguaros also gives prominence to the fight of the Tohono O'odham Nation against the wall,²¹ a reference that acquires a profound meaning when it is put into dialogue with the husband's project, which is focused on the Chiricahua Apache resistance.

Through these accounts, the novel incorporates what American Studies professor Jennifer Nez Denetdale (Diné) describes as "histories of violence [...] that have everything to do with the United States as a settler nation whose thirst for Indigenous lands and resources remains unabated" (112). In addition, the novel brings attention to processes of settler colonialism that have marked the Desert Southwest in particular, and the entire region at large: "Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua [are] all beautiful names, but also names to name a past of injustice, genocide, exodus, war, and blood" (232). In the context of the Mexico-US borderlands, through sonorous references, the narrative highlights the continuation of past and present acts of violence committed against Native Americans and Native lands.

Sound is also central to the wife's project. Elements such as the radio news, oral histories, and the *Elegies*, which are often read out loud, generate an aural specter that carries echoes of the desert's weaponization. At the center of this project are the stories of refugee children. Although the sound documentary is seemingly detached from the inventory of echoes, they are strongly interrelated. As discussed above, both underscore different forms of dispossession and practices of colonialism. Moreover, the stories of the child refugees resonate with some of the experiences of Chiricahua Apache children. Similar to the detention of refugee kids, as Fort Sill Apache Tribal Chairman Jeff Haozous recalls, Chiricahua Apache children were also imprisoned and separated from their families²². This connection highlights the existence of a long-standing genealogy of children's incarceration and family separation.

The main method through which the narrative foregrounds the multitemporal and complex existence of the southwestern desert is sound. It is through the representations of sounds that the novel underscores the vitality of desert ecology, its vulnerabilities, and its participation in border-control schemes. In the narrative, said characteristics situate the desert as a border biome. Beyond this characterization, *Lost Children Archive* emphasizes that the territory upon which the Mexico-US border is built is Native land. Featuring echoes and acoustic waves, the narrative exposes various mechanisms of ongoing colonization, deterrence, and dispossession that revolve around the arid biome. Even though the archives created by the sound projects cannot recuperate what has been lost, destroyed, or obliterated, they defy silence and erasure by tracing the reverberating echoes of distant and immediate realities.

NOTES

¹The Desert Southwest includes parts of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, and it is composed of the Sonoran, Chihuahuan, and Mojave deserts. In addition, Nevada, the Great Basin, and the Colorado Plateau are sometimes considered part of it. Luiselli's novel revolves around the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts.

²For instance, in Dennis Zhou's "Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*," and in Powell's Picks Spotlight.

³Such as the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo between Mexico and the US, and the Selva El Petén between Mexico and Guatemala.

⁴Which are located between the Chihuahuan and the Sonoran deserts.

⁵Environmental activist Laiken Jordahl has followed closely the damage produced by the border wall.

⁶Besides the Tohono O'odham Nation, another tribe that has opposed the 2020 border wall construction is the Kumeyaay.

⁷As reported by Simone Romero for *The New York Times*.

⁸This was reported by several journalists, including Ryan Devereaux for *The Intercept*.

⁹This information was reported by Dara Lind in *Vox*.

¹⁰According to the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, since the late 90s more than 7500 people have perished in their attempt to cross the Mexico-US border, and over 4000 have been reported missing.

¹¹Haozous mentions that the Chiricahua children were sent to the Carlisle school in Pennsylvania, where they "were subjected to intense assimilation and indoctrination." The author recalls that in that school, many of the children got gravely ill and lost their lives.

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A Meditation on the Translation of *Our America*

Translated by Katie Brown

Colorado State University Pueblo

ABSTRACT: This translation of José Martí's *Nuestra América* (*Our America*) and accompanying essay offer English-speaking readers a new version of his seminal text, situating it more firmly within the realm of literary and translation studies, and decentering it from the world of Latin American history or politics, where the extant English translations tend to live in North American libraries. The translator's meditation focuses on some of the more poetic aspects of Martí's language and the logic he employs to create interconnected evolving metaphors and metonyms, while also explaining some of the lexical and syntactic choices made in key areas that have traditionally caused difficulty with previous translations of this essay.

KEY WORDS: José Martí, *Nuestra América*, *Our America*, Translation, Latin American Essay

José Martí's seminal essay, *Our America*, first published in *La Revista Ilustrada* in New York on January 1, 1891, and again on the 30th of that month in *El Partido Liberal* in Mexico, ostensibly stands as a prophet and martyr's wake-up call to Latin America, on the cusp of the new millennium and facing the threat of imperialistic ambitions. For Martí, those ambitions emanate from dangerous powers little known to the vast majority of the *campesino* population, who are generally 'ignorant of the comets' cosmic scuffle, hurtling through the sleepy air, devouring worlds.¹ The stage is set from the first paragraph with this image and that of the giant in seven-league boots, parting from the idea of a common threat and an idealized population—that very same 'natural man' who is ignorant of the comets—capable of combatting that threat. This initial incongruity in turn creates a contradictory ontological exploration throughout the essay, which results in advocating for both an essentialist, homogenous Latin American political identity and for preserving individual cultural identities—all filtered through the lens of Cuba, Martí's homeland. A frustration with the opposition between beliefs, values, and circumstances manifests in the contradictions and visceral arguments in his writing: behind a mask of optimism is fear for *Our America's* future, fear of the threat of effeminate and weak traitors, of repetition of the past, of imported ideas, governments and even social structures.

Alas, no one is a prophet in his own land, and the words destined for Martí's idealized *madre patria* must be written while living in New York during his 15-year exile, in the mouth of the giant. The seer, the poet, is at work in this essay: instead of reading a well-reasoned political treatise, one is swept through a whirlwind of evolving metonymic symbols and metaphors, such as the recurring *patria*, personified and feminine. In my translation I chose to also use 'patria,' a word accepted in English, to avoid the masculine association with a term like 'fatherland.' Within this essay's ethos,

the patria, *Our America*, is passive and to be defended from the imposition of more 'virile' nations. Paradoxically, to be a patriot within Martí's ethos would necessitate embodying the virile qualities of the imperialist, otherwise risk being an effeminate traitor. Although English nouns by and large aren't gendered, using 'she/her/herself' instead of 'it/its/itself' as pronouns for *patria* emphasizes a feminine association in the English rendering. It also retains the original's symbolic value and corporeal metonymy: first her bones are being gnawed by destructive insects, or traitors; later she is represented by the Indian apron she wears; then as an ill mother, of whom her son (a traitor), is ashamed and refuses to help—and whose masculinity must therefore be called into question: 'So then, who is the real man?'. I reinforce this symbolic relationship by employing 'Our America' as a proper noun throughout the essay.

Martí dialogues with his contemporaries and with Latin American history: with 19th-century Argentine intellectual and eventual president, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento ('There is no battle between civilization and barbarism, but between false erudition and Nature'); or by referencing Simón Bolívar and General José de San Martín ('nations began to arise, the Venezuelans in the North and the Argentines in the South. When the two heroes clashed, and the Continent was going to tremble, one, who was not the lesser man, gave up the reins'). During his generalized, quasi-metaphoric recounting of the processes of independence across Latin America, Martí criticizes the influx of foreign thought and influence and advocates for a turning inward. For all his fervor, he offers no concrete plan for Latin America, *Our America*.

Even with its lack of concrete action for *Our America* to follow, it is regarded as a political/historical text, especially in English translations, and continues to be referenced as such. After translating the text, it is clear that what prevails are its literary qualities. Perhaps it is the language of smoke and mirrors, the secret of the seer, that has

given the text its enduring popularity. The tendency to speak in axiomatic metaphors and aphorisms results in phrases that truly vacillate between wisdom and vacuity: 'Resolving a problem after knowing its elements is easier than resolving it without knowing them... To know is to resolve.' Then the real seeds finally sown by this Grand Cemí are in fact those phrases of the prophet that can be imbued with myriad meanings, according to the dictates, or dictators, of the epoch. Imagery that implies but doesn't name explicitly—like *gusanos* and 'destructive insects' for traitors—offers later generations a rhetoric that can be recycled and repurposed: under the Cuban Revolution the specific enemies of Castro and the Revolution may be ever-evolving but can always be classified as *gusanos*. And one can't help but connect the *venas abiertas* ('open veins') described by Eduardo Galeano, a catchphrase that would affect generations of subsequent political thought and action in Latin America, to Martí's mention of *las venas que nos dejaron picadas nuestros dueños* ('the veins that our masters left open'), interpreted as the doomed cultural, political and economic inheritance of Latin America.

For all its political deficiencies, the text holds great literary value as a testament to the beauty of Martí's hand, and to his faith in the power of ideas and reason as the mightiest weapons in the birthing of a new nation. It is an example of lingering Romanticism and emerging *modernista* aesthetics in Martí's writing. A few quasi-surrealist images sprout up, precursory to the *Vanguardia* movement, such as the octopus from whose arms the young generation is springing forth in (false) hope, or the assertion that Latin Americans can no longer be 'a people made of leaves, living in the air, our crown loaded with flowers.' He also sets the stage for *Macondismo* (see J.J. Brunner, Emil Volek), an essentialist attitude that points toward the inherent 'uniqueness' of Latin America as a stumbling block to its modernization or integration into the modern world, which will pervade Latin American political thought and literary and cultural production, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Martí proclaims: 'Let the world graft itself onto our republics; but the trunk must be our own.' It seems almost a conciliatory gesture toward the rest of the world on his behalf, but at its core, is an anti-assimilationist argument. Applied to literature—certainly Martí would agree, integral to the cultural identity of Latin America—that phrase could be emblematic of the *modernista* aesthetics to which he helped give early formation, as later, when he demands that going forth poetry cut its Zorrilla-esque mane in a rupture with Romanticism, and that prose now be 'sparkling and sifted...loaded with ideas.'

Although the poet is at work in the crafting and stylistics of the essay, the mask being shown is perhaps his favorite: the prophet-politico mask, looking to project a voice of certainty through aphorisms and axiomatic commandments, implying no room for error or doubts. Martí's passion comes through in a frenzied manner and sometimes leads him to contradict himself: at one point he speaks of the stagnant aboriginal race; at the end of the essay declares that there can't be hate among races because races don't exist and are

a construct of elitist intellectuals ('bookshelf races'), of false erudition. Martí is most impassioned in his loathing of those who don't support the cause for political and cultural independence, who are generally referred to throughout the essay with disparaging, homophobic epithets. Translators to English have had particular difficulty with the translation of the word *sietemesinos* (literally, those born prematurely, at seven months). Emil Volek addresses the problem and analyzes various attempts to translate the term into English, asserting that Martí equated its use in Spain to the use of *gratin* in France for the upper crust, decadent Parisian youth of the epoch ("*Nuestra América*" 2011). These *sietemesinos* are not only weaklings, and in Martí's macho ethos, effeminate and therefore traitors (Volek, "*Nuestra América*" 2011), but there is also an emphasis on farce and pretension versus authenticity, an idea that will appear in other metonymic symbols throughout the essay: the book and the cassock/Church, the artificial lettered man and false erudition, and the Greece that is or is not ours. Authenticity is virility. Or vice versa. Mimicry is passive, feminine, and weak. These weak arms appear as arms of Paris or Madrid that contribute nothing to the tree of Our America. In fact, they can't even reach its branches. Later, they get sent to the Prado park and to Café Tortoni's, but they are ridiculous posers (i.e. not authentic).

In Martí's paragraph about those weak arms and inauthentic posers, I originally wanted to use 'dandy' for *sietemesino* due to its similar implication of posing, but that proved inadequate, and didn't allow for the way Martí employs this imagery in a chain of causality from weakling to traitor to effeminate poser. So, they are introduced first as premature-born weaklings in my translation, which maintains the insinuation of a weak constitution and adds the possible connotation of a person unready for their times—in this case, to fight for Cuban independence and Latin American autonomy. Then, when they go to the Prado park in my translation, they go passing as coxcombs, an epoch-appropriate synonym for dandy and also a type of flower, which creates a double entendre accessible to the English-speaking reader. In Paris, the Café Tortoni, popular at the time, becomes a destination for those who are posing in high hats, which makes them appear as sipping straws, an object, in itself, of almost inconsequential value. Volek discusses Martí's proximity to Mexican and Puerto Rican Spanish, in which a *sorbete* can mean a type of high hat or a sipping straw, respectively. The translation, although it doesn't retain the same literal wordplay as the original, manages to transmit a new wordplay and a laughable image, as utilized by Martí for the very people who incited a most visceral reaction in his writing.

The barrage of symbols and metaphors are encased in a confusing and tangled syntax—often relying on devices like hyperbaton, asyndeton, and polysyndeton, apart from other poetic rhetoric—, suffering its own identity crisis between a Baroque inheritance, Romantic sensibilities and *modernista* aesthetics. The syntactical difficulties are perhaps the most challenging aspect for the translator. Occasionally it seems impossible to decipher his

code. I often had to resort to dissecting and diagraming sentences to clearly understand the correlations Martí wished to establish. And even then, sometimes, it felt futile, just beyond grasp, a tangle of prepositions and subordinate clauses with no clear antecedent, or metaphors that tended toward the quasi-surrealist and whose referent remained obscure.

I had to consider these syntactic factors, also keeping in mind that this text is rarely going to be heard anymore, but mostly read silently to oneself. As I worked on this translation, I first divided the essay by sentence, placing each one as a new line of text. The effect was an intensification of the poetic nature of the text, an emphasis on its reliance on axiomatic and aphoristic language, but also a heightening of the tangled syntax. In two instances, one sentence displayed as a single paragraph that spilled onto the next page. These sentences were structured by Martí as a series of causes listed in each independent clause, culminating in one subsequent effect; for example, all of the factors leading up to the assertion that 'America began to suffer, and still suffers.' I eventually settled on cutting out the 'as' or 'due to' initiating each clause/cause, and wrote them as a series of separate sentences that would paint the process undertaken in post-Independence American republics, such as the centralization of power and people in the cities/capitals and the importation of faulty knowledge through 'bibliogenic redeemers'—a neologism in Spanish, and so in its English rendering as well. Each enumeration of crimes against Our America now culminates in the final sentence of the paragraph, maintaining the cause-effect relationship established by Martí, while making the prose 'sparkling and sifted' for English-speaking readers.

As I recomposed the essay back into paragraphs, I divided the prose into more paragraphs—longer ones were broken up in places where a new, but still related, idea was presented. I intended to create divisions that not only made logical sense in English but also maintained the same cohesion and transitions between ideas as the original. My other guides were the often concise and always impactful axioms (whether wise or vacuous in their content), which tended to get lost amongst longer, more rambling explorations of thought. Sometimes, a series of axioms were inserted as a part of a larger theorem, truth in the Martí cosmos:

'The government must be born of the country. The spirit of the government must be that of the country. The form of government must comply with the natural constitution of the country. Government is nothing more than equilibrium of the natural elements of the country.'

In the original, this sentiment, which has a certain cadence building up toward a climax, was the closing of a paragraph, in which it was actually a new idea. I moved the last sentence to become the opener of the following paragraph to highlight the correlation of the natural process of achieving equilibrium with the natural man vanquishing the imported book, the idea that immediately follows

in Martí's essay. Aside from this type of structural cleanup, the order in which Martí espouses his vision for Our America is unchanged.

The original essay was in some ways a concretization of Martí's previously written 'Madre América' ('Mother America'), and was destined to be read aloud, written by the hand of a man who was also skilled at orating. Confronted with a text such as this—tangled syntax, complex constructions of causality and metaphor-heavy projections of Our America's past and future—an audience would be left with sound bites, floating imagery, and most importantly, raw emotion, to fan the patriotic flames in their hearts and 'thaw out the frozen America!' That is the true literary beauty and complexity of this text: Martí's ability to create an ambiguous text that accepts a superficial reading or listening and constant historical reinterpretation of its referents, while also being a masterful blending of poetics and politics, metaphors and symbolic histories, passion and reason, which resists a simple arrival at deeper meaning. Martí's own hymn has echoed through more than a century of human thought and politics, still seated proudly on the back of the condor, just out of reach of even the strongest arm.

¹ All English quotations of Martí are from my translation.

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Our America¹

The smug villager believes that his village is the whole world, and as long as he can become mayor, or the rival who stole his bride gets humiliated, or his piggy bank fills up, he assumes the universe to be in good order, ignorant of the giants in seven-league boots that could crush him, ignorant of the comets' cosmic scuffle, hurtling through the sleepy air, devouring worlds. What remains of the village in America must wake up. These are not times for sleeping in nightcaps, but with arms for pillows, like the elegiac heroes of Juan de Castellanos:² arms of reason, which defeat all others. A trench made of ideas is worth more than a trench made of stones.

No prow can slice through an aurora of ideas. An energetic idea, fluttering at the right time before the world like the mystical flag of Judgment Day, can detain a fleet of warships. The peoples of the continent who don't know one another should get acquainted, and quickly, as those who are going to come together in arms. Those who threaten one another with fists, like jealous brothers who desire the same land, or like one who lives in a smaller house and envies the brother who lives better, need to bring their two hands together as one. Those who, under the safeguard of a criminal tradition, amputated the lands of a defeated brother already punished far beyond his offenses, with a sword stained in blood from their own veins, must return their brother's lands if they do not wish to be called thieves. The honorable man does not call in debts of honor with money, at so much per wallop. We can no longer be a people made of leaves, living in the air, our crown loaded with flowers, crackling or humming with caresses from the capricious sunlight, or beating and thrashing from the storms: the trees must stand in line, so the giant in seven-league boots cannot pass! Now is the hour of reckoning, the time to march united, shoulder-to-shoulder, like the silver coursing through the veins of the Andes.

Only those born prematurely are lacking courage. Those who don't have faith in their land are premature-born weaklings. Because they are lacking courage, they deny it to other people. Their puny arms fall short of reaching the tree—their arms with bracelets and painted nails, arms of Paris or Madrid—, yet they say the branches are out of grasp. We must load our ships with these destructive insects gnawing at the bones of the very patria that nourishes them. If they are Parisians or from Madrid, let them stroll through the Prado passing as coxcombs, or go to Café Tortoni's in high hats, posing as sipping straws. These carpenter's sons, ashamed of their carpenter fathers! These sons of America, ashamed because they were raised behind the Indian apron of their mother, and then they reject that ailing mother, the scoundrels, abandoning her on her sickbed.

So then, who is the real man? The one who stays with his mother, to cure her illness, or the one who puts her to work out of sight, and lives from her sustenance on the corrupted lands, with a worm for a tie, cursing the breast that nursed him, displaying the sign of the traitor on the back of his paper coat and tails? These sons of Our America, who must save herself along with her Indians, and

is moving from worse to better, these deserters that ask for a rifle in the armies of North America, which drowns its Indians in blood, and goes from better to worse! These dandies, who are supposed to be men, and don't want to do the work of men! Well, the Washington that made this land, did he go live with the English in the years he saw them threatening his own country? These effete *incroyables* of honor drag that honor across foreign soil, just as their namesakes during the French Revolution, dancing and putting on airs, affected their speech.

In what other patria could a man have more pride than in our suffering American republics, which rose up amongst masses of silent Indians, to the sound of the struggle between the book and the cassock, upon the bloody arms of a hundred apostles? From such disparate factors, never, in less historic time, have such advanced and solid nations been forged. The arrogant man believes the land was made to serve as his pedestal, because he has an easy way with the pen or a colorful tongue, and accuses his native republic of being impotent and irredeemable because the pristine jungles don't provide him with the means to travel the world like a famous pasha, guiding Persian mares and spilling champagne. The impotency is not in the nascent country, seeking suitable forms and utilitarian greatness, but in those who want to govern original nations, of a unique and violent composition, with laws inherited from four centuries of their free practice in the United States, from nineteen centuries under monarchic rule in France. A decree from Hamilton does not halt the charge of the plainsman's colt. A phrase from Sieyès³ does not move the stagnant blood of the Indian race. In order to be able to govern well, one must attend to things as they are; the good leader in America is not he who knows how the French or the German govern themselves, but he who knows with which elements his country is made, and how to harness them in order to arrive, through methods and institutions born of the country itself, to that desired state where all men achieve self-fulfillment and exercise their rights, and everyone enjoys the bounty provided by Nature in the lands they enrich with their labor and defend with their lives. The government must be born of the country. The spirit of the government must be that of the country. The form of government must comply with the natural constitution of the country.

Government is nothing more than equilibrium of the natural elements of the country. Because of that, in America the natural man has vanquished the imported book. The natural man has defeated the artificial, learned man. The autochthonous Mestizo has defeated the exotic Creole. There is no battle between civilization and barbarism, but between false erudition and Nature. The natural man is good and obedient and prizes superior intelligence in others, as long as that superior intelligence doesn't use his humility against him, or offend him by finding him dispensable, which is something the natural man doesn't easily forgive; he is disposed to use force to recover the respect of those who injure his sensitivities or are preju-

dicial to his interests. The tyrants of America have come into power by conforming to its disdained natural elements, and have fallen as soon as they betrayed them. Through those tyrannies, the republics have purged their inability to grasp the true elements of their country, to derive from them a form of government, and to govern with them. Leader, in a new nation, means creator.

In nations composed of both cultured and uncultured elements, where the cultured don't learn the art of governance, the uncultured will govern by their habit of bullying and resolving problems with their fists. The uncultured masses are lazy, and feeble in questions of intelligence, and they want to be governed well; but if the government hurts them, they will rebel and govern themselves. If there is no university in America that teaches the rudiments of the art of governance, that is, the analysis of the singular elements of the peoples of America, how are leaders supposed to emerge from those universities? As it stands, the young enter the world looking through Yankee or French spectacles and aspire to lead a nation they don't know. In political careers, entry should be denied to those who are unfamiliar with the rudiments of politics. Competition prizes should not go to the best ode, but to the best study of the factors of the country in which one lives. In the newspapers, in professorships, in the academy, the real factors of the country should be investigated. Knowing them without bandages or embellishments is enough; because he who puts aside part of the truth, voluntarily or from forgetfulness, will fail in the long run from that missing truth, which grows in its negligence, and topples that which is raised without it as a base. Resolving a problem after knowing its elements is easier than resolving it without knowing them. Here comes the natural man, indignant and strong, demolishing the justice accumulated through books because it is not administered in accordance with the clear necessities of the country.

To know is to resolve. Knowing the country, and governing it in accordance with that knowledge, is the only way to liberate it from tyrannies. The European university must cede to the American one. American history, the history of the Incas, should be learnt by heart, even if that means the archons of Greece will not be taught. Our Greece takes priority over the Greece that is not ours. It is more necessary to us. National politicians need to replace exotic ones. Let the world graft itself onto our republics; but the trunk must be our own. And the defeated pedant can be silent; there is no other patria in which a man can have more pride than in our suffering American republics.

With our steps guided by the rosary, with a white face and a bronzed body, Indians and Creoles, we came, undaunted, into the world of nations. Under the banner of the Virgin we went out to meet the conquest for liberty. A priest, a handful of lieutenants and a woman raise up the Republic in Mexico, on the shoulders of Indians.⁴ A Spanish cleric, under the cover of his priestly cope, instructs some magnificent young students in the French concept of liberty, who put the general of Spain as the leader of Central America against Spain.⁵ Dressed in monarchic habits, and with the sun on

their chest, nations began to arise, the Venezuelans in the North and the Argentines in the South. When the two heroes clashed, and the Continent was going to tremble, one, who was not the lesser man, gave up the reins.⁶

Since heroism during peacetime is less common because it is less glorious than during wartime, it is easier for a man to die with honor than to think with order. Governing when sentiments are unanimous and exalted is more feasible than leading diverse, arrogant, exotic, or ambitious thinking after wartime. The powers invested in the epic assault undermined, with the cunning of the feline species and the weight of reality, the building that had raised—in the coarse and singular regions of our Mestizo America, in the nations where bare legs clash with tailcoats from Paris—the flag of a people nourished by vital juices governing in the continual practice of liberty and reason. The hierarchical constitution of the colonies resisted the democratic organization of the republic, or the bow-tied capitals left their country boots and horseshoes in the vestibule, or the bibliogenic redeemers didn't understand that the revolution that triumphed with the soul of the land upon the voice of its savior, must be governed by soul of the land, not against her nor without her. America began to suffer, and still suffers, from the fatigue of accommodation between the discordant and hostile elements that it inherited from a malicious, despotic colonizer, and the imported ideas and patterns that have been retarding, due to their lack of correspondence to local reality, the logical form of government.

The Continent, disjointed for three centuries because of governance that negated man's right to exercise reason, overlooking or unheeding the ignorant masses that had helped it to redeem itself, entered into a government based on reason, of everybody for the common good, and not one man's university-learned reason over the homegrown reasoning of others. The problem of independence wasn't the change in forms, but the change in spirit. With the oppressed there needed to be made a common cause, to establish a system opposite to the interests and habits of command of the oppressors. The tiger, frightened from the fire, returns at night to the place of his prey. He dies with flames shooting from his eyes and with his claws in the air. He can't be heard approaching; he draws nearer with his paws of velvet. When the prey awakes, the tiger is upon it. The Colony continued living on in the Republic; and Our America is saving herself from her grand errors—the arrogance of the capital cities, the blind triumph of the scorned countrymen, the excessive importation of extraneous ideas and formulas, the iniquitous and imprudent disdain of the aboriginal race—by way of the superior virtue, fertilized with necessary bloodshed, of the Republic that combats the Colony. The tiger waits, lurking behind every tree, crouched in every corner. He will die, with his claws in the air and flames shooting from his eyes.

But, 'these countries will save themselves,' announced the Argentine Rivadavia,⁷ whose only sin was being a refined man in rough times; a machete isn't housed in a silken sheathe, nor can a country that was won with the sword leave it behind, because it becomes

angered, and stands in the door of Iturbide's Congress⁸ demanding that 'they make the fair-haired guy emperor.' These countries will be saved because—due to the moderate temperament that appears to reign, due to the serene harmony of Nature within the continent of light, and due to the flow of critical thought in Europe succeeding the utopic experimentation and Fourier's imagined phalanstery that saturated the previous generation—in America, in these real times, the real man is emerging.

We were a vision, with an athlete's chest, the hands of a dandy, and the forehead of a child. We were a mask, with European stockings, a Parisian vest, an American short coat and the cap of a Spanish bullfighter. The silent Indian hovered around us and went to the mountain, high up to the top of the mountain, to baptize his children. The Negro, under scornful vigil, sang the music of his heart throughout the night, alone and unknown, among the waves and the beasts. The countryman, the creator, blind with indignation, revolted against the disdainful city, against his own creation.

We were epaulets and togas, in countries that came to the world with rope sandals on their feet and headdresses on their heads. The genius would have been in uniting, with the founders' boldness and charity of heart, the headdress and the toga; in stirring the stagnant Indian; in making space for the able Negro; in bestowing liberty upon the bodies that rose up and fought for her. We were left with the judge, and the general, and the scholar, and the prebendary. The angelic youth, as if rising from the arms of an octopus, threw their heads to the heavens, only to let them fall in sterile grace, crowned with clouds. The native people, driven by instinct, blind with triumph, crushed the golden staffs that ruled them. Neither European nor Yankee books provided the clues needed to crack the Hispano-American enigma. Hatred was tried out, and the countries worsened each year. Tired of useless hatred, of the resistance of the book to the sword, of reason against the cassock, of the city against the countryside, of the impossible empire of urban castes spread across the tempestuous or inert natural nation, love, almost inadvertently, begins to be tried out.

The nations rise up and greet one another. 'How are we?' they ask each other, and one-by-one they say how they are. When a problem arises in Cojimar, they don't look for the solution in Danzig. The frockcoats are still French, but the thinking begins to be from America. The youth of America roll their sleeves up to their elbows, put their hands in the dough, and make it rise with the leavening from their sweat. They understand that imitation happens too often, and that to create is salvation. To create is the prerogative of this generation. The wine, from plantains; and if it comes out sour, at least it is our wine!

It is understood that the forms of governance of a country should conform to its natural elements; that absolute ideas, in order not to fail due to an error in form, should become relative forms; that freedom, in order to be viable, needs to be sincere and complete; and if the republic doesn't embrace all and move forward with all, it dies. The tiger within enters by way of the crevice, as does

the tiger without. In the march, the general holds back the cavalry to the pace of the infantry. If he leaves the infantry behind, the enemy surrounds the cavalry. Strategy is politics. Nations must live criticizing one another, because criticism is health, but only with one heart and one mind. Stoop down to those who are miserable and raise them up in your arms! With the fire in your hearts, thaw out the frozen America! Send the natural blood of the country bubbling and burning through her veins!

On foot, with the happy eyes of workers, the new American men greet one another, from one nation to another. The natural statesmen arise out of the direct study of Nature. They read to apply knowledge, but not to imitate. Economists study the origins of problems. Orators begin to wise up. Dramatists bring native characters to the stage. Academies discuss practical topics. Poetry cuts its romantic Zorrilla-esque mane and hangs its red vest on the glorious tree.⁹ Prose, sparkling and sifted, is loaded with ideas. Leaders, in the lands of Indians, learn to speak Indian.

From all of her dangers, America is saving herself. Over a few republics the octopus still lays dormant. Others, because of the natural law of equilibrium, run like mad to the sea to recover, with crazy and sublime haste, the lost centuries. Others ride on a carriage of wind with soap bubbles for a coachman, forgetting that Juárez rode around on a mule-cart;¹⁰ poisonous luxury, the enemy of freedom, corrupts the fragile man and opens the door to the foreigner. Others refine their virile character with the epic spirit of threatened independence. Others raise, in predatory war against their neighbor, a military that can devour them.

And, perhaps *Our America* runs the risk of yet another danger that doesn't come from within, but from the differences in origins, methods and interests between the two continental factors. Soon the time will come when an enterprising, booming nation that disdains her and isn't familiar with her, draws near, demanding intimate relations. Virile nations that have made the shotgun and the law their own, love and only love other virile nations. The time of excess and ambition—from which North America will hopefully escape, thanks to the predominance of the purest of its blood, or into which she may be plunged by her sordid and vengeful masses, the tradition of conquest, and the interest of an able caudillo—is still not so close to the eyes of the timid that there not be time to test discreet and continuous high-mindedness, with which it could be challenged and diverted. As her decorum as a republic before the attentive nations of the Universe puts a brake on North America that should not be removed by foolish provocation or ostentatious arrogance, to the parricidal discordance of *Our America*, the urgent task of *Our America* is to show herself as she is, one in soul and intent, fierce defeater of a suffocating past, only stained by the fertile blood drawn out of hands battling against ruins and from the veins that our masters left open.

The disdain of a formidable neighbor that doesn't know her is the biggest threat to *Our America*; and it is urgent, because the day of the visit is nigh, the neighbor must know her, and know her

soon, so as not to scorn her. Avarice may enter into her out of ignorance. But, upon knowing her, he would take his hands away out of respect. One must have faith in the best of man and mistrust in the worst of man. You must give occasion that the best of man will reveal itself and prevail over the worst. If not, the worst prevails. Nations should have a pillory for those who foment useless hatred, and another for those who don't tell the truth on time.

There is no hatred among races because there are no races. Feeble thinkers, candlelight thinkers, mix up and reheat bookshelf races, which the just traveler and the cordial observer look for in vain in the justice of Nature, where instead the universal identity of man stands out, in victorious love and turbulent appetite. The soul emanates, equal and eternal, from bodies diverse in shape and color. He who foments and propagates opposition and hatred among races sins against Humanity. But with the proximity of other diverse peoples, in the dough of the nations are condensed peculiar and active characteristics—of ideas and habits, of expansion and acquisition, of vanity and avarice—that from a latent state of national preoccupations could, in a period of internal disorder or of the pre-

cipitation of the accumulated national character, become a grave threat to neighboring lands, isolated and weak, which the stronger country determines to be perishable or inferior. To think is to serve.

Nor should one presume, out of provincial antipathy, an innate and fatal evilness in the fair-skinned peoples of the Continent because they don't speak our language, nor see the home as we do, nor resemble us in their political scars, which are different from ours, nor esteem much the querulous mulatto, nor look charitably, from their as-yet unsecure eminence, at those who, less favored by History, build the way to republics through heroic deeds. The patient information should not be hidden about the problem that can be resolved, for the peace of centuries, with the opportune study and tacit and urgent union of the continental soul. The unanimous hymn is already sounding; the current generation bears the weight, along the path fertilized by our sublime forefathers, the working America. From the Río Grande to the Strait of Magellan, the Great Cemí,¹¹ seated on the back of the condor, has sown, among the romantic nations of the Continent and the suffering islands of the sea, the seed of the New America!

NOTES

¹ Helpful for establishing context and for exegesis during the translation process were: 'Nuestra América, texto cenital de José Martí' edited by Cintio Vitier and published in *José Martí a Cien Años de Nuestra América* (1993), and English translations by Onís (1953); Randall (1977); Allen (2002); and Shnookal and Muñiz (2007). An earlier version of this translation appeared as an appendix to my dissertation (Brown 2016).

² 'Elegiac heroes of Juan de Castellanos': (1552–1607) Spanish epic poet, soldier and later priest. The heroes Martí refers to are from Castellanos's *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* (1589), written in Nueva Granada (now Colombia), 113, 609 lines that recount various aspects of the Conquest. Here, importantly, Martí establishes a connection with Latin American history since the Conquest, as well as with literary antecedents.

³ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836): French clergyman and author of *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état? (What is the Third Estate?)* preceding the French Revolution (1789), later became one of its leading figures. Involved in drafting the Declaration of the Rights of Man (August 26, 1789).

⁴ 'Under the banner of the Virgin... A priest, a handful of lieutenants and a woman': The Virgin of Guadalupe, whose image was used by the armed forces led by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811), an elderly priest. He initiated the Mexican Revolution in the town of Dolores on September 16, 1810. The woman Martí refers to is Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez (1768–1829), wife of the chief magistrate of Querétaro.

⁵ 'Put the general of Spain as leader': Martí is referring to General Gabino Gaínza, of Basque origin, who on September 15, 1821, was named leader of the new Central American government, separated from the Spanish crown.

⁶ 'When the two heroes clashed...': Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) and General José de San Martín (1778–1850). Bolívar led revolutions of independence beginning in 1810 in Venezuela and moving south. San Martín began in Argentina in 1813 and moved north. On July 26–27, 1822, they met in

Guayaquil. San Martín accepted Bolívar as uncontested leader, renounced his title as Protector of Peru and retired to France.

⁷ Bernardino Rivadavia (1780–1845): Argentine politician and dignitary, involved in the independence struggle and elected as the first president of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata in 1826. He promoted a Unitarian Constitution and improvements to the cultural institutions and infrastructure of Buenos Aires. Faced with Federalist opposition he resigned in 1827 and spent his life in exile, eventually dying in the Spanish city of Cádiz.

⁸ 'Iturbide's Congress': Agustín de Iturbide (1783–1824), Mexican general and leader of a conservative faction in Mexico's independence movement. On May 18, 1822, Sergeant Pío Marcha declared him emperor, an act that the new Mexican Congress had to ratify, and to which Martí is alluding here. Iturbide's conservative ideology was not in line with the liberal state envisioned by many during the fight for independence, and in March of 1823 he abdicated and was eventually executed.

⁹ 'Zorilla-esque mane...glorious tree': A reference to Spanish Romantic poet José Zorrilla (1817–1893), and the *gilet flamboyant* (red vest) described by Victor Hugo, symbolizing the triumph of Romanticism in France. The glorious tree, according to Cintio Vitier, is the laurel, the tree of artistic fame. History is to be revered, but Martí is calling for a change in aesthetics and ideology.

¹⁰ Benito Juárez (1806–1872): Of Zapotec origin, Juárez served for five terms as constitutional president of Mexico from 1858 until his death. He is a widely revered nineteenth-century liberal political figure.

¹¹ 'Cemí': Martí closes with a particularly Caribbean image, connecting it with the condor, symbolic of the Andean peoples and the South American Continent in general. The cemíes were spirits worshipped by the Taíno peoples, and the term also refers to the (often) tri-cornered clay objects that represented and housed those spirits.

Letters to Chican@s from Oaxaca

J. César Díaz Calderón

Biographical note: J. César Díaz Calderón were born in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1994 as the first child of Francisca Calderón Melo and a late child of Eucario Díaz Reyes. J. have a sister, Karina Alejandra Díaz Calderón. They are working on finishing their first bilingual poetry book. Lately, they go for walks at noon, they sit on a weathered wooden bench three feet from the shore of a lake inhabited by gators, and, staring at life compositions, they spend hours imagining wor(l)ds when just being is enough.

A note on the poems: These poetic epistles emerged from the political and academic puzzling of a type of forgetting and of a recurrent practice in certain communities of Chican@s. I noticed the forgetting of transnational ties that bound diasporas with the territories of their ancestors. Also, I witnessed an increasingly recurrent practice of (mis)uses of decolonial vocabularies, such as ancestry, *barrio*, or *gente*, in art/ivism circles and circuits for their commodity value in neoliberal diversity writing (programs). These poems decry the importance of noticing fetishized contacts between cultures, places, and people.

Oaxaca is not paradise Chicanxs

Oaxaca is not paradise Chicanxs.
You are so self-centered *gabachx*
que crees que te ando viendo.
I don't care about you walking in *el andador turístico*.
Taking my everyday life in.
To get connected to ancestors that are still moving around.
They are still murdered, raped, and stepped over.
Just like the poetry you and I write.

Imagining we could heal wounds
here in my *tierra* over the Hill
with the mushrooms that you can get
three blocks from home in L.A.
Ay Chicanitxs,
I packed those *tlayudas pal Norte*
just two days ago,
you didn't need to come here,
this is not your home.
The *barrio* is earned.
What have you earned?

Take pictures if you want.
They are 20 dollars each.
Take my sex if you want.
It is a magical trip, and it takes two orgasms
to make me forget the loneliness tonight.

Take everything you want Chicanx,
all that is for sale,
before you leave
to continue with your spiritual *camino*,
your *andariegue* soul.
Is it Chiapa de Corzo
or Chichén Itzá?

We are also taking everything we can,
but we can't take the air we breathe
when we don't get the raise
and we get asked to leave.

Don't take what is not for sale.
Parts of us are not for sale.
But you are so self-centered *gabachx*
that you do not notice what we hide.
How we learned to smile without
the laughter of our eyes.
Llévele, llévele güerx,
lléguele, lléguele güerx.

You've been around long Chicanx,
it is time to leave,
or it is time
to learn to see.

Dear Chican@s,

Children of *paisan@s*.
Accented Spanish and *perfecto inglés*.
USA citizens.
Come here to hear the stories of your *abuelitos*
from the clamoring soil of her *chicozapote* tree.

I must weigh my words and resist calling
your parents' sacrifice, betrayal,
and your hardships, privilege.
Not to a nation, *a tu gente*.
But sometimes, children, it gets tough
to eat my words.
Un chile too spicy even for my trained *bocota*.

We were waiting for you
to take your turn holding
in each *hombro*
your share of the cost of your clothes and your Coke.
Of your new iPhone
or your food-stamps.
The goodwill trashes
that runs from your sweat to the blood of our lands.

What are you afraid of?
Becoming us?

We are waiting for you with our stories
hidden behind *tacos de barbacoa* and *chiles en nogada*.
Agua de horchata and *mole*.
Colonial histories.
Imperial rules.
Transnational movements.
And all our love.

Cross to the other side
the colored land.
Blacks, Browns, and Whites.
All hoping to see you soon
with your back
ready to be scarred.

Dust

Andrea Navarro

A brief note about Dust: When you leave your home country, usually, you do not miss the country itself but the sense of belonging that being *from* somewhere grants you. Every immigrant knows intimately this particular yearning — even if you would not necessarily return to your “origin galaxy” you cannot help imagining what things could have been had certain circumstances had just been different. Should we go back to the beginning, before any devastation took place in our home countries? Or do we allow ourselves to think of all the possibilities that the future could bring, like a new country to belong to or even a stable homeland? In this sense, imagining what the future could be is a way of remembering what we once had, and lost.

Dust

If we go back, maybe we can start
 moving forward. But what if
trying to move on
 only led us back
to the beginning?

We move in circles:
 All it takes is one mistake.

Take me to inception —
I am longing for the absolute,
 nostalgic for the future:
glimmers of possibilities
 yet to crystalize.

 There is a void in all of us:
I have tried to fill mine with light,
but humans were created in the quiet chaos
of the night. Made of the dust
of dead stars and ancient planets,
we have traveled so far
 from our origin galaxies:
Through vivid white clouds or
running through deserts
 under the precarious coating
 of the moon’s light.

What if this yearning just means
that we want to go back home?

Tell me, when you look at the night sky,
do you imagine the place where you come from?
 Imagination is remembrance —
When I die, again I will be dust
 I hope to go back home.

Amanecimiento (variaciones)

Guillermo Rebollo Gil

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Guillermo Rebollo Gil (San Juan, 1979) is a poet, sociologist and attorney. He is the author of several poetry, creative non-fiction and scholarly books. His academic work has appeared in *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*, among others. His book-length essay *Writing Puerto Rico: Our Decolonial Moment* (2018), a careful consideration of the potentialities of radical thought and action in contemporary Puerto Rico, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in their New Caribbean Studies Series. In 2020, Ediciones Liliputienses in Spain published a volume of his selected poems entitled *Informe de Logros: Poemas 2000-2019*. He belongs to/with Lucas Imar and Ariadna Michelle. Happily so.

Note on the poem: "Amanecimiento (variaciones)" is a sort of chronicle of my reading of/relationship with John Ashbery's poetry. It looks to engage the poet's whimsy and softness.

Amanecimiento (variaciones)

El libro está sobre la mesa.
La mesa mira hacia el sur.

Sobre la mesa hay, además, un sobre.
Afuera del sobre no hay indicio
de lo que podría haber dentro.

Toda belleza es logia
de posiciones extrañas,
resolana.

Solo podemos imaginar
hundir la mano
en el cabello de otro.

Si me tocara adivinar,
diría que una nube negra.

¿Qué más hay para tolerar allá afuera?

Toda integridad es mucho menos que esto.

*

Sobre el libro un aire dosificado y filoso.
Solo podemos imaginar,
adviento con las manos de otro
trepándome.

Hundimiento, dice
con su boca de pedir ácaros
y aeroplanos, ¿y qué más?
anturios y anterioridades,
¿y qué más?

artificios y antepasados,
¿y qué más? aldabas
y anda-al-diablos,
¿y qué más?

amanecimientos/
más manecillas/
más mis dos piecitos planos.

*

Todo hacia el hombre es menos
que el sur de su belleza.

Aun así, lo podemos hundir.

Alguien se pasea por mi integridad y la juzga.
Toma mi pelo y lo estira,
lo estela,
lo abulta en una nube negra.

Oh calabozo, ¡¿qué hay?!

Según el libro, solo podemos imaginar
lo que otro ya advirtió—
un hilo de baile osificado livianamente,
resoplando.

*

Toda belleza es ocio de oscilaciones,
amanecimiento que se ensancha
sobre el hombre como un antesuspiro.

Me atrevería a treparlo toditito hasta el hundimiento,
pero mejor camino hasta la próxima nube negra.

¡Espera!

Si prometes mirarme desde la mesa, prometo
girar desde el sur hacia ti,
decimismarme.

*

El libro está sobre la mesa.

Sobre la mesa cae, además, un hombre.
No hay indicio de lo podrido que podría
haber dentro,
¿resolana?

Solo podemos prometernos no imaginar
la máquina que hunde las manos
del otro en el sol y lo integra.

Ahora tómame por el pelo,
úntame un antepasado,
calaboceemos.

Toda belleza es algo que se le suma a un suspiro,
como un ácaro o una advertencia.
Si me tocara adivinar,
diría que es el aire.