



AUTHORITARIANISM,  
CULTURAL HISTORY,  
AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE  
IN LATIN AMERICA

Exposing Paraguay

Edited by Federico Pous,  
Alejandro Quin, and Marcelino Viera



# Memory Politics and Transitional Justice

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Federico Pous · Alejandro Quin  
Marcelino Viera  
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Authoritarianism,  
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Latin America

Exposing Paraguay

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“No hablo, no escucho, no veo, no siento,” Osvaldo Salerno, 1994. Body print on paper, 80 x 50 x 5 cm, Collection Felix Toranzos and CAV/Museo del Barro

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## Introduction: Exposing Paraguay

*Federico Pous, Alejandro Quin and Marcelino Viera*

The idea for this book came about after a tragic event in recent Paraguayan politics. On June 15, 2012, eleven peasants and six police officers were murdered in a conflict over land occupation. The Massacre of Curuguaty, as the tragedy would come to be known, set off the expedited trial of then-president Fernando Lugo, whose 2008 electoral triumph had stirred great enthusiasm among the popular sectors. Lugo's breakthrough on the national stage as part of a coalition of leftist political sectors grouped under the *Alianza Patriótica para el Cambio* (Patriotic Alliance for Change, APC) had put an end to over sixty years of the Armed Forces' and Colorado Party's joint hegemony in the country. This coalition paved the way for a potential reconfiguration of Paraguayan politics outside the institutional channels that were consolidated following

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the fall of Alfredo Stroessner's regime in 1989 and throughout the so-called democratic transition. However, one week after the massacre, and in less than forty-eight hours, the National Congress succeeded at impeaching the president and removing him from office based on the charges of "poor performance," incompetence, and negligence in his handling of the chain of events that culminated in the incidents at Curuguaty.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of this "parliamentary coup," the responsibility of governing was entrusted to liberal vice president Federico Franco with whom the traditional elites' historical dominance was reestablished.<sup>2</sup>

The massacre and the immediately ensuing destitution of Lugo not only awakened the specter of military coups that had proliferated throughout Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century, but also marked a rupture with a democratic electoral process that was almost without precedent in recent Paraguayan history. As Milda Rivarola noted, the overthrow of Lugo "shattered the entire social contract entered into by Paraguayan society following the fall of the dictator Stroessner."<sup>3</sup> In addition, and despite the differences in context, this political juncture sanctioned a return to the authoritarianism which historically had left deep scars in the social fabric of the country.

It was this tragic episode and its historical ramifications that we took up in 2013 when we met at the Annual Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in Washington D.C. to reflect upon and investigate the "roots of authoritarianism" in Paraguay. Our purpose was to inquire about the political and cultural stakes in the recent suspension of a democratic horizon in process of consolidation. Some of us who had taken part in this debate decided to prepare and edit a collective volume that would offer participants the opportunity to expand on the thoughts that had begun to emerge in those initial discussions. The project was subsequently enriched thanks to the contributions of other colleagues whose work and interests converged on the cultural history of Paraguay from a variety of perspectives that included sociology, visual culture, gender studies, cultural studies, and political theory. Two considerations clearly guided our approach to this volume. One is that the episode at Curuguaty could not be considered as an isolated incident or as exclusive to the Paraguayan context. The other is that the very political forces condensed around the massacre required us to adopt a broader horizon of critical inquiry capable of accounting for the connections between authoritarianism, cultural history, and political resistance throughout the Paraguayan

national experience. As a result of this trajectory, this book responds to both the necessity of understanding the complexity of these connections and the desire for another Paraguay and another Latin America.

In writing a collective volume on the interactions between culture and politics in Paraguay, one must contemplate from the outset a series of challenges and tensions. Considering that our approach requires reassessing the discourses that have organized the country's cultural history, this collective volume aims to signal a geographic and social space that is often overlooked in Latin American studies. The problem resides in the continued perception of Paraguay as an exception compared to the rest of Latin America: an isolated and forgotten country, cataloged as both empty and absent. As Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson argue in their introduction to the recently published *The Paraguay Reader*, "Paraguay is a country defined not so much by association as by isolation... It is exceptional in the degree to which it has been defined by isolation and difference from its neighbors, from Latin America, and from the wider world."<sup>4</sup> This commonly held perception has been predicated on a set of factors which include the country's landlocked geographical condition; its consolidation as an independent republic within the geopolitical power struggles in the Southern Cone; and even the fact that one of its official languages, Guaraní, is an indigenous language.<sup>5</sup> It would nevertheless be difficult to characterize these factors as having always and in every instance been exclusive to Paraguay. Other Latin American contexts could equally reveal similar examples of geographical reclusion, bilingualism, and historical-political exceptionalism which typically support the notions of national foundation and providentialism. The frequently incurred generalizations so common in the discourses that make up the Paraguayan "archive" have ended up cloaking these features in an aura of "myth," "stereotype," and "cliché" in ways that simplify a highly complex reality.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the title of this volume posits a dual reference which acknowledges Paraguay's cultural and political particularities while also evoking the shared rhythms and resonances that situate them within the broader sphere of Latin America. Our aim in "exposing Paraguay" is, therefore, shot through with the tension that such a phrase captures, framing the volume's analytical conception. On the one hand, it attempts to show or make visible the specificity of a country whose register in Latin American studies and cultural critique (both in Latin America and beyond) has been intermittent at best.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it also points to how this

relative silence is itself a form of representation and a sort of visibility that persistently portrays Paraguay—to recall an expression coined by Luis Alberto Sánchez—under the figure of the *incógnita* (mystery).<sup>8</sup>

Taking this characterization as a starting point, it seems pertinent to interrogate the discursive regimes and the modes of visibility that have relegated Paraguay to a sense of time suspension, woven through (and herein lies the paradox) a constant return to specific events monumentalized by the historiographical record, such as the Jesuit Missions, Rodríguez de Francia's perpetual dictatorship, the War of the Triple Alliance, and Stroessner's dictatorship. These are unavoidable events for any examination of the country's historical-cultural process, and, as the reader will notice, we do not intend to ignore them. Nonetheless, the purpose of the contributions compiled here is to rethink and intervene these historical processes in ways that do not necessarily result in the reproduction of the crystal-clear narrative of national exceptionalism disconnected from broader contexts. The recurrent citation of these episodes typically operates as a gesture of return to origins and of rationalization of historical becoming. Therefore, the essays included in this volume respond to the challenge of integrating these events in broader conceptual matrices concerned with interrupting the hermeneutic privilege that has been bestowed upon them.

On the other hand, the so-called *incógnita* of Paraguay—which in itself denotes a mode of absence—is not solely an external representation as it also alludes to an internal dynamic that has been especially exemplified in the literary field. If, as Horacio Legrás argues, “the historical project of Latin American literature ... entails the symbolic incorporation of people and practices in the margins of society or nation into a sanctioned form of representation,” in Paraguay, the consolidation of such hegemonic extension of the institution of literature has been significantly hampered.<sup>9</sup> Augusto Roa Bastos's periodization is pertinent in this regard, as he considered that the production of Paraguayan narrative only began to organize this “symbolic incorporation,” in the form of a literary corpus, after the Chaco War (1932–1935). Roa Bastos, following Josefina Plá, argues that Paraguayan narrative had emerged as a “literature devoid of a past” in a country dominated by the diglossic condition between Spanish and Guaraní.<sup>10</sup> According to the author, this particular situation is at the root of a kind of “linguistic and cultural schizophrenia” that prevented Paraguayan writers—most of whom were the members of

the high culture ensconced in Asunción—from adequately expressing the Guaraní stratum that laid the basis of the national bilingual experience.<sup>11</sup>

Later on, Roa Bastos would coin the expression “absent literature” to refer to the lack of any “substantial production of novels in Paraguay, despite [the country’s] rich history” and to point to “the absence of a corpus of works qualitatively linked by common denominators.”<sup>12</sup> This expression provoked a polemic with the writer Carlos Villagra Marsal who criticized the term’s relevance and questioned the presumed absence to which it referred.<sup>13</sup> This debate eventually showed the relevance of the conceptualization of an “absent literature,” which came to be viewed as an alternative to the ideas of “literary system” and “transculturation” that Ángel Rama had developed to explain the way in which the “symbolic literary incorporation” of marginal sectors of society had taken place in Latin America. In fact, as Carla Benisz specifies, Roa Bastos “characterizes transculturation ... as a lettered artifice, likening this operation (which Rama characterizes as an alternative to aesthetic dependency on metropolitan centers) to the practices of the lettered city” in which the margins of society (popular and indigenous cultures) are constantly subjected to appropriation, regulation, and resignification.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, Roa Bastos highlights the preeminence of the oral universe of Guaraní above the lettered culture associated with Spanish, while at the same time he asserts the category of “absent literature” by basing it on the novelistic genre, which is the modern lettered form par excellence. Yet, beyond the artificial overcoming of the dichotomy between the oral and the lettered proposed by the concept of transculturation, Roa Bastos’s characterization of an “absent literature” is traversed by a problematic inherent to Latin American cultural critique, which Horacio Legrás has characterized as follows:

[a]ll the essential concepts of Latin American cultural criticism—transculturation (Ortiz, Rama), heterogeneity (Cornejo Polar), hybridity (Canclini), colonial semiosis (Mignolo), third space (Moreiras), tropological mimesis (González Echevarría), auto-ethnography (Pratt)—underline, with different intonations, the fissured self of Latin American culture as its ineluctable condition of possibility.<sup>15</sup>

The essays presented here “expose” this “fissured self” in Paraguay which manifests itself as a trope that inhabits the ambiguity of that absence, rather than as a concept that seeks to identify instances of

transculturation between indigenous and European world visions. From this configuration, it is crucial then to reconsider the image of an isolated, secret, and exceptional country seemingly cut off from the historical forces of Latin American modernity. Such reconsideration and critique would not aim to “fill” this void with the same narratives as those of the neighboring countries, nor to generalize a supposed cultural absence at the heart of Paraguayan narrative. Rather, our goal in this collection of essays is to explore what is at stake in the ambiguous materiality of this “absence,” capable of fostering other ways of looking at Paraguay and, conversely, other projections from within Paraguay.

#### INTERRUPTIONS: *REALIDAD QUE DELIRA*

*Exposing Paraguay* also designates a historical relation to the forms of violence under which collective and individual lives are constantly regulated and administered by way of their exposure to precariousness, insecurity, silencing, and annihilation: lives physically or symbolically exposed to death, caught up in what Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben have called “power of death” or “zones of indistinction” produced by the sovereign exception.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the Paraguayan experience, marked by successive authoritarian and dictatorial governments, civil and international wars, processes of capitalist expansion, and post-dictatorial regimes, constitutes an inflection in the region’s history, whose latest episode would be the Massacre of Curuguaty and the destitution of Lugo. While this decidedly singular inflection manifests itself as a saturation of forces in a specific geographical location, it responds to (and is a consequence of) political, economic, social, and cultural processes that go beyond its own referential field. For this reason, we could state that the alleged Paraguayan exceptionalism is the visible core of a shared regional experience that is distributed among those sites in which the expanding production of vulnerability is condensed and expressed through particular modalities. Therefore, an approach to the Paraguayan case should not aim to subordinate it to the law of absolute equivalences with other contexts in the region. Indeed, peoples and nations are not alike just because they share the same violent processes, but rather because they imprint an idiosyncratic variability on the historical determinations within which they are constituted. They express these determinations in their differences, while these determinations simultaneously express them.

How should we inquire into these contrasts between exceptionality and vulnerability, between the silence of representation and the category of “absent literature,” between the continental articulation and the national specificity that converge and are brought into play in the gesture of “exposing” Paraguay? Our approach to this question necessarily enters into dialogue with the accumulation of images summoned by Roa Bastos in his attempt to capture the devastating scene left after the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870). This war, in which the power of the military alliance between Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay literally ruined the country, marks for Roa Bastos the tragic foundation of historical reality on the shaky ground of debris, traumatic memories, catastrophe, and delirium. In his own words:

Under these conditions, Paraguay was reduced to moral and material ruins. This small nation had nothing left but a “great catastrophe of memories,” at the heart of which was a delirious reality [*una realidad que deliraba*] that thrust enormous bursts [*ráfagas*] of its history at the faces of the survivors—following the description that Spaniard Rafael Barrett made at the start of the century, when he adopted, to use his own expression, the Paraguayan sorrow [*el dolor paraguayo*].<sup>17</sup>

Paraguay was thus founded upon the catastrophic calamity of memories in which the realities that are not truthful, and the delirium that can be real, all shape, contain, and set the limits of national history. This *realidad que deliraba* is not exactly a “delirious reality” in which everything is hallucination, fantasy, exoticism, and irrationality. Rather, it names a reality immersed in a *modus operandi* of history whose very materiality is constituted by a “great catastrophe of memories” that intermittently haunts Paraguayan subjectivities and collective life. This is not a “delirium” that disrupts the “rational development” of the country, but rather one that is inherent to the modern constitution of Paraguay insofar as the catastrophic nature of those memories represents the revival of experienced historical violence. They reappear as a *ráfaga*, that is, a burst of gunfire, a whirling, a blast, in which the war is maintained in perpetual lingering: as if it were still there and had never left the country.

The notion of a *realidad que delira* nevertheless contains the trace that can bring about its potential interruption. As Walter Benjamin suggested in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, “[t]he true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes

up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”<sup>18</sup> For Benjamin, this living image of the past that “throws its light” on the present not only captures the possibility of shattering the “homogeneous concept of historical time as a progression,” but also appears to be capable of opening up thought to its own interruption. As he states: “[t]hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock.”<sup>19</sup> The “bursts of history” that erupt on the surface of Paraguay’s delirious reality can be likened to a “thinking that stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions.” In Paraguay, these tensions correspond to the traumatic return of the past (which crystallizes in the “survivors’ faces”) and are linked to the demand for an interruption that would redeem that past from perpetuating itself so as to generate from there other narrative paths. The historical continuum manifests itself in Paraguay as an extension of the catastrophe which frustrates any possibility of constituting a sense of collective life. Furthermore, the catastrophe that Benjamin singles out as underlying all of “modernity’s progress” presents itself in this case as a catastrophe without progress, inscribed within what Roa Bastos would refer to, following Barrett, as *el dolor paraguayo*. In this sense, the *realidad que delira*, which is the unceasing return of Paraguay’s catastrophic past, echoes Benjamin’s notion of a “thinking in arrest” inasmuch as its own interruption demands other criteria, other languages within which to inaugurate different modes of thinking and action. The dynamic of interruption is immanent in the *realidad que delira*, while it potentially enables a political intervention that aims to dissociate the pain inflicted from the images that the “flashes” of history generate. The task at hand is therefore not the resolution of this tension inherent to the concept itself (in fact, each of the essays included in this volume posits this tension in its own way), but rather to think of the interruption as a displacement or a break, both of which seek to interrogate the mechanisms through which these contradictory figures of exceptionalism, isolation, and absence are woven around and within Paraguay. If the *realidad que delira* undermines any narrative aiming to account for national origins in the context of modern Latin America, *Exposing Paraguay* works both ways: as Paraguayan, it interrupts Latin America; while as an interruption, it dislocates Paraguay itself from its own history.

Hence, our desire to summon a group of scholars to work on the cultural history of Paraguay should nonetheless be situated within the



tensions harbored in the *realidad que delira*, as a condition of possibility for the writing of this book. In *Exposing Paraguay*, we recognize that the “ex” always denotes an inadequacy, an untimeliness that insistently decenters the operation of “posing.” This “ex” is therefore called upon to interrupt the action of “posing,” in such a way that our aim of “exposing Paraguay” amounts to just another position that is necessarily dislocated and untimely. Writing then is recognized here as existing in this condition which speaks to its limits and possibilities. Ultimately, *Exposing Paraguay* is political, not only because it is one more finite and contingent publication which contributes to the divulgation of Paraguayan culture, but also because the untimely distance, which defines the relationship of history with itself, reveals and frames the debates, disputes, and struggles over historical discourses in and about Paraguay.

The book’s first section, “Writing the Limits of Authoritarian Paraguay,” focuses on narratives of war, discourses of historical revisionism, and literary representations of sovereign power, aiming to account for both the deployment and the exhaustion of authoritarian reason in Paraguay. Part One begins with “Disintegrating Bodies: the Undoing of the Discourse of War in Palleja’s *Diario* (1865–66)” by Javier Uriarte (Chap. 2). This chapter broaches the problematic of how the “first modern war in Latin America” was experienced from the position of a constantly shifting “outside” which is, paradoxically, internal to Paraguay. Uriarte focuses on the *Diario de campaña* written by Colonel León de Palleja, who led a battalion of the Uruguayan armed forces during the War of the Triple Alliance. In his text, Palleja’s position is diametrically opposed to the triumphalist nationalism so characteristic of the first accounts of this event. Instead, Palleja narrates the war as a process of dismembering, undoing, and desertion of the Uruguayan troops as they moved toward the Paraguayan territory. In this sense, both movement and immobility contribute to the process of destruction which becomes the military campaign’s ultimate destiny. The analysis of Palleja’s narration allows Uriarte to put forward an analogy between the dismembering of the Uruguayan army and the destruction of Paraguay as a result of the war.

Alejandro Quin’s (Chap. 3) “Poetry and Revisionism: Notes on Authority and Restoration in Postwar Paraguay” explores early twentieth-century revisionist discourses to situate the radical break that poet Hérib Campos Cervera introduced in the Paraguayan cultural field.

Engaging Hannah Arendt's discussion on the concept of authority, Quin examines the writings of Cecilio Báez and Juan O'Leary to interrogate the basis of the formal antagonism between liberal and conservative revisionist traditions. Despite their political differences, both traditions shared similar attitudes regarding the past such as the anxiety provoked by the waning of authority in the modern world and the resort to an ideology of national restoration. Quin argues that, in contrast to the revisionist paradigm, Campos Cervera's poetry inaugurates an opening toward the past that neither claims it as an authority nor predetermines its meaning, but rather confronts poetic language with the aporia of the unwitnessable and an indeterminate memorialization. The next chapter further exposes the limits of authoritarianism in Paraguay. In "Writing the State: The Redistribution of Sovereignty and the Figure of the 'Legislator' in *I the Supreme* by Augusto Roa Bastos," John Kraniauskas (Chap. 4) centers on the political and philosophical dimension of Augusto Roa Bastos's most famous novel. He analyzes the transformation of sovereign power from the moment in which El Supremo, as sovereign, "dictates history" while, at the same time, history "dictates the death of the sovereign." He reads this tension through the lens of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* by focusing on the relationship between the sovereign and the people. In Rousseau's text, this theoretical tension is resolved through the creation of a fictional figure, the Lawgiver. Ultimately, Kraniauskas argues in this chapter that Roa Bastos's novel narrates a redistribution of sovereignty that reflects upon, and suggests, a critique of political representation.

Part Two, "Preaching Popular Art in Paraguay," explores the tensions between the singularity of Paraguay's popular culture and the globalization of Western values. It begins with Ticio Escobar's (Chap. 5) essay "Indigenous Art: The Challenge of the Universal." In this chapter, Escobar addresses the question of popular art in Paraguay by interrogating indigenous artistic practices that have survived and grown under conditions dissimilar to those in which they originated. The author explores the possibilities of conceiving indigenous art as "modern," while also mapping the tensions between popular art and indigenous artistic expressions. Based on this analysis, Escobar claims that modern concepts of culture and art are able to frame a notion of popular indigenous art in the context of a dispute over the aesthetic legitimacy of non-Western artistic systems.

Horacio Legrás's (Chap. 6) "Inheritances of Carlos Colombino. Painting and the Making of a Democratic Paraguay" follows a similar direction in its inquiry about the state of Paraguayan art in a globalized world. In his analysis of Carlos Colombino's oeuvre, Legrás argues that, throughout his artistic journey, it was the gift of freedom that was always at stake: the "hard-fought freedom of any Paraguayan to be an artist as well as the freedom of the artist to be Paraguayan." In this chapter, Legrás re-elaborates the fundamental complexities that sustain art as an operation intervening in the struggle for freedom within contemporary processes of globalization. The following chapter continues to make inroads in the direction outlined by Escobar, as it pursues a historicism affected by the demands and necessities of particular historical moments. Sebastián Díaz-Duhalde's (Chap. 7) "Interrupted Visions of History: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Newspapers and the History of (Popular) Art in Contemporary Paraguay" investigates the historical interstices of nineteenth-century Paraguayan popular culture, by making visible the mechanisms through which mid-twentieth century popular art criticism carves out a discursive site for itself. In doing so, contemporary criticism demands an opacity in which popular art remains open to an uncertain future that nevertheless is susceptible to being captured by the discourse of the nation state.

This section closes with Adriana Johnson and Horacio Legrás's (Chap. 8) interview with recently deceased Paraguayan artist Carlos Colombino, "The Wings of Carlos Colombino: Architect, Artist, Writer." While he was best known for his paintings, Colombino also made inroads in sculpture, architecture, literature, and cultural management. His activities are a testimony to the struggle for democracy in a country in which those who defended these ideals risked being harshly punished. This interview conveys Colombino's multifaceted life, the influential work he carried out in Paraguay, and his creation of cultural institutions, especially the Museo del Barro (The Museum of Mud), a space which harbors a broad variety of modern, indigenous, and popular artistic artifacts. In sum, this chapter offers perspective on Colombino's trajectory, efforts, and political commitment to shaping Paraguay's artistic and intellectual scene.

The volume's Part Three, "Flashes of Memory in Paraguay: The Legacies of Stronism," includes three interventions on the politics of memory that revisit the relationship between Stronism and contemporary democracy in Paraguay. In "Beyond Coercion: Social Legitimation

and Conservative Modernization in the Stroessner Regime (1954–1989),” Lorena Soler (Chap. 9) addresses, from a sociological perspective, the mechanisms of legitimation of Stronism in Paraguay. The author challenges the assumption that the “longest dictatorship” of the twentieth century in South America relied exclusively on the violent repression of popular classes and political sectors of the opposition. Although repression was certainly a fundamental factor, the author argues that Stronism was the result of a complex process of legitimation, which included the use of democratic tools (such as constitutional reforms and popular elections) and support from the lower classes.

From a queer perspective, Eva Romero (Chap. 10) analyzes Stronism’s repression of sexual difference through Renate Costa’s documentary *Cuchillo de Palo* (2010). This film tells the story of the torture and interrogations involved in the “Palmieri Case” and the dictatorship’s list of “known” homosexuals (the so-called list of the 108), pointing directly to the abuses perpetrated by the regime on sexual minorities. In “108/*Cuchillo de palo* (2010): Limits and Political Potentialities of Queer Countermemory,” Romero suggests that, whether most Paraguayan films (like *Hamaca Paraguaya*) are political through allegory, *Cuchillo* is the first one to take on the Stroessner dictatorship in an overt, literal way, by exposing the regime’s persecution of homosexuals and, in the process, shedding light on contemporary homophobia. In keeping with the focus on film analysis, Federico Pous’s (Chap. 11) “De-parting Paraguay. The Interruption of the Aesthetic Gaze in *Siete Cajas* (2012)” examines the film *Siete Cajas* while simultaneously reflecting on the aftermath of the Massacre of Curuguaty. Following Jacques Rancière’s notion of “the partition of the sensible,” the author argues that part of the success of “the most watched film in Paraguayan history” relies upon an “aesthetic gaze” in which Paraguay is portrayed as a broken society whose memory cannot be reconstituted because its parts have been lost or destroyed. This aesthetic gaze that breaks through the scissions of Paraguayan political culture, i.e., the double determination of Guaraní and Spanish, allows Pous to think of the Massacre of Curuguaty as a return of the political violence that undermines recent attempts to build a democratic society in Paraguay.

The final Section, “Tracing *la realidad que delira*,” features three essays that delve into the hidden forces behind the incommensurability of the cultural history of Paraguay. In “Paraguayan Counterlives,” Adriana Johnson (Chap. 12) puts forward a genealogy of

“counterlife”—through a reading of Rafael Barrett’s chronicles, several of Augusto Roa Bastos’s short stories and novels, and Paz Encina’s film *Hamaca Paraguaya*—as a counterstory of Paraguay shaped by repeated disasters from which there is no teleological overcoming. In Johnson’s own words, “[w]hat I am calling the counterlife posed to us under the name Paraguay speaks of a lack of relation, of, more precisely, a lack of relation with futurity, that which remains a disorganized heap rather than an aggregate or assemblage.” In the next chapter, “Paraguayan Realism as Cruelty in Gabriel Casaccia’s *El Guajbú*,” Gabriel Horowitz (Chap. 13) follows a similar line of inquiry by considering resonances between the notion of “*la realidad que delira*” and the vision of a “magical” reality so often applied to Latin America, through an examination of the work of Gabriel Casaccia. Horowitz centers on “cruelty,” which he defines as the incommensurable relationship between the “mythical” and the modern secular history of Paraguay. In Casaccia’s narration, cruelty subverts “a positivist view of history defined as a trajectory of progress and secularization,” and speaks as much to the reality of Paraguay as to Latin American modernity.

The traces of “*la realidad que delira*” lead us to Marcelino Viera’s (Chap. 14) “Rafael Barrett’s Haunted Letter.” In this final chapter, the author proposes that “*la realidad que delira*” not only explains reality and/or fiction (possibly amounting in this way to a “new realism”), but also exceeds the formal parameters of writing on Paraguay so as to enable the potentiality of “encounters” with the reader’s sensibility. Viera posits that writing itself is a “*realidad que delira*” in which Rafael Barrett would present two amalgamated registers: on the one hand, the author affects the reader’s sensibility with a “raw” truth (the catastrophe of war which shoots out its bursts of history), while, on the other hand, Barrett’s style exposes a transcendental creative force emerging from the materiality of language and its surroundings.

In sum, this volume takes on the challenge of conceptually thinking through the place of Paraguayan cultural history within the broader field of Latin American Studies. The essays compiled here focus on dislocating Paraguay or, rather, on outlining the different figures of a country that is decentered from, but also deeply connected to Latin America, despite its perennial lack of synchronicity with it. The gesture of exposing Paraguay allows for a reconsideration of the writing of authoritarianism, the rooting of popular culture, and the returning flashes of memory within a *realidad que delira*.

## NOTES

1. See Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson eds., *The Paraguay Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 452.
2. Lugo came to power in alliance with the Liberal Party. Combined with the APC's inability to secure a majority in Congress for its party, this alliance faced constant obstruction that stalled many of the progressive reforms promised by the government, including the restitution of peasant lands that had been illegally appropriated during the Stroessner dictatorship.
3. According to Rivarola, even if political and institutional deterioration had been underway since the passing of the 1992 Constitution, "the parliamentary coup [shattered] the essential principle of any Republic ... according to which sovereignty resides in the people." Rivarola, "La rescisión del olvido," in Rocco Carbone and Lorena Soler eds., *Franquismo en Paraguay* (Buenos Aires: El octavo loco Ediciones, 2013), 43.
4. Lambert and Nickson, *The Paraguay Reader*, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 1–3.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. A symptom of this may be found in the latest edition of *Modern Latin America*, a textbook frequently assigned in introductory courses on Latin America in North American universities that does not feature a single chapter on Paraguay. See Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James N. Green eds., *Modern Latin America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
8. Quoted in Augusto Roa Bastos, "La narrativa paraguaya en el contexto de la narrativa hispanoamericana actual," in Saúl Sosnowski ed., *Augusto Roa Bastos y la producción cultural americana* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1986), 125.
9. Horacio Legrás, *Literature and Subjection: The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 4.
10. Roa Bastos, "La narrativa paraguaya," 132. Carla Daniela Benisz also argues that "the phenomenon of diglossia segments the spheres of discourse according to a hierarchy and estranges from one another the dimension of fiction (linked to orality and to Guaraní) and the dimension of writing (linked to official culture and to the Spanish language)." See "Transculturación y después. Roa Bastos y su lectura de Ángel Rama," in *Grupo Paraguay* (2014). Accessed on October 31, 2016 at [http://www.grupoparaguay.org/P\\_Benisz\\_2014.pdf](http://www.grupoparaguay.org/P_Benisz_2014.pdf).
11. Roa Bastos, "La narrativa paraguaya," 126.

12. Roa Bastos, "Una cultura oral," in *Antología narrativa y poética. Documentación y estudios* (Barcelona: Suplementos Anthropos, 1991), 100.
13. For a conceptual approach to the polemics between Roa Bastos and Villagra Marsal, see Benisz, "Transculturación."
14. *Ibid.*
15. Legrás, *Literature*, 6.
16. See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
17. Roa Bastos, "La narrativa paraguaya," 127.
18. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.
19. *Ibid.*, 262.

PART I

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Writing the Limits of Authoritarian Paraguay



## Disintegrating Bodies: The Undoing of the Discourse of War in Palleja's *Diario* (1865–66)

*Javier Uriarte*

The War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), also known as The Paraguayan War (and, in Paraguay, as The Great War), is—although generally overlooked outside of Paraguay—one of the central events in the history of nineteenth-century Latin America. In it, the Brazilian Empire joined its forces with Argentina and Uruguay against Paraguay. The outcome was the utter destruction of the latter, while the victors occupied the country and appropriated significant portions of its land.<sup>1</sup> Francisco Doratioto and

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I would like to thank my colleagues Felipe Martínez-Pinzón, Carl Fischer, Laura Torres, and Lena Burgos-Lafuente for having read the first version of this chapter. Their comments were an invaluable help in the process of writing these pages. I also thank Ana Inés Larre Borges and Fernando Degiovanni for inviting me to present earlier versions of this paper at the National Library of Uruguay and the CUNY Graduate Center respectively.

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Luc Capdevila, two historians who have written books on this war in recent years, agree in calling it a “total war.” By this expression, I am referring to a conflict “involving the complete mobilization of a society’s resources to achieve the absolute destruction of an enemy, with all distinction erased between combatants and noncombatants.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the conflict had a profound impact on the modernization efforts of the participating states.<sup>3</sup> The clearest consequence of it was the spectacular militarization of the allied countries in the decades that followed the war.<sup>4</sup> In Paraguay, where this militarization and modernization of the state apparatus had taken place before the war, the consequences were the complete destruction of the country.<sup>5</sup> Given the brutality of the conflict, the extraordinary length of time over which it dragged out, and the devastating consequences wreaked on Paraguay, most of the accounts of the war consist of subjective opinion, pamphlets, or the establishment of unique responsibilities to explain the Paraguayan genocide that resulted from it. Most importantly, this war was a traumatic event that transformed forever the Paraguayan ideas of itself and its neighbors. References to the conflict are omnipresent in all narratives of the country’s history, and the event strongly influences—still today—the ways in which culture, politics, the economy, and virtually every aspect of the country are commented and discussed.<sup>6</sup> Still today, when we have just commemorated the 150th anniversary of the beginning of this other “Great War,” a modern and supposedly modernizing event that transformed Paraguay into a pre-modern country, it remains urgent to remember and rethink this conflict.

In this chapter, I will read the ways in which León de Palleja’s (1817–1866) *Diario de la campaña de las fuerzas aliadas contra el Paraguay* [*Diary of the Allied Forces’ Campaign against Paraguay*] (1865–66), written by a colonel of the Uruguayan army sent to the battlefield of the war, performs a critique of the state apparatus and of its logic of war. The contradictory and profoundly original element of this critique is that it is made from a soldier’s perspective. Focusing on the complexities that constitute Palleja’s writing, as well as on the representations of spaces and of the troop’s movement toward the battlefield, I suggest that both movement and immobility contribute to the destruction of the Uruguayan army. Specifically, through the frequent references to desertion and diseases, I show how the image of the army that this narrative draws is one of disintegration, decomposition, and loneliness. The army, as it approaches the Paraguayan territory, is represented as an

increasingly dismembered and weak body. Thus, the article suggests a connection between the narrative of the Uruguayan forces and the traumatic sufferings of the Paraguayan population. In fact, Palleja's description of the enemy changes as the destruction of his own army becomes increasingly evident, and the reader perceives a better understanding of the Paraguayan sufferings toward the end of this book.<sup>7</sup>

León de Palleja, born in Spain as José de Pons y Ojeda, was a close ally and friend of the Uruguayan president Venancio Flores, who signed the Treatise of the Triple Alliance with Argentina and Brazil in 1865.<sup>8</sup> Palleja was then sent to the Paraguayan front in command of the "Florida" battalion. He died in Paraguay, at the Battle of Boquerón, on July 18, 1866, when the war was not even close to an end. The participation of Uruguay in the war was widely viewed within the country as a favor that Flores had to pay back to the Brazilian Empire for having helped it topple the Blanco government.<sup>9</sup> It was largely considered an issue involving the governing Colorado Party, not a national cause.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the small size of the Uruguayan army sent to the front, this was the group that, within the Allied forces, most suffered the war. In fact, it was almost annihilated. Only about ten percent of the Uruguayan soldiers, at the most, survived.<sup>11</sup> This point will be central in my reading of Palleja's text, and it is an element of this war that speaks to both the Uruguayan and the Paraguayan experiences. Palleja's voice, in its desperation and anguished cries for help, in its lack of understanding of the surrounding war, in the slow but certain awareness of its own inevitable destruction, of the extermination of its own forces, is closer to the Paraguayan experience than to that of a glorious victor.

Throughout the article, I will refer to some Paraguayan accounts of the war that strike similar tones to that of the diary I study. Thus, I intend to bring closer the experiences of suffering pervasive in both armies. In a way, it is perhaps the Uruguayan perspective the one that—among the allied nations—could better identify itself with the Paraguayan suffering. Both countries were very close to each other before the conflict erupted, and, since then, they have always maintained a marginal role in the political dynamics of the Southern Cone region, being largely ignored and dismissed by the South American powers. Their independence was threatened by Brazil for most of the nineteenth century, and their continued existence has been attributed partly to the maintenance of the political equilibrium in the region. In many ways, both Uruguay and Paraguay were—and still are—*islands*.

Palleja's *Diary* was published in two volumes (the first in 1865, and the second one posthumously in 1866), and it is composed by the chronicles that Palleja would publish in the Uruguayan newspaper *El pueblo* while he was traveling to the front and, afterward, already in Paraguay. The first volume of the *Diary* narrates the Uruguayan forces' trip to the front of war, while the second one is mostly focused on the events that occurred after the troops entered the Paraguayan territory. The last day to be narrated is July 17, 1866. The author would die in combat one day later, leaving his work unfinished.

### PROBLEMATIZING REPRESENTATION: DIARY, WITNESSING, AND DEATH

Palleja's *Diario* is particularly interesting because it constitutes one of the very few accounts of the war in which the narrator adopts a remarkable independence of mind while analyzing the conflict. If, as mentioned above, most narratives of this war—up to the present day—have tended to be clearly one-sided and simplistic, Palleja's writing constitutes an important exception. This article suggests that his *Diario* performs a profound critique of the nationalistic and fanatic discourse of war. His account is devoid of all certainty about the purpose, the logistics, and the strategy of the conflict. He vehemently denounces the abandonment to which the Uruguayan state condemned its own military forces and, more generally, the contradictions of the official discourse of war. His desperate text dramatically expresses the complete futility of war, of which Palleja himself was a victim. Alai Garcia-Diniz affirms: "In the *Diary* of Palleja the routine of war eliminates all "patriotic" clichés and problematizes the subject of the narration in the midst of the conflict's nonsense."<sup>12</sup> It is a discourse of senseless pain and suffering, devoid of all celebration of nationalistic pride. The abrupt silence that interrupts the flow of the narrator's voice at the end of the book constitutes the most eloquent—visual, typographic, sonorous—form of critique of the conflict.

The *Diario*, while considered a valuable and rich historical document, has rarely been approached as literature. One important exception is Sebastián Díaz-Duhalde's recent book, in which he examines the visual elements present in these writings, focusing specifically on the dialogues between literature and photography.<sup>13</sup> Díaz-Duhalde discusses how the photographic perspective present in the chronicles of Palleja—although no

photographs were included in the *Diario*—would work as an instrument to approach the conflict, which eludes representation.<sup>14</sup> This is connected to Fredric Jameson’s idea that war in itself constitutes an event that resists representation.<sup>15</sup> I argue that war—understood as concrete clashes, as the first-hand narration of battles—is not part of Palleja’s *Diario*. Palleja’s is a noneventful war. Sun Tzu, in his well-known book *The Art of War*, states: “be swift as the thunder that peals before you have a chance to cover your ears, fast as the lightning that flashes before you can blink your eyes.”<sup>16</sup> War understood as movement, as action or velocity, is nowhere to be found in Palleja’s text. In fact, war becomes its exact opposites: loneliness, immobility, desertion, void, loss, and waste. And, at the end, silence, a deadly silence. The entire 380-page first volume does not narrate *any* concrete clash; on the contrary, it is the narration of a destructive immobility that suggests war as a goal that is never reached.

War represents an impossible narrative frontier also because, when it finally comes and involves the traveler, it means the end of narration. In a way, the silence that closes these chronicles is arguably the most powerful presence of the war. War is most effectively represented as *silence*. The abrupt interruption of the narrator’s voice toward the end of the text implies a contradictory operation by which the witness is finally able to *say* through silence. This impossibility to bear witness to traumatic events is addressed by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. This author affirms that what the testimony communicates, what is left of the act of suffering, cannot be a word: “language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness.”<sup>17</sup> Agamben explains how, in some experiences of extreme suffering, what remains is “an inarticulate babble or the gasps of a dying man.”<sup>18</sup> I suggest that the silence that closes this *Diario* can be read as having the same role as these inarticulate sounds. Agamben concludes that the *superstite*, the witness who underwent an event up to its end and can give testimony of it, speaks on behalf of the true witness, the one who can no longer tell his/her story. I would like to read the final silence of Palleja’s text as a form of this impossibility of bearing witness, as that which speaks for the dead author, as a contradictory form by which his voice prolongs itself. In this sense, silence is a trace of language.

This silence can also be considered from the perspective of the diary as a literary form. The abrupt interruption of the narrative voice could in fact be understood as a characteristic of all personal diaries.<sup>19</sup> Palleja’s text presents nonetheless some fascinating particularities. Diaries of war,

by definition, do not narrate a life, but a particular circumstance witnessed by an “I” who is immersed in a collective mission and whose personal life is severely limited due to the scarce private spaces and times available at the front, the prohibition of taking personal decisions, the group mentality, the necessary obedience to superior orders, the absence of individual activities, and practically all elements of a soldier’s life. The private and the public are inextricable parts of this genre. In a way, the expression “diary of war” constitutes an oxymoron. It can be said that the more personal a diary of war is, the more it undermines the essence of war and the more it undoes itself. Moreover, this text is being written for immediate publication in a newspaper, an element that further complicates the consideration of the purpose of the writing in this case. For whom, and for what reason, is Palleja writing? Who is the intended reader of this text? Ricardo Piglia has affirmed that “in the origin of a diary there is always a loss, something that the text tries to understand or restore.”<sup>20</sup> As I will argue here, loss (more specifically, the Spanish word *pérdida*, which can mean “loss” but also “waste” in English) is actually Palleja’s central obsession. His diary is about the many forms of loss that become more and more painful throughout this narration. The quintessential relation of the diary with death that has been pointed out by critics is present in Palleja’s account with unusual relevance.<sup>21</sup> It can be said that the imminence of death constitutes this writing’s origin or condition of possibility. If many diaries are written as a form of giving density to time and to life, in this case, the diary is a strategy of survival, a way of clinging oneself urgently—desperately—to life. I will further discuss these different aspects of Palleja’s writing throughout the chapter.

I propose to read these chronicles as travel writing. By adopting this perspective, I intend to focus my analysis on the ways in which space and movement are represented, and on the specific articulations that spatial elements adopt in times of war. As happens in the case of the diary form, the particular voyage represented here problematizes the very notion of travel. To travel toward war implies a different understanding of movement, of the notions of departure, return, home, and destination. In a word, here I will study a rather original conception of travel—and of traveler—different from the most common ways of writing about voyages in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In Palleja’s chronicles, specifically, the gradual destruction of the traveler (i.e., the Uruguayan forces), turns the experience of movement into a narrative of suffering. While the “Florida” battalion traverses different regions advancing toward the battlefields of

Paraguay, it begins to falter, to debilitate, and to decompose. The idea of disintegration becomes thus central for understanding Palleja's travelogue, in two complementary ways: on the one hand, he repeatedly mentions desertion as a growing threat to the corps; on the other hand, Palleja narrates how the weather and different diseases have a destructive effect on the body of the soldier, which becomes rotten, dismembered, and useless. The frequent use of the Spanish word *cuervo*, meaning in English both "corps" and "body," is eloquent here. The *Diario* narrates thus the simultaneous and complementary disintegration of the corps and the body. The decomposition that Palleja is witnessing is of course not just the one affecting the Uruguayan army, but, as I said before, he talks frequently of a "war of extermination" throughout his narrative. In a way, he is aware of the utter decimation of the Paraguayan national body that is taking place while he writes. This is important because the apocalyptic tone of his text, its numerous images of rotten and decomposing bodies, the atmosphere of death and abandonment suggested, acquire universal dimensions that affect the territory, as well as the different armies and nations involved. In this narrative of contagion, everything seems to be irremediably vanishing.

Since I am studying here the ways in which travel and movement operate in the context of war, I will focus my study on the first volume of Palleja's *Diario*, which narrates the events of the year 1865, centered on the trip to the battlefield, although at times I will mention elements of the author's last letters (included in the *Diario's* second volume) that are pertinent to my analysis.

## DETOURS, OBSTACLES, ABSENCES: THE WAR BEFORE THE WAR

If—as argued above—war conceived as clashes and as velocity is absent from this narration, it is nonetheless fascinating to study the ways in which the texts tries to approach the conflict without fully representing it. The war will be present as silence, immobility, and as natural obstacles. In Palleja's view, the war begins as soon as the army leaves Montevideo. Already in the very first letters, it is clear that the narrator describes a war against the space, which is the first—and terrible—enemy. Before the Paraguayan army even appears in the horizon, the Uruguayans find a formidable ally of the enemy in the soil they traverse (not even Paraguayan territory in the first volume). This unexpected enemy is what causes prolonged stops and waits that will begin

to destroy the soldiers' bodies and minds. Each letter enumerates a series of obstacles that complicate movement. The unknown space imposes its own rhythm to the travelers. For the invading army, it is not possible to control the speed or the direction of movement: "We began to walk through long swamps and brooks, some of them very deep, which had been made difficult to traverse by the strong rainfall of the previous night and day." Among many quotes similar to the following, we find references to various traps that nature hides:

One can avoid the ant's nests by walking in zigzag; but old ant's nests form a well or a drain which is not visible because it is covered by water; these wells are called *cangrejales*. Sometimes the walking infantryman or cavalryman disappears one or two meters underground and usually needs the help of the next man to escape from the predicament. We already knew the reputation of this *new plague* that comes to afflict us. [emphasis added]

The ant's nests prevent the army from moving in a straight direction, forcing it to move in zigzags. However, other obstacles remain hidden by water and catch the travelers by surprise. The image of the soldier suddenly disappearing into the soil, as if he were being trapped or even eaten by it, represents the difficulties for advancing at the expected speed and prefigures the increasing sufferings that will be narrated in the following letters. There is even a reference to these natural obstacles as a "plague," which also anticipates the many diseases—and the desertion—that will contribute to the battalion's gradual dismemberment. The text is also explicit regarding the ways in which nature slows down the troops' movement: on the same page, the narrator tells us that on that day the group could only make "five *mortal* leagues" when it should have traveled twice that distance if the field had been good (emphasis added). Movement is already synonym with death and suffering: "each day is a real *via crucis*."<sup>23</sup> The notion of feeling pain while moving—of obvious Christian resonances—is also pervasive in some Paraguayan accounts of the war, such as the one by Gaspar Centurión, where we read "I calculated the length of this *via crucis* to be about two leagues."<sup>24</sup>

Not just the typical elements of the soil—swamps and brooks—represent a problem, but also the weather: the constant rain, extreme heat or unusual cold are impossible to foresee, and the soldiers do not have any protection against them. Weather and space affect movement in manifold ways, and this increasingly takes a toll on the morals and the speed



of the troops. There are references to “a cold water that seemed a hail and snow drizzle,” to the wind that “cuts our faces,” the “excessive cold,” “a great gale which has remained all day,” an exceptionally terrible tempest, rivers that, due to excessive rain, get out of their course and kill twenty-eight men, men who die at night as a consequence of the extreme cold, poor and deserted soil where there is no food or natural resources. The descriptions of this extremely hostile nature remind the reader of apocalyptic scenes: “the most insignificant brook has become a torrent, the most modest streams have become rivers.”<sup>25</sup> There is no order or measure in this alien nature; everything is hyperbolic, extreme, and deadly.

One of the main consequences of this permanent struggle with space is immobility: “Another wasted day due to this damned weather that has been chasing us for two months.”<sup>26</sup> Strictly speaking, this is not a narration of war, but of paralysis: “everything has remained paralyzed,” “unexpected paralysis.”<sup>27</sup> If war is movement, then it is absent from these pages. The Uruguayan army cannot move, and thus the actual clash with the Paraguayan troops is incessantly deferred, the enemy remains impossible to reach.<sup>28</sup> Travel and movement disappear, and each announcement of an imminent combat comes to nothing, thus betraying the expectations of both the reader and the narrator. It could be said that Palleja’s *Diario* is an uneventful narration, since we read about a war that does not happen. In fact, *nothing* happens. There are innumerable references to immobility, silence, and the absence of any change in the situation: “the night ended without change,” “nothing of note happens,” “nothing of note happened. The area is still silent. Not a single shot is fired,” “not a single change occurred,” “no changes during the night.”<sup>29</sup> These sentences, incessantly repeated with identical structure throughout the two volumes of this account, acquire an almost anaphoric power. They show one of the forms in which this battalion is surrounded by a growing void: the void of action, which is another form of destruction, since the presence of the army in those unknown lands becomes purposeless. This “state of inaction”<sup>30</sup> to which the soldiers are condemned by the space (and the state) makes that same space increasingly visible, bringing it to the foreground. When there is no movement, there is only space. At the same time, this very inaction causes hunger, death, and uneasiness.<sup>31</sup> Immobility constitutes the narrator’s main cause of anxiety: “Our inaction does not have an explanation; nobody understands this mystery that presides over our war operations.”<sup>32</sup> This lack of understanding constitutes an eloquent way of expressing the

narrator's powerlessness to decide operations, movements, and strategies. In *Palleja*, war is essentially a discourse of passivity, of a body that does not control its movement, that does not possess itself, and that has no agency. This is a traveler that has no control whatsoever of the rhythm or exact purpose of his trajectory, or about the itinerary of his voyage. This desperate urgency for action proves sadly ironic in the end, since when action finally comes it will bring the narrator's disappearance.

### FORMS OF NO RETURN

These first letters are in reality the narration of successive failures and frustrations, because, as we have seen, the destination of the voyage (i.e., the enemy, the concrete battle) cannot be reached. The fact that the destination of a voyage of this kind is not actually a place but an event (which, in this case, can be elusive, invisible, deferred) makes it of course very special. Thus, the destination is conceived in terms of action and time. We travel to *do* something, to take part in some event. However, both time and action are a problem in this narration. Reaching the destination implies, furthermore, the possibility of the traveler's destruction. To travel to war means that the return might not be possible, and this is precisely what happens in the case of *Palleja*. Already in the first pages, there is uncertainty about the narrator's future when he describes the first death in his troops: "one that will not see Montevideo again, which he left only three days ago full of hope... but at least his bones rest in Uruguayan land. Friendly hands dig the grave that holds his remains... who knows where ours will rest?" When the battalion finally leaves Uruguay, *Palleja* shows his awareness of the possibility of not coming back: "we said goodbye from the bottom of our hearts to our beloved Banda Oriental..., happy those who can see it again." The uncertainty with respect to the return to one's own land implies an entirely different conceptualization of the experience of travel. According to Georges Van Den Abbeele, the *oikos*, or home—that point from which one departs and to which one returns—can become unrecognizable, thus making the return impossible: "the home that one leaves is not the same as that to which one returns. The very condition of orientation, the *oikos*, is paradoxically able to provoke the greatest disorientation."<sup>33</sup> The disappearance of the point of return deeply changes the entire experience of travel. There is an additional complication in the case of the travelogue we study here, since it is being narrated from the perspective of one's

own imminent death, from a liminal and radically exceptional circumstance.

These circumstances are of key importance for allowing Palleja to see beyond the limited and simplistic perspective of state-sponsored military violence. This is, undoubtedly, a voyage of no return, but not simply because of the Colonel's death in the battlefields of Paraguay. Most importantly, it is not possible to come back from war because the traveler ceases to identify himself with his *oikos*. By questioning the decisions of his superiors and revealing the absence of the state, as well as the abandonment to which it has condemned its own forces, Palleja is actually undermining the ideological point of departure of his voyage. As the situation becomes critical, the narrator's tone becomes desperate, and writing becomes an imploration for help: "We would much desire that our voice were heard by the Minister of War."<sup>34</sup> The *oikos* is no longer a valid reference for the soldier-traveler. It has gone out of sight. The war, from the perspective of Palleja, is an atypical one, a stateless war.<sup>35</sup>

There is an interesting ambiguity here, because the narrator is explicit in his loyalty to the government (particularly to President Flores) and to his mission, while at the same time he constantly denounces the state's lack of resources, organization, and interest in the war. The clear will to show respect and obedience is implicitly undermined by the detailed description of the critical situation of the army. The narrator struggles to navigate between the military codes of honor, respect, and obedience on the one hand, and the exposure of the premodernity of the Uruguayan army and state, which contradicts the official war-mongering discourse on the other. The narrator seeks to build a personal and critical voice that expresses the "truth" about war. Although he expresses his unwillingness to being involved in long debates, the accusations against his views that appear in the Uruguayan press force him to reflect on his task and the purpose of his writings. Thus, the *Diario* is not just the account of a voyage to war, but also of the construction of an independent voice that escapes the simplifying and fanatic discourse of the military and becomes that of a public intellectual:

*We do not write correspondences, what I write is my personal Diary ... I narrate the plain truth as Colonel Palleja always knows how to say it; otherwise it would be a farce. If my Diary must not be read, let them not publish it; but do not censor it; this is the Liberation army, and not one of despots. As long as the Commander in Chief does not bar me from doing it, I will always narrate the truth that my eyes witness.*<sup>36</sup>

Here, Palleja makes the private diary become public. The importance of the individual is also highlighted by the grammar of the first sentence: The reference to the war correspondent is in the plural, while the one who writes the personal diary is the “I.” While Palleja condemns the critical views of his account as forms of censorship, he implies that he only writes his opinions and experiences, and that they should not be read as official dispatches. However, by reclaiming his right to disagree and to make critical, unwanted, or unwelcomed remarks, he is undoing the very logic he represents. Thus Palleja, by openly showing reservations about his mission and, above all, exposing his own fragility (and that of the entire battalion), subverts the military discourse that constitutes his education: “How sad is to be a soldier!”

In many occasions, we read about the scenes of writing: they always include obstacles, hardships, suffering, and loneliness. These descriptions are central in the construction of the traveler-writer-intellectual: “this clumsily-written diary, sometimes written when I was sunk in mud, while the wind and the rain were taking the paper away, and even if I pay attention it is stained with mud.”<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, the writing is made possible by the forces’ state of immobility. It is particularly interesting to note that, according to Palleja, certain traces of his fight against the space are inserted in the materiality of the writing. The sheet of paper preserves signs of the muddy scene of writing. The space marks the paper, *writes on it*.

Both the narrator’s auto-construction as a writer and intellectual, and the portrayal of his writing as personal and not official, are part of a subtle rhetoric of disobedience that traverses the text and which is evident when the narrator portrays himself as an example of obedience: “The duty of a soldier imposes silence on me; thus I will simply narrate without adding commentaries.”<sup>38</sup> Palleja is a master of the art of saying without saying. The supposed clear-cut distinction between narration (understood as an objective account of events) and commentary (understood as subjective opinion) implied in this quotation is completely absent from his writing, of course. The text is, in fact, a succession of critical statements about the deficient preparation and strategy of the Uruguayan government and army. At the same time, paradoxically, the absence of the state might be the condition of possibility of this writing: he can write *because* there is no state and no displacement. If to be a soldier is to be silent, as Palleja states, then the mere act of writing is already a form of disobedience. And, in its turn, to disobey constitutes, figuratively speaking, another form of no return; the *oikos* ceases to be the voyager’s point of reference.

“DISOLUCIÓN CONTINUA DE LOS CUERPOS:” WAR  
AS DISINTEGRATION

Oscar Centurión, a Paraguayan soldier who was part of his country's medical corps, described the decimation of his troops as a form of disintegration: “After passing through Tacuatí, toward Lima-Tuyá, our division began to disintegrate due to the lack of orders and food. We did not know where to go or even which direction to take; the enemy was blocking all the roads and the stragglers that joined us all brought conflicting reports, which sowed panic among our already decimated forces.”<sup>39</sup> While the Paraguayan army never loses its pride and always knows the reasons for fighting, this voice is clearly aware of the complete annihilation that the war is bringing upon the soldiers. The mention of the “lack of orders” indicates that, as happens with Palleja, there is a strong uncertainty about how to proceed, where to go, and how to recover from the numerous lost battles.

Palleja adds one important element to this: a significant part of the hardships narrated in his war travelogue deals with the body and its sufferings. The narrator highlights the connections between travel, war, and the body. War brings the body to the foreground. The body can be understood here in two different—though complementary—ways. On the one hand, there is the body of the soldier (of the narrator and the other men who are part of the “Florida” battalion). These bodies are usually the victims of the harsh weather, as we have seen, but also—and as a consequence—of many diseases, such as dysentery, smallpox, measles, and typhus. This is another element that contributes to the Uruguayan forces becoming a void, a desert. The narrator enumerates the different diseases as he painstakingly keeps track, day by day, of the number of dead soldiers caused by them. Palleja narrates death before the actual battle is reached. He even equates diseases to desertion, because some soldiers pretend they are sick in order to avoid exercise and the tiredness it provokes. Needless to say, this contributes to the battalion's scarce mobility.

On the other hand, the entire Florida battalion can be considered as a body (the Spanish military word for a group of soldiers is *cuervo*, and Palleja uses this word—not accidentally, I believe—continuously, as can be seen in the quote that gives a title to this section). Not just the diseases imply death and destruction, but desertion represents the gradual dismemberment of the military body. A deserter is someone

who transforms his own army into a void; someone who abandons the battlefield, who flees the glorious narration of the victor. He seeks to escape the logic of war and its consequences. The *Diario* is a narration of abandonment, and desertion represents its most pungent form: “we continue to have desertions in our corps. On the 11th we had four, and last night another four; men from Corrientes, Entre Ríos and some Uruguayans among them.”<sup>40</sup> This problem is a constant source of alarm for Palleja, and it becomes much more serious than the many diseases. It is, in fact, another form of no return. Even if desertion is a destructive force for Palleja and his battalion, I argue that, through the different operations I have outlined in these pages, Palleja himself is undoing the discourse of war. He is using a logic that does not differ in reality from that of those who flee the army. The narrator, in a lucid comparison, calls desertion “the worm that gnaws our body.” The image constitutes a powerful anticipation of death, but it also makes clear the equivalence between the body of the soldier and the battalion considered as a unity. The unstoppable desertion imposes a slow, but inevitable and complete, disintegration to a body that is already dead and, thus, cannot defend itself against destruction. It is interesting that the image of the premature death of a traveling body that was unified at the moment of departure does not imply the absence of suffering and torture. To move forward means debilitation. The army is a zombie-like suffering dead body.

Before the battalion becomes a void in itself, the narrator describes the space as a desert. As discussed above, the space is treacherous, menacing, and it hides traps and obstacles that modify the ways in which the advancing army moves. In addition, however, it is also a void, a ruinous and already destroyed space. Palleja narrates a trip through the desert: “are we really in a desert?” As they move forward, the Uruguayan soldiers find nothing. This isolation, again, implies the absence of food and of any kind of support: “we find the fields more and more destroyed and, thus, our horses are each day weaker.”<sup>41</sup> The battalion becomes a deserted entity in the midst of a desert.<sup>42</sup> These “deserts” where the army stops are ruinous spaces, where devastation has already happened. It is as if the war had already visited these places. Palleja finds only wastelands where there is nothing but traces of destruction. For example, the Uruguayan forces have to clean the field, “which, due to the *wastes of meat and bones* from the slaughtering of animals, is full of *decomposing* matter which contaminates the air. We have only burned what we

could, and if we stay longer in this *state of inaction* it will be necessary to change fields.”<sup>43</sup> This atmosphere of death surrounds the uneasy battalion. It seems that they encounter battlefields, residues of a war, before the war even begins: “Also the entire field’s surface, in a two-league radius, is covered with horses and some oxen that have died of starvation and lack of food. The field is awful and day by day appears more destroyed.”<sup>44</sup> This description of the space is strongly anticipatory, but at the same time it is a metaphor of the conditions of the Uruguayan soldiers. The description of animals that died of hunger and of the soil that is gradually being destroyed and becomes unproductive is also a reference to the circumstances that the witnesses of that desolation are experiencing. The space contaminates the army, which becomes more and more “swamp-like” and “desert-like,” that is to say, stagnant, foul. The armed body is now an alien to itself, uncanny. Toward the end of the second volume, the battlefield is described as a cemetery, and everything is rotten and corrupted:

The Paso de la Patria is contaminated, only old corrupted air can be breathed there. What can we say about the vast cemetery where we are camping? Here death comes at all times; it is thought of, because tents are mixed with the graves of dead people. If one goes outside, we see the large graves and the still unburied Paraguayan corpses. One could say that this is a mansion where only death can be breathed, the cold, stoic death of martyrdom and resignation.<sup>45</sup>

This is a book that simultaneously tells a story of loss of men and of waste of time (as suggested above, *perder* is an adequate Spanish verb to express both disappearances). Time is continuously wasted because the weather (also expressed with the word *tiempo* in Spanish) is another enemy. We have seen that time is one of the main elements in Palleja’s narration: time related to space, to movement (or lack thereof), to speed, to paralysis, and to expectations and frustrated encounters. Time is a source of desperation and despair for the narrator and his men. It is through time that we see the gradual fall into pieces of the entire battalion.

Time and space are central in the struggle for representation and for bearing witness that Palleja’s text constitutes; I have argued that this is in many ways a narrative of no return; but it also, and above all, narrates an impossible arrival. The arrival narrated is an impossibility, as argued

above, because it means death, silence, and the absence of language. But Palleja is traveling not just toward the growing void of his own army, his own voice, and his own *cuervo*, but he gradually discovers that he travels toward the desert into which Paraguay is being transformed by the war. This book thus narrates the unspeakable suffering that shapes these newly created deserts, these two simultaneous products of war.

## NOTES

1. Luc Capdevila claims that “Brazilian troops occupied Asunción until 1876, and Argentine troops waited till 1878 to evacuate the Villa-Hayes region in the Chaco. The country was in shambles. It had lost 40% of its original territory and 60% of its inhabitants. Its adult male population had been decimated, and its economy devastated.” Luc Capdevila, *Une guerre totale. Paraguay 1864–1870* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), 34–35. Unless otherwise stated, throughout this chapter all translations are my own.
2. David A Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 7. Capdevila uses this expression in the very title of his book, and affirms that the Paraguayan War was “one of the first modern total wars.” Capdevila, *Guerre totale*, 11. And he adds: “here, the focus is put in the dynamics of the clashes, as well as on the mechanisms of mobilization of the entire society which resulted in the disappearance of more than half of the inhabitants of Paraguay, and more than 80% of the masculine population in arms” (11). Doratioto refers to the Paraguayan War as the “second total war,” immediately following the American Civil War (1860–1865). Francisco Doratioto, *Maldita guerra: nova história da Guerra do Paraguai* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002), 477. For Capdevila, “total war” largely means war of extermination. Also Palleja, the author I study in these pages, referred repeatedly to this war as one of extermination. León de Palleja, *Diario de la campaña de las fuerzas aliadas contra el Paraguay* (Montevideo: Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Previsión Social, 1960), volume II, 267, 280, 290, 325. When I quote from Palleja several times in the same line or in consecutive lines, I have opted, for the sake of readability, to mention all the pages when the last quotation appears.
3. Doratioto, *Maldita guerra*, 23. See also Thomas Whigham, *The Paraguayan War. Volume I. Causes and Early Conduct* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 48–73; and Milda Rivarola, “La Guerra Grande y los Estados-nacionales del Plata,” in *Más*



- allá de la guerra. Aportes para el debate contemporáneo.* Herib Caballero et al. (Asunción: Secretaría Nacional de Cultura, 2016), 21–26.
4. With respect to the consequences of the war in Brazil, see, among many possible sources, Doratioto, *Maldita guerra*, 472–485. For Argentina, see Oscar Oszlak, *La formación del Estado argentino: orden, progreso y organización nacional* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1997), 177. However, the involvement of Uruguay—by far the smallest country among the allies—was much more limited. See Juan Manuel Casal, “Uruguay and the Paraguayan War. The Military Dimension,” in *I Die with My Country. Perspectives on the Paraguayan War, 1864–1870*, ed. Hendrik Kraay et al. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 138.
  5. Whigham, *Paraguayan War*, 68–72.
  6. “The echo of the War has transcended generations to today, and has reunited the inhabitants of the Republic in a community of meaning. The War would have founded the new Paraguay, that which its inhabitants are.” Capdevila, *Guerre totale*, 10.
  7. In the first pages Palleja calls the Paraguayan army “stupid and animal,” and, while racializing them by dismissively identifying them with the Pampas Indians, states that “indolence and stupidity” are the main characteristics of Paraguayans. León de Palleja, *Diario de la campaña de las fuerzas aliadas contra el Paraguay* (Montevideo: Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Previsión Social, 1960), volume I, 85. However, he will later add, admiringly, that Paraguayans are the “most frugal and suffering [people] in the world” (152), and that Paraguayans had been “in the past, enemies, today, brothers. Besides, I confess, I have sympathy for Paraguay” (186).
  8. The biographical information about Palleja comes from the second edition (1960) of the book (a volume of the “Colección de Clásicos Uruguayos”—“Collection of Uruguayan Classics,” seemingly an interesting—and clearly unsuccessful—operation of canonization). The *Diario* was published for the third time in 1984, the last year of the military dictatorship, by the Military Circle of Uruguay. This publication constitutes an interesting operation of appropriation of Palleja. The inclusion of this author within a possible group of glorious military writers celebrated by the dictators implies the erasure of Palleja’s critical opinions directed at the state and the military. My argument in these pages goes precisely against these kind of implicit misreadings of Palleja.
  9. On the events in Uruguay that triggered the war, see Casal, “Uruguay and the Paraguayan War.”
  10. Casal, “Uruguay and the Paraguayan War,” 119.
  11. The difference among the figures given by historians is striking. For example, Juan Manuel Casal says that the army was composed by

- “1500 soldiers, of whom only 150 survived.” Casal, “Uruguay and the Paraguayan War,” 119. But Doratioto affirms that Uruguay sent 5500 soldiers, of whom 500 survived. Doratioto, *Maldita guerra*, 483. One of the most lucid witnesses of the war, Richard Burton, wrote in 1870: “As for the «Oriental» army, I failed to find it. The force commenced under General Flores with 5600 men, and he handled it so recklessly that 600 were sent home, and 4600 were killed or became unfit to serve. The remnant of 300–400 is further reduced by some authorities to forty or fifty.” Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Letters from the Battle Fields of Paraguay* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1870), 326. There seems not to be any doubt about the complete destruction of the Uruguayan forces in this War. László Erdélyi affirmed that the Battle of Boquerón, where Palleja died, meant the complete annihilation of the Uruguayan forces. László Erdélyi, “El presente de esa guerra maldita,” *El País Cultural*, May 12, 2014, 3.
12. Alai Garcia-Diniz, “Máquinas, corpos, cartas: imaginários da Guerra do Paraguai” (Ph.D. dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo, 1997), 57.
  13. Sebastián Díaz-Duhalde. *La última guerra. Cultura visual de la Guerra contra Paraguay* (Barcelona: Sans soleil, 2015), chapter 2. See also his article “Cámara bélica: escritura e imágenes fotográficas en las crónicas del Coronel Palleja durante la Guerra contra Paraguay,” in *Entre el humo y la niebla. Guerra y cultura en América Latina*, eds. Felipe Martínez-Pinzón and Javier Uriarte (Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Pittsburgh, 2016), 55–76.
  14. Díaz-Duhalde, *Última guerra*, 138.
  15. Fredric Jameson, “War and Representation,” *PMLA* 124 (2009):1533.
  16. Sun Tzu, *The art of war*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 23. Paul Virilio has studied the forms that war adopts in the contemporary world from the perspective of velocity. This is for him a basic connection: “War has always been a worksite of movement, a speed-factory.” Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), 141.
  17. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 39.
  18. Agamben, *Remnants*, 37.
  19. I thank my colleague Joseph M. Pierce for helping me think through the intricacies of the diary as literary form.
  20. Ana Inés Larre Borges and Ignacio Bajter, “«En el origen del diario siempre hay una pérdida» Diálogo inacabado con Ricardo Piglia,” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional* 4–5 (2011): 121.
  21. Ana Inés Larre Borges has showed how, in one way or the other, death is usually an essential part of the writing of diaries: “The diary that is written in order to oppose the life’s brevity originates in the awareness of

- death. It finds—as does man himself—its meaning in death.” Ana Inés Larre Borges, “Escrituras del yo, razones para una revista,” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional* 4–5 (2011), 16.
22. On the necessity of opening up the very notion of “travel” to include diverse experiences (races, genders, social classes) see James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 31–4.
  23. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 53. The three previous quotes by Palleja that appear in this section correspond to page 52 of this same volume.
  24. Gaspar Centurión, “Memories of the Paraguayan War,” in *The Paraguay Reader. History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Peter Lambert et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 100.
  25. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 79. The previous quotations from Palleja in this paragraph correspond respectively to pages 99, 99, 99, 113, 77, 66, 101, and 99.
  26. This is only one quote among many possible ones. I will discuss this rhetoric of waste (and loss), key in my reading of Palleja’s *Diario*, in the last section of this chapter.
  27. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 112. The previous quotes in this paragraph come from pages 87 and 99 of the same volume.
  28. An additional reason for this is that the Paraguayans avoid facing the allies: “the enemy ... tries to avoid the clash with the Oriental army.” Palleja, *Diario*, I, 68. The Paraguayan forces adopt a nomadic logic that implies the abandonment of the battlefield and seeks to avoid the actual clashes. The war testimony of the Paraguayan soldier Leandro Pineda shows the adoption of a strategy that avoids traditional clashes and organized warfare: “We continued our work mainly in guerrilla operations and ambushes.” Leandro Pineda, “A chronicle of war,” in *The Paraguay Reader. History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Peter Lambert et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 93.
  29. The same continues to happen in the second volume, in which supposedly there should be actual battles: the sentence “The night passed without novelty” is repeated every single day. The lack of action is debilitating for Palleja and his army, and a source of anguish for the narrator. This oxymoronic repetition of the uneventful constitutes an effective way of expressing the desperation caused by immobility and the absurdity of war.
  30. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 120. The previous quotes from Palleja come from pages 115, 117, 112, 104, and 121 of the same volume.
  31. Hunger deeply affected also the Paraguayan army, as Leandro Pineda’s account shows: “Many of us starved to death. We were forced to eat our leather whips and cartridge belts, as well as Colonel Martínez’s lame horse.” Pineda, “A Chronicle,” 94.

32. Palleja, *Diario*, II, 273.
33. Georges van den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor. From Montaigne to Rousseau* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), XIX.
34. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 114. The previous quotes from Palleja in this section come from pages 12, 60, and 200.
35. I am alluding here to Charles Tilly's well-known article "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" in which he famously stated that war and the state are interdependent. Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Violence: A Reader*, ed. Catherine Besteman (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 37. Palleja shows that the Uruguayan state was not really involved in the Paraguayan War. Thus, the state is not only killing its own soldiers, but acting against its very nature, revealing its own precariousness, its own non-statehood.
36. Emphasis added.
37. The repetitive style of Palleja, which bears many traces of orality, does not always follow grammar rules.
38. Palleja, *Diario*, II, 309. Here there is another good example: "Without intending to dare to criticize my superiors, I am convinced that the Argentine army lost today a favorable occasion to get covered with glory." Palleja, *Diario*, II, 379. The previous quotes from Palleja come from pages 21, 79, 47, 69, 21, and 133 of the first volume of the *Diario*.
39. Centurión, "Memoirs," 102.
40. Another eloquent example is the following: "The corps counts already twenty-one losses since it stepped in the land of Concordia; nineteen deserters and two dead."
41. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 80. The previous quotes from Palleja come from pages 17, 120, 120, 14, 78, 63, 71, and 21 of the same volume.
42. It is important to remember here the closeness between the words "desert" and "deserter." Both words' root in Latin are *sero* and its derivative *desero*. The Spanish term *desertor* must have originated from the latter word, though it probably arrived in Spanish through the French *désertier*. Joan Corominas, *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Madrid: Gredos, 1967), 208.
43. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 120, emphasis added. See another strikingly similar example: "the wastes of meat, the bones resulting from the slaughtering of animals, the dead animals and the fresh and shallow graves of our men who died in the last few days and the places of the bodies, all that mass corrupted by the strong heats, have formed a pestiferous and repugnant atmosphere that circulates throughout the camp, and, mostly at night, it is not possible to traverse it [the camp] due to the foul smell it [the camp] releases." Palleja, *Diario*, I, 241.
44. Palleja, *Diario*, I, 120.
45. Palleja, *Diario*, II, 331.

## Poetry and Revisionism: Notes on Authority and Restoration in Postwar Paraguay

*Alejandro Quin*

Released in Buenos Aires in 1950, *Ceniza redimida* (Redeemed Ash) was the only book published by poet Hérib Campos Cervera during his lifetime and the first work in a corpus that, though slim, would end up having considerable influence on the reconfiguration of the literary field in Paraguay.<sup>1</sup> As was the case for a number of twentieth-century Paraguayan writers, Campos Cervera published this book of poems in exile, after he had escaped from the gruesome repression inflicted by Higinio Morínigo's regime in response to the popular protests that led to the Revolution of 1947. *Ceniza redimida* comprises seven sections, each of which features poems composed for the most part during the 1940s. The book is suffused with dark nuances and delves into topics such as exile, solitude, the tragedy of war, the impossibility of bearing witness, as well as what could be identified as the aporetic condition of language before the unnameable—in other words, that condition in which language attempts to name an overwhelming experience without channeling it toward instrumental purposes.

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This latter trait possibly holds the key to understanding how Campos Cervera's work inaugurates a renewal of poetic language in the Paraguayan context. *Ceniza redimida* can be anachronistically situated on the global horizon of avant-garde aesthetics, which belatedly made inroads into Paraguay among the writers of the *Generación del Cuarenta* who were part of the *Vy'a Raity* literary circle ("Nest of Happiness," in Guaraní)—a group of intellectuals that included Campos Cervera, Josefina Plá, younger writers Augusto Roa Bastos and Elvio Romero, and literary critic Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá, among others.<sup>2</sup> The poetry of Campos Cervera would indeed play a decisive role in establishing a local avant-garde aesthetic, to such an extent that critic Juan Silvano Díaz Pérez referred to him as "an agent of poetic evolution" in the prologue he wrote for the first edition of *Ceniza redimida*.<sup>3</sup> Yet a reading that limits itself to interpreting his work within the evolutionary coordinates set by literary historiography—no matter how relevant it may be—nevertheless runs the risk of reproducing the very same teleological scheme that Campos Cervera's poetry actually seeks to question and destabilize. Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá would later say that the importance of the group of writers around which the poet gravitated lied in that they broke ranks with the "vindictive nationalism" that had been the *de rigueur* attitude of the Paraguayan intelligentsia since the so-called *Generación del Novecientos*—the first generation concerned with the impact of the nineteenth-century authoritarian regimes and the Triple Alliance War (1864–1870) on the nation's historical trajectory.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring the terms within which this rupture takes shape, insofar as it represents a crucial turn within the Paraguayan cultural field, one which will redefine the relationship of language with the past, particularly with certain constructions of the national past. This also requires examining the manifestations and limits of that relationship in both liberal and conservative revisionist discourses of an earlier period, specifically those put forward by Cecilio Báez and Juan O'Leary—the two most influential intellectuals during the first years of the twentieth century in Paraguay. Despite the conventional antagonism between the two types of historical revisionism, both positions share similar origins, converging in the modern anxiety spurred by the waning of authority as a founding principle, and in a national historical teleology that projects itself as a doctrine of restoration. In this

scenario, Campos Cervera's intervention will constitute an opening up of language to the possibility of a relation with the past that neither claims it as an authority nor predetermines its meaning—a relation that names an indeterminate memorialization which resists instrumentalization.

This opening up of poetic language stems initially from its positioning as a witness of a tragic experience whose intensity exceeds any articulation, therefore condemning the poem, as well as language itself, to failure in its attempt to name it. In *Ceniza redimida*, the poem will constitute the site that refers to this impossibility. The third poem of the collection, "Regresarán un día" (One Day They Will Return), provides an example of this when the reader is exhorted to see the devastation caused by an unspecified war that could stand for any of the Paraguayan wars. This exhortation takes shape in the proliferation of questions that implicitly suggest an uncertainty as to whether the meaning of what is shown can be fully grasped:

Do you see those sailors still clothed in gunpowder;  
 and those hardened workers whose fiery blood  
 runs like a river of ardent roots  
 below the dense quebracho of their torsos?  
 And those short mothers, their frame so slight;  
 who look as if they could be their sons' sisters?  
 Have you not seen, nor touched the deafening faces  
 of these adolescents covered in lightning;  
 broken, used, wasted, and thrown away  
 in a mythological endeavor?<sup>5</sup>

This anonymous multitude ("sailors," "workers," "mothers," "adolescents"), destroyed in the "mythological" skirmish of war, represents "all of the unknown Children of the same aggrieved land," whose mouths have been "stripped of lips" in the "tumult of the early blood/that walks during the day, the nighttime, at all hours," and who, for that very reason, are unable to speak.<sup>6</sup> Faced with the overwhelming scope

of an unfathomable reality, because those who could name it have been silenced, the poetic voice asks us whether we can “see.” This question inscribes the poem within what Giorgio Agamben has conceptualized as the *aporia* of the act of bearing witness, insofar as the “complete witnesses” have been silenced (their mouths have been “stripped of lips”) and those who attempt to speak for them can only do so “in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness,” that is, in the name of an experience that exceeds language.<sup>7</sup> “Regresarán un día” seeks to broaden this aporetic experience by turning the entire world into a witness of the tragedy: “Come, brothers!/Come, immense voices of America and the World/come to us and touch the shroud/of my people’s cut down jasmine branch.”<sup>8</sup> This summoning then takes a particular turn which situates poetry itself before the responsibility of naming that which cannot be witnessed. Specifically, Campos Cervera makes a call—which is also a plea and a desperate cry—to the most influential Spanish-language poets of his generation: “Come to us, Pablo Neruda, brother... and contemplate these numb wounds!/Come, Nicolás Guillén...and give a precise name to this agony/And you, Rafael Alberti...draw us the map/of these defenseless deathly coasts!”<sup>9</sup> The poet’s work on language consists in nearing it to “contemplation,” to the possibility of “naming” or “drawing” those landscapes of death and agony. But since these actions denote an experience that has ceased to signify and can no longer be contained in language, poetry and the poem are charged with the task of bearing witness to this impossibility. The references to Neruda, Guillén, and Alberti were certainly a gesture through which Campos Cervera aimed to position himself within the contemporary aesthetics of the time, something repeated in other poems included in the collection such as “Federico” (about the absence of García Lorca) and “Captain of this Aurora” (dedicated to Roa Bastos). Still, the gesture had deeper and much more radical repercussions in the Paraguayan context. It represented an open positioning of poetic language toward the unnameable tragedy of the past, and with it also a shattering of the monopoly, and the sense of ownership, that historiographic discourse exercised over the past.

The root of this monopoly can be found in the historical specificities that shaped the trajectory of post-independence Paraguay. The cycle of nineteenth-century authoritarian governments, helmed by José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, Carlos Antonio López, and Marshal Francisco Solano López (the latter’s son), imposed considerable restrictions on the



inroads made by free-trade liberalism and export-oriented economic policies that were a widespread trend across several Latin American regions. This particular condition favored a relatively self-sufficient form of modernizing development which, together with these governments' paternal-collectivist disposition, cemented the legend of Paraguayan isolationism: a hermetic country governed by tyrants or a self-sufficient social arcadia, depending on the perspective.<sup>10</sup> As is well known, the Triple Alliance War—in which Paraguay succumbed to the combined military power of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay—brought an end to this model, resulting in the country's near-complete destruction, the annihilation of almost half of its population, and significant territorial losses, as well as the total subordination of the nation to the Alliance's political and economic interests. Additionally, as Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá recalls, the victor nations coined their own historical interpretation, arguing that the war had been a difficult but necessary process aimed to emancipate the Paraguayan people from the yoke of despots. Postwar intellectual generations would adopt different positions with regard to this interpretation, forged in part through heated discussions about the responsibility that the governments of the authoritarian period bore in the disastrous dénouement of the Paraguayan national project. Decades later, the territorial disputes that led to military conflict with Bolivia in the Chaco War (1932–1935) would revive the nationalist interest in revisiting the past, since the study of historical documents (especially from the colonial period) were thought to contain proof that would legitimate Paraguay's sovereignty over the disputed territories.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, early twentieth-century Paraguayan writers and intellectuals remained within the orbit of historiographical discussions, to such an extent that “literature—as Josefina Plá understood well—was devoured by history.”<sup>12</sup>

This context became the breeding ground for an intellectual tradition anchored in historical revisionism, which Campos Cervera and the writers of the *Generación del Cuarenta* sought to displace. For critic Guido Rodríguez-Alcalá, Paraguayan historical revisionism, like other revisionist traditions, constitutes an expression of cultural nationalism that “seeks inspiration in the past to put forth a political model for the future,” and that articulates itself through praises of prewar times, particularly of Marshall Solano López's patriotic crusade, as a defense of “the autochthonous” against “the exotic”—the latter represented in a cast of enemy characters that included Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Bartolomé

Mitre, the Brazilian Empire, the liberal ideology, and even the group of Paraguayan Legionnaires who became allies of the invading powers during the conflict.<sup>13</sup> Among the main representatives of this tendency were conservative politicians and intellectuals affiliated with the Colorado Party, such as Juan O’Leary, some of whom ended up espousing reformist agendas and even fascist ideologies, as happened with Rafael Franco and Natalicio González in the 1930s, and who later found a place in the cultural and propaganda apparatus of the Stroessner regime (1954–1989).<sup>14</sup>

However, it should be noted that Paraguayan revisionism—understood here as a practice that intervened the past in order to secure a national teleology—was not exclusive to conservative sectors. In fact, historian Cecilio Báez, who served also as president of the country between 1905 and 1906, would become emblematic of a liberal mode of revisionism which stood in stark contrast to conservative revisionism in that the former condemned the past as the origin of the national disaster while, paradoxically, both revisionist paradigms formally coincided on the function that such a rereading of the past should have. If, as suggested by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, revisionism in its broadest definition consists in carrying out “a critique of a dominant orthodoxy,” such a critique tends to emerge “at the intersection of various and occasionally contradictory ideologies” situated from across the entire political spectrum.<sup>15</sup> Hence, depending on the context, the circumstances, and the interests at stake, revisionism can take on a positive or negative connotation.<sup>16</sup> Despite ideological discrepancies, it can be affirmed that historical revisionisms take root in a terrain on which authority, as a principle of foundational legitimacy, has ceased to operate. They flourish, in other words, on the ground of the modern experience where the past and tradition have lost their function as the foundation of authority. Revisionist writers may idealize or condemn the past, but in any case the condition of possibility of their intervention is given in the destabilization, or the emptying out, of the principle of authority as a binding force that ensured the direction and the meaning of history. Insofar as revisionists are unaware of this condition—which amounts to the indeterminate opening of the past and of historical time—their discursive strategies can be viewed as a symptom of anxiety for the lost authority, which ultimately winds up manifesting itself as a program for political restoration.

At this point, it is fitting to consider Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on the notion of authority in order to elucidate what is at stake in this

discussion. In “What is Authority?” an essay originally published in 1959, Arendt suggests that to think the political dimension of authority—that is, to think its functioning beyond social spheres such as the family or the educational system—implies focusing on the actual crisis and inoperativeness of authority, inasmuch as “authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Arendt, the question is no longer what “is” authority, but rather what “was” authority, taking as a premise that Modernity has emptied out this concept’s meaning. According to her argument, authority implies something different from “coercion by force” or “persuasion through arguments,” corresponding instead to a freedom-limiting regime resting on a hierarchical principle of organization recognized as legitimate both by those who exercise command and those who obey. This is why, even if authority in the strict sense is anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian—as it expresses an order in which everyone is assigned a predetermined position—it should not be confused with figures such as dictatorship or tyranny, where political freedom is abolished (not merely limited or restricted) and the hierarchical legitimacy is effectively broken down. Unlike in an authoritarian structure, the dictator or the tyrant must resort to violence to stay in power, ruling “in accordance with his own will and interest [while] the source of authority is always a force external and superior to its own power...from which the authorities derive their authority.”<sup>18</sup>

This derivative aspect, which designates the tacit separation between having authority and holding power, has historically relied on a connection to the past, perceived as the actual source and foundation of authority. Arendt argues that the first articulation of this conception, and indeed the most influential in the Western world, originates in the Roman tradition:

At the heart of Roman politics... stands the conviction of the sacredness of foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations... It is in this context that word and concept of authority originally appeared. The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, “augment,” and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation...Authority, in contradistinction to power (*potestas*), had its roots in the past.<sup>19</sup>

The correlation between past and authority establishes a generational link destined to perpetuate itself through time and space, and whose purpose is to ensure, maintain, and intensify the instituting force of the foundation. This model was subsequently absorbed by the Church during its long-lasting hegemony in the West, and it would only be challenged, plunging into a deep crisis, with the changes and ruptures brought on by the advent of the modern era and the decline of the Ancien Régime. The dissolution of authority erodes the foundational irradiation of the past, that is, its function as guarantor of the stability and direction of human institutions. Arendt should be given credit for suggesting that it is precisely in this conjuncture that our modern political categories—left and right, progressivism and traditionalism, liberalism and conservatism—originate. Thus, from a liberal perspective, to paraphrase her example, the dissolution of authority corresponds to the expansion of freedom, whereas, from a conservative perspective, it represents a process of decay in which the loss of authority is tantamount to the destruction of the limits and restrictions that protected freedom.<sup>20</sup> Each of these positions is mutually dependent upon the other and they point to the two sides of the same phenomenon. They also both operate within a horizon defined by the quest for restoration, and, in that sense, they converge into the concern for “restoring either freedom or authority, or the relationship between both, to its traditional position,” therefore framing all of history within a process that is predictable on the grounds that its direction and ends are set beforehand at a point in the past (foundation) which must be recovered.<sup>21</sup>

The above discussion serves as a background to address the manifestations of historical revisionism in the writings of Cecilio Báez and Juan O’Leary, and their particular anchoring in the problematics of authority and restoration. As was mentioned earlier, both authors situated themselves on opposite ends of the political spectrum, and their intellectual endeavors aimed to define divergent interpretations about the place ascribed to the past within the process of national reconstruction that followed the debacle of the war. Both are considered to be precursors of the historiographic discipline in Paraguay, even if their works could hardly be categorized as historical research in any conventional sense, since rather than adopting the discipline’s objective analytical criteria, they engage in polemics and digressions whose premises and results are defined from the outset. Báez was a fervent liberal of his time—a defender of free trade and economic internationalization, in addition to

being a staunch critic of the governments of the authoritarian cycle in which he saw a horrendous system of tyranny. In contrast, even though O’Leary was politically initiated amidst liberal ranks and was Báez’s disciple and admirer, he quickly jumped ship to become one of the intellectual champions of the conservative Colorado Party and later of the Stroessner dictatorship. He would go down in history as the most belligerent apologist of Paraguayan romantic nationalism, condensed in the defense of the figure of Solano López and the affirmation of the epic legacy of the war. Finally, in 1902, both authors became involved in an impassioned debate in the local press, which would end up having considerable public repercussions—an event that would lay the hermeneutic ground for subsequent interpretations of Paraguay’s past in a way that Liliana Brezzo considers to “have been unmatched, as its consequences have been so decisive that they continue to be felt in the present.”<sup>22</sup> While I will not focus on this debate, it entirely permeates the texts that I intend to examine here, which can indeed be considered an extension of the postulates put forward by the two authors in 1902. These texts are, respectively, Báez’s *La tiranía en el Paraguay* (Tyranny in Paraguay), a heterogeneous compilation of essays, newspaper columns, letters, speeches, and even theatrical plays published in 1903; and O’Leary’s 1930 essay *Los legionarios* (The Legionnaires) in which the author rips into those who attempted to justify the actions of the Paraguayan expatriates who had joined the Alliance’s armies.

Báez refers to two co-dependent political categories to explain the anomaly of Paraguay’s historical process: tyranny and the people’s “cretinism.” The so-called cretinism becomes central, not only because this term would ignite the famous debate with O’Leary, but also because it constituted the diagnosis that was necessary to take on the national *regeneration* that would finally solve the country’s ills. Indeed, the term was first mentioned in a 1902 article in the newspaper *La patria*, where Báez denounced as false the climate of economic prosperity that both the banks and the newspapers of Asunción loudly celebrated at the time. Even if the topic was merely circumstantial, Báez seizes the opportunity to endow it with historical significance by stating that such delusions could easily proliferate because “[the Paraguayan] people have been cretinized by secular despotism and demoralized by thirty years of bad government ...the people thus continue to be very much like a cretin, a being who lacks will and judgment.”<sup>23</sup> In principle, cretinism denotes a form of “voluntary servitude,” that is to say, the people’s more or less

deliberate complicity in their own subjugation; but the term also has additional meanings which liken it to an illness, to the loss of the basic faculties of understanding, in such a way that it comes to designate a type of degradation and moral degeneration that questions whether those afflicted by it belong to the human community.

In *La tiranía en el Paraguay*, cretinism not only refers to the people's own subjugation, to their "herd"-like condition. It also names their transformation into a social entity whose soul has been "sterilized by terror," in other words, by what the author identifies as the "system of tyranny" that prevailed in Paraguay before the war and during the rule of Francia and the two Lópezes.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with contemporary positivist doctrines, Báez asserts that, just as cretinism is the direct consequence of tyrannical terror, tyranny is also rooted in the country's geographic isolation, in the dominance of Guaraní over Spanish, and in the pernicious legacy of the Jesuit Missions:

At the start of the Revolution of Independence, Paraguay was sunken in the greatest backwardness and the deepest darkness. Isolated from the rest of the world due to its land-locked position; lacking commerce with the ideas of other peoples due to its people's ignorance of Spanish... to Jesuit education and to the colonial despotism that had dulled its spirit, flattened the springs of its will... [a people] oppressed by Spanish governors and given over to the indolence induced by the climate.<sup>25</sup>

Báez's invective also encompasses the Hispanic heritage in Paraguay. For him, Spain represented nothing but a "sick" mother who busied herself with furthering the "stultification" of the people and its "degradation" through the influence of "kings, priests, and writers," as well as through the promotion of "hatred toward foreigners," and the rejection of modern science.<sup>26</sup> The author considers that these factors explain why the Paraguayan people were never able to align themselves with the historical forces of progress and freedom, to such an extent that the events that played a crucial role in shaping the nation's modern political identity—such as the Comuneros Revolution (1721–1735) or the Declaration of Independence (1811)—were only possible insofar as they had been instigated by foreign parties: respectively, Peruvian José Antequera and the liberating forces from Buenos Aires. Báez, therefore, deems that post-independence authoritarian governments played the role of administrators tasked with perfecting the colonial legacy until they succeeded at

consolidating the systematization of tyrannical terror that dominated all aspects of social life and delayed the apodictic march of progress. If Francia had succeeded at securing Paraguay's independence while promoting hatred toward *porteños*, his undertakings also had the negative effect of closing the country in on itself, and leaving it outside the "orbit of the progressive [liberal] revolutions."<sup>27</sup> This system's "monstrous" dimension would be exacerbated under Solano López, culminating in the catastrophe of the war which, for Báez, originates in the "tyrant's whim" of proclaiming himself the guarantor of the balance of power in the River Plate region, despite his ignorance in matters of international relations.<sup>28</sup> Still, Báez ascribes a double meaning to the event of the war: On the one hand, he viewed it as a necessary and constitutive consequence of tyranny; on the other, he surprisingly claimed that the war had had the positive effect of momentarily shaking the cretinism off the Paraguayan people, "tun[ing] the strings that had been slackened by the opium of despotism," and awakening their "civil virtues" and a "nascent public spirit."<sup>29</sup>

The latter definition prompts reflection because it characterizes the war as an event that sets the country on the path to freedom and democratic virtues. This clearly constitutes a contradiction as, after all, Báez is discussing a brutal military event that is nearly unmatched in modern Western history, one that left the Paraguayan nation vanquished, in ruins, and annihilated large swaths of its population. Báez's discourse will nevertheless transform the war into a foundational instance situated in the past, into the cornerstone of the awakening of this "nascent spirit" of political emancipation, and, in that sense too, into the original instituting force of a legitimate and historically binding authority. The expansive irradiation of the foundation was precisely hindered by the persistence in Paraguayan society of the alleged cretinism that Báez denounced. In fact, for the author, this obstacle had found a new channel of expression in *lopizmo*, that is, in the cult surrounding the memory of Solano López promoted by conservative factions and war veterans. This led Báez to conceive of his task as a struggle against the historical "mystifications" responsible for perpetuating cretinism and as a prophylactic crusade in favor of social *regeneration*. His revisionist propaganda sought to open the "book of history to the eyes of the people," using a pedagogy that did not pursue "political gains," but that, rather, aimed toward "the moral regeneration of the Paraguayan people, so debased and humiliated by their tyrannical rulers."<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note the role that the word “regeneration” plays in Báez’s thought. As María del Pilar Melgarejo recalls, regeneration refers to a discourse of governability and population management, heir to the Enlightenment and positivism, which takes root in Latin America during the final decades of the nineteenth century. This concept “supposes the existence of ‘something’ that has degenerated. Discourses of national construction identify this ‘something’ as the population,” and consider that the latter must therefore be intervened upon, renewed, and restored with the aim of “recovering a [social] order” that has presumably been interrupted.<sup>31</sup> Regenerationist discourses always presuppose a movement toward restoration; in Báez’s case, the regeneration of the Paraguayan people, the very possibility of purging them of their cretinism, amounts to returning them to the founding moment of an original position that, for the author, had initially come to light during the war. His revisionism argues for the transition from cretinism to the restoration of a lost freedom.

While O’Leary’s motivations are diametrically opposed to Báez’s, he nevertheless reproduces the same argumentative structure in *Los legionarios*. If for Báez the key to understanding national history was found in the pairing between cretinism and tyranny, for O’Leary the central categories will be “heroism” and “treason.” *Los legionarios* emerges as a polemical commentary prompted by the publication of a study authored by Héctor F. Decoud, a defender of the Paraguayan Legion who had joined the ranks of Bartolomé Mitre’s troops and later became a promoter of the interpretation of the war as a campaign to free the Paraguayan people. Indeed, for O’Leary *mitrismo* and *legionarismo* not only shared the same vision of the past, they also “fraternized in their hatred for Paraguay.”<sup>32</sup> Still, if the position espoused by the former seemed to him to be coherent within the conflict, he pointed out how the latter’s course of action was contradictory with their avowed defense of the fatherland and criticized it as nothing more than the shameful expression of an unforgivable treason. *Legionarismo* represents for him the expression of “treason, it is the ignominy that aspires to defame... the unfortunate heroism, the vanquished loyalty” of a people that had sacrificed itself to protect its sovereignty.<sup>33</sup> O’Leary used the epithet *legionario* to qualify not only those who fought among the ranks of the Allied forces, but also those who, like Báez, subscribed to their historical theses. They are all traitors and targets of the author’s fury, expressed in the most degrading insults: “damned caste,” “race of Cain,” “aborted



[offspring] of the war,” “larvae,” and “human fungus that have nothing to do with our healthy and clean organism.”<sup>34</sup> His pamphlet thus aimed to preserve the health and reestablish the balance of a social organism that faced the constant threat of becoming infected, and in consonance with this he conceives his refutation as a metaphorical voyage through the “pestilent swamp” of the *legionarios*’s treason that threatens “our moral vitality.”<sup>35</sup>

As Brezzo observes, O’Leary’s vengeful nationalism was built on three fundamental pillars:

The exogenous cause of the war due to the intromission of the [Brazilian] Empire in matters concerning the River Plate region, the exaltation of race in tales of unprecedented heroic feats accomplished by the Paraguayan army ... and the idealization of the period preceding the war as one that must be restored so as to overcome the adversities of the present.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, and against those who maintained that the “submissiveness” of the Paraguayan people was a consequence of Jesuitism, O’Leary states that, in fact, “the Paraguayan [Jesuit] missions were razed and left no traces in the popular soul,” while their legacy had remained alive among the majority of liberal *criollos* of the River Plate region. Quite the contrary, O’Leary considered that, almost since colonial times, Paraguay had been “the cradle of American democracy” and of “civilization in the River Plate,” and found proof of this in the Independence process and the governments that succeeded it:

Doctor Francia, implacable in his patriotic zeal ...was cruel to those who, whether or not he was right, held beliefs that ran contrary to his intentions. But he never went against his people. Those mass killings..., so frequent in Argentine “liberalism,” are unheard of [in Francia’s Paraguay]. The entire nation saw in him the protector of its independence, and supported him with sympathy ...And let us not speak of Don Carlos Antonio López, an incomparable leader ...who served the fatherland. No one fought as he did for its happiness, for its moral dignification, for its culture, for its freedom. His son and successor [Solano López] only lived long enough to be a hero and martyr of [the nation’s] violated sovereignty.<sup>37</sup>

O’Leary’s observations express the idea of a perfect identity, of an original link between the people and the rulers that would have taken shape during the authoritarian period. Paraguay was one single “moral

and material entity [in which] the vision of the fatherland... materialized in the paternal magistrate that ruled upon our destiny.”<sup>38</sup> Even if the war had attempted—in vain—to shatter that union, it ended up revealing it in its purest form, as the sacrifice that a heroic people had made for its heroic leader. Therefore, Solano López could not be deemed to be a tyrant because tyrants are indifferent to patriotic sacrifice, nor could the Paraguayan people be characterized as cretinous or submissive for having followed Solano López to the very end, since the original link obligated the people to “uphold” the authority of its leader in the face of invaders.<sup>39</sup> The latter, with the help of *legionarismo* and its historiographic apparatus, had used the traitors’ lies in their attempt to sully the integrity of the tie and infect the national body politic. O’Leary’s nationalist campaign thus deploys itself as an immunological project that is capable of countering the harmful effects of external contaminating agents and also capable of restoring the bond between people and rulers, which in his view had reached its fullest expression in the sacrificial tragedy of the war. For this author, the past must be recuperated because it is authority and because it holds the possibility of expanding the nation’s very foundation: “the past... is the powerful force that thrusts [us] toward the future.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite ideological differences, Báez and O’Leary’s historical revisionism converge into more than one aspect. They both propose a philosophy of restoration in which the return to a foundational moment in the past constitutes a paradigm for present and future action. For both, the foundation, which is the pillar of authority, not only contains the meaning of the past but also unfolds as an experience of the finality of history, whose direction seems to have already been predetermined. Furthermore, they conceive of the category of “the people” as an entity that does not coincide with itself and must be unified and intervened upon so as to be able to function as a subject of governability. As Agamben indicates, in modern political thought the people “is what always already is, as well as what has yet to be realized; it is the pure source of identity and yet it has to redefine and purify itself continuously according to exclusion, language, blood, and territory.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Báez and O’Leary’s discourses prescribe that the fracture of the Paraguayan people must be mended through the elimination of that which keeps it separated from itself: The expulsion of “cretins” and “traitors” becomes the means of actualizing the coincidence between—to paraphrase Agamben again—the people (as a multiple collective) and the people (as

a subject of government).<sup>42</sup> This is why the two authors resort to medical and organicist metaphors (“regeneration” for Báez, the “healthy” and clean organism for O’Leary), which suggest the idea of a political body that is ill or vulnerable to contagion, a body that must be brought back to health by returning to the paradigm inaugurated by the foundation. The problem this poses, however, is that the event that epitomizes the foundation, the Triple Alliance War, is above all an event that is synonymous with trauma and destruction; therefore, its transformation into a foundational instance can only result from an ideological operation that seeks to erase the traces of the tragedy to praise a model of governability based on the administration of the past.

Now we are in a position to return to our initial discussion on Campos Cervera’s poetry. As posited in the analysis of “Regresarán un día,” the author’s intervention aimed to position poetic language as a witness of the war’s victims, of the overwhelming tragedy of the past, thus exhibiting the impossibility of naming an experience that is unwitnessable since those who could have named it (the complete witnesses) had been silenced. We suggested that this inaugurated the possibility of an open, non-instrumental relationship with the past, one which without abandoning its claims on it, refused to claim it as an authority or as foundation of a predetermined historical progression. From this perspective, Campos Cervera’s poetry ends up assuming in all its radicality the modern condition of the waning of authority as examined by Arendt. It seems to me that it is precisely in this sense that we must understand the rupture that his work introduces in the Paraguayan cultural field, dominated by revisionist discourses which frequently invoked the past as a foundation and as a program of restoration. The withering away of authority is, according to Arendt, tantamount to the loss of the “groundwork of the world” and is inseparable from the loss of tradition, which “safely guarded us through the vast realms of the past;” and yet, this very process also makes it possible for the past to “[open] up to us with unexpected freshness and [tell] us things no one has yet had ears to hear.”<sup>43</sup> Campos Cervera’s poetry looks toward that indeterminate opening of the Paraguayan past to tell us a version of history that he himself finds it impossible to tell. This will not be the monumental history peopled with tyrants, cretins, heroes, and traitors, but rather a history that exposes us to the limits of discourse at the heart of that which cannot be witnessed. In “Testimonio” (Testimony), another poem from *Ceniza Redimida* about the anonymous victims of a war—which, again, could

be any of the Paraguayan wars—the poetic voice declares: “it will be useless to sculpt a mask for them ... How to even write the figure they wore/without offending the dust of their names?”<sup>44</sup> These verses may well condense the fundamental turn introduced by Campos Cervera’s poetry: between the mask of a predetermined past and the uncertainty of a past that remains open and confronts us with the impossible responsibility of the witness.

## NOTES

1. Years after Campos Cervera’s passing, another of his collections of poems was published under the title *Hombre secreto* (Secret man). It is also known that Campos Cervera composed a few short stories, a novella whose manuscript was never found, and a play which to this day has never been staged. See *Portal Guaraní*, accessed on September 23rd, 2016. [http://www.portalguarani.com/356\\_herib\\_campos\\_cervera.html](http://www.portalguarani.com/356_herib_campos_cervera.html).
2. Ignacio Roldán Martínez and Rodrigo Colmán Llano “Historia de la literatura desde 1920 hasta el presente,” in Francisco Pérez-Maricevich, Ignacio Roldán Martínez, Rodrigo Colmán Llano, Carlos Sosa Rabito, and Amalia Ruiz Díaz, eds., *Historia cultural del Paraguay. 2a Parte* (Asunción: El lector, 2010), 53–59.
3. Juan Silvano Díaz Pérez, “A manera de prólogo,” in Hérib Campos Cervera, *Ceniza redimida* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tupá, 1950), 7.
4. Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá, “El vanguardismo en Paraguay,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 48 (1982), 242.
5. Hérib Campos Cervera, *Ceniza redimida* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tupá, 1950), 23.
6. *Ibid.*, 24.
7. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 34–39.
8. Campos Cervera, *Ceniza redimida*, 25.
9. *Ibid.*, 25.
10. For a study of nineteenth-century authoritarian governments in Paraguay, see Nidia Areces and Beatriz González de Bosio, *El Paraguay durante los gobiernos de Francia y de los López* (Asunción: El Lector, 2010).
11. Rodríguez-Alcalá, “El vanguardismo,” 241–242.
12. *Ibid.*, 247. The work of Blas Garay (1873–1899) inaugurates this trend in Paraguay. The administration of Juan Bautista Egusquiza sent Garay to Spain, tasking him with identifying documents that could legitimate Paraguayan title deeds for lands in the Chaco region. See Liliana Brezzo, “En el mundo de Ariadna y Penélope: hilos, tejidos y urdimbres del

- nacimiento de la historia en el Paraguay,” in Ricardo Scavone Yegros and Sebastián Scavone Yegros, eds., *Cecilio Báez-Juan O’Leary. Polémica sobre la historia del Paraguay* (Asunción: Tiempo de Historia, 2008), 20.
13. Guido Rodríguez-Alcalá, “Temas del revisionismo,” in Mar Langa Pizarro, ed., *Dos orillas y un encuentro: la literatura paraguaya actual* (Alicante: Centro de Estudios Iberoamericanos Mario Benedetti, 2005), 211–212.
  14. *Ibid.*, 213–221. It is important to specify that Franco’s occasional flirting with European fascism (he manifested his admiration of Hitler and Mussolini on more than one occasion) was more rhetorical than ideological. Franco was a hero of the Chaco War and leader of the Febrerista Revolution. He was president of the country for a short period, during which he developed a reformist agenda that included land redistribution and the empowerment of the peasantry. See Rodríguez-Alcalá, “Temas del revisionismo,” 215–216.
  15. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Theses on Revisionism,” in *Assassins of Memory. Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 79; 87.
  16. *Ibid.*, 79.
  17. Hanna Arendt, “What is Authority?” in Peter Baehr, ed., *The Portable Hanna Arendt* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 462.
  18. *Ibid.*, 463–467. Arendt also posits an important additional distinction regarding totalitarianism. This system represents not only the abolition of freedom, but also “the total elimination of spontaneity itself, that is, of the most general and most elementary manifestations of human freedom,” 466.
  19. *Ibid.*, 485–487.
  20. *Ibid.*, 467.
  21. *Ibid.*, 470.
  22. Brezzo, “En el mundo de Ariadna y Penélope,” 12.
  23. Cecilio Báez, “Optimismo y pobreza. Las ganancias de los bancos. Males y remedios,” in Ricardo Scavone Yegros and Sebastián Scavone Yegros, eds., *Cecilio Báez-Juan O’Leary. Polémica sobre la historia del Paraguay* (Asunción: Tiempo de Historia, 2008), 74.
  24. Cecilio Báez, *La tiranía en el Paraguay* (Asunción: El País, 1903), 44; 15; 172.
  25. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
  26. *Ibid.*, 27–29.
  27. *Ibid.*, 21.
  28. *Ibid.*, 33; 45.
  29. Báez, “Optimismo y pobreza,” 74.
  30. Báez, *La tiranía en el Paraguay*, 156–158.

31. María del Pilar Melgarejo Acosta, *El lenguaje político de la regeneración en Colombia y México* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2010), 71–74.
32. Juan E. O’Leary, “Los legionarios,” in *Prosa polémica* (Asunción: Ediciones Napa, 1982), 41.
33. *Ibid.*, 39.
34. *Ibid.*, 39; 111; 112; 113; 129.
35. *Ibid.*, 53.
36. Brezzo, “En el mundo de Ariadna y Penélope,” 26.
37. O’Leary, “Los legionarios,” 43–45.
38. *Ibid.*, 66.
39. *Ibid.*, 119; 68.
40. Juan E. O’Leary, “Las tiranías paraguayas y la educación del pueblo,” in Ricardo Scavone Yegros and Sebastián Scavone Yegros, eds., *Cecilio Báez-Juan O’Leary. Polémica sobre la historia del Paraguay* (Asunción: Tiempo de Historia, 2008), 218.
41. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 31.
42. *Ibid.*, 30.
43. Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 464–465.
44. Campos Cervera, *Ceniza Redimida*, 17–18.

Writing the State: The Redistribution  
of Sovereignty and the Figure of the  
“Legislator” in *I the Supreme* by Augusto  
Roa Bastos

*John Kraniauskas*

INTRODUCTION: “IS THERE A STORY?”

The story of Augusto Roa Bastos’s *I the Supreme* (1975) is quite difficult to reconstruct.<sup>1</sup> This is because of the ways in which meaning is organized, represented and distributed throughout the novel. In structuralist terms, its “discourse” and compositional procedures seem to dominate its “histoire” or (hi)story. In *I the Supreme*, a novel about the origins of a State, a nation and a “people,” readers are confronted with what is evidently a *construction*, made out of a variety of discursive materials and perspectives, as if attempting, from the two dimensionality of the page, to produce an effect of three dimensionality—in the tradition of cubist painting—in which conventional reading becomes more like a stuttered “scanning.” The work, however, is not merely a static puzzle. Even though the arrangement of the material functions to subvert

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the dominant discourse of El Supremo, the novel's dictator (the narrative function of another "character," the Compiler), the tension between textual fragmentation and textual unity—the one and the many texts—is, arguably, a discursive inflection of the attempt by the dictator to impose his own will/text (the "Perpetual Circular") on others.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will concentrate on the political and philosophical dimensions of this tension.<sup>3</sup>

"Detracing the path leading back through so many years, passing once again by way of low tricks and high treason, misfeasance and malfeasance..." the voice of El Supremo emerges from the dead and installs itself in the centre of power, the "House of Government."<sup>4</sup> From here he watches, listens and orders society, engages with those voices that have made a "barbaric" myth of him (El Supremo rewrites history against the grain of regional liberal historiography) and traces the story of his eventual failure from the heights of the political.<sup>5</sup> The following passage, situated towards the end of the novel, before the "last dictator"—the *Tenebrion Obscurus*—devours what remains of the dictator's flesh, reveals and summarizes this narrative, condensing within it some of the work's most important themes, whilst also giving clues as to their significance:

There was another time, I remind myself, when I wrote, dictated, copied. I flung myself heart and soul into paper-and-ink work. Suddenly a full stop [*punto*]. An abrupt end to this abandon. The point [*punto*] at which the absolute begins to take on the form of history from the other side. At one time toward the beginning, I believed that I dictated, read, and worked under the sway [*imperio*] of universal reason, under the rule of my own sovereignty, under the dictates of the Absolute. I now ask myself: Who is the amanuensis? Not the trust-unworthy scribe, certainly.<sup>6</sup>

This passage suggests that once upon a time ("another time... toward the beginning"), El Supremo had a particular power—a sovereign power to decide; now, aware of his proximate demise, he realizes that he has lost it, that it may have been an illusion. A change has taken place that has put an end (a full stop [*punto*]) to what he refers to as the "absolute" giving birth to history "from the other side," and now out of the dictator's control. The implicit answer to his last question ("Who is the amanuensis?") is that now he is the secretary—the "trust-unworthy scribe"; that



*he*, rather than his amanuensis, Patiño, is being dictated to by history, and is to be written by, or rather, in it.<sup>7</sup> The narrative thus traces a movement from a situation in which power is held—when El Supremo, as sovereign, dictates history—to another in which it is lost. Historical change has now escaped his grasp/rule and undermined it. *I the Supreme* is thus a tragedy of sorts, telling the story, however phantasmatic or fictional, of a “rise and fall,” of a certain (sovereign) *illusion of the political*.

### SOVEREIGN REDISTRIBUTION

As he narrates his story, El Supremo recalls the moment when as a young man he was expelled from school: the “rector” complains of his reading “the books and the ideas of those libertine impostors... the anti-Christis.” The young student answers, prefiguring his own modernizing political project after his country’s independence from colonial rule: “You still want to destroy Newton with syllogisms... We, on the other hand, are endeavouring to make *everything new* with the help of masons such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, and others as good as they are.”<sup>8</sup> All are associated with the desacralizing anti-Absolutist movement of the Enlightenment, widely read, although prohibited, in late eighteenth-century colonial Latin America, and influential in the formation of an independence-minded elite. And it is this kind of language, the language of the Enlightenment that informs El Supremo’s description of his story.

What does El Supremo mean when he tells us that he thought he “dictated, read, and worked under the sway of universal reason, under the rule of my own sovereignty, under the dictates of the Absolute?” The Enlightenment had two dialectically related moments: in its negative aspect, influenced by advances in the natural and human sciences, it criticized sacred explanations of the universe and of absolutist monarchy; and in its positive aspect, it argued for the universality of reason, the sovereignty of the individual subject and various rationally organized state forms, be they liberal, as in the case of John Locke, or republican as in the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>9</sup> What is involved politically is thus a redistribution of “sovereignty,” and the power it institutionalizes as legitimate, from one focused on the authority of the sacred body of the absolutist monarch, to another “new” kind of body politic, now focused on the “people” as citizens (Rousseau) or as self-interested “possessive” individuals (Locke).<sup>10</sup> Each, however, *as state form* unified as *nations*.<sup>11</sup>

Since, for the Enlightenment, reason was by definition universal, in the sense that everyone has it and that it is the same for everyone, it also became possible to think of planning a collective history of sorts, and, to be sure, rationally organizing the State. This, El Supremo says, was his intention: “Removing from the chaos of the improbable the constellation possessed of probity. A State revolving on the axis of its sovereignty. The sovereign power of the people, nucleus of energy for the organization of the Republic.”<sup>12</sup> The philosophical context of his discourse, therefore, is provided by emerging theories of the modern State associated with the Enlightenment; its political context being its conjunctural actualization in the French Revolution and the Latin American struggles for independence and the creation of sovereign republics. In other words, the context and the contents of El Supremo’s discourse are provided by the formation of modern bourgeois nation-states in both theory and practice: “primitive political accumulation,” in Althusser’s words, with all of the violence such a process involves.<sup>13</sup>

That El Supremo should mention Rousseau first amongst the above list of the “illuminated” should come as no surprise. His influence throughout Latin America was extensive, and although it is not certain whether Dr. Francia himself read Rousseau, El Supremo, Roa Bastos’s fictional version, clearly has.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, he glosses Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, almost exactly:

The multitude-people; in other words, the labouring-procreating populace produced all the goods and suffered all the ills. The rich reaped all the goods. Two apparently inseparable estates. Equally fatal to the common good: from the one came those responsible for tyranny; from the other, the tyrants... it’s precisely because the force of circumstances tends increasingly to destroy equality that the force of Revolution must always tend to maintain it. No one should be rich enough to buy another, and no one poor enough to find himself obliged to sell himself... I want to bring the extremes together... There is no equality without freedom... Those are the two ends that we must conjoin.<sup>15</sup>

Like Rousseau, El Supremo puts the general interest of the community above the private interests of individuals. In this sense, his project is decidedly anti-liberal. In the historical context El Supremo is addressing this means it is aimed at the Buenos Aires elites (*Porteñistas*), from whose mercantile interests he defends the emerging nation.<sup>16</sup> “[T]he

force of circumstance” undermining equality (fundamental to the freedom desired by Rousseau and El Supremo) is constituted by the egoism (*amour-propre*) or possessive individualism structuring civil society, and considered by classical liberal political theorists such as Locke as the “natural rights” of “man” and the foundation of modern societies. In the latter’s view, the State’s function is merely to guarantee these rights, that is, private property and its corresponding notions of individual freedom. Rousseau, on the contrary, argued that private property was not a natural fact or right, but a social and historical phenomenon. For this reason, in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the idea of a mythical “state of nature,” in which there is no private property, has a *historical* and critical dimension that reveals that the egoistic pursuit of private interests in civil society is far from natural and which, furthermore, damages the freedom of the community.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the classical republican demand in Rousseau’s work, taken up by the Jacobins in the French Revolution, not to mention El Supremo above, for an economy based on small peasant farms in which no one is so poor as to have to sell their labour (power) to another.

The political corollary of equality is a conception of freedom based on direct popular (peasant) democracy in which sovereignty lies with the people, the “general will.” The “social contract” consists precisely in the recognition and imposition of this will over and above the Hobbesian chaos of the “will of all,” that is, of contending private interests (and, of course, of Hobbes’s absolutist solution to it). These, for Rousseau, can only be realized “morally,” in and through the “general will,” which is “one” and indivisible (rather than, for example, through the abolition of private property). According to Étienne Balibar, Rousseau’s new notion of popular sovereignty is mediated by the idea of “community,” whilst Locke’s is mediated by “property.”<sup>18</sup> The key question addressed by both Rousseau and El Supremo is thus: How to make virtuous “citizens” of private individuals such that they can exercise their sovereignty? The answer, given its economic connotations and its character as an originary event (i.e. the “social contract” as a self-constituting moral community) is revolutionary. This is where Rousseau and El Supremo begin to part company. For if the latter considers himself to be the mythic founder and defender of a nation, a heroic deed in the republican tradition, his appropriation of the people’s sovereignty—“I-am-the-State,” El Supremo insists, reabsolutizing sovereign power—condemns him (*el punto*) to failure and betrayal.<sup>19</sup>

The above quotation from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* in *I the Supreme* should not be read, therefore, as just another example of erudite intertextuality on Roa Bastos's part or as just a formal (meta)compositional gesture, constitutive of the discourse of the novel. The point is rather to see how the dilemmas of Rousseau's work are inscribed, dramatized and reflected in Roa Bastos's own.

### THE LAWGIVER

*The Social Contract* provides the occasion for such a situation, relevant both to the context of post-Independence struggles to secure Paraguayan national sovereignty, as told in *I the Supreme*, as well as to the interpretation of the text itself. It does so in a character Rousseau calls the "Lawgiver," whose function is described as follows:

Laws are really nothing other than the conditions on which civil society exists. A people, since it is subject to laws, ought to be the author of them. The right of laying down the rules of society belongs only to those who form the society; but how can they exercise it?... Who is to give it the foresight necessary to formulate enactments and proclaim them...? How can a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it, undertake by itself an enterprise as vast and difficult as a system of legislation? By themselves the people always will what is good, but by themselves they do not always discern it... It must be made to see things as they are, and sometimes as they should be seen; it must be shown the good path... Such public enlightenment would produce a union of understanding and will in the social body, bring the parts into perfect harmony and lift the whole to its fullest strength. Hence the necessity of a lawgiver.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau's character, the Lawgiver occupies the site of a series of tensions which Althusser calls "discrepancies" (*décalages*).<sup>21</sup> For if the "people" are both the author of the "general will," which formalizes their sovereignty, and subjected to it, Rousseau also makes it clear that the "people" as such must be "formed" by "public enlightenment" for this to be the case. In other words, the "people" both produce and are the products of the "social contract" (as Althusser suggests, Rousseau presupposes what he is supposed to be explaining). The people, on the one hand, institute the "general will" and, as sovereign, employ the Lawgiver to draft its law, but, on the other, are made

or educated by them in order to do so: the Lawgiver must be ready to “change human nature, to transform each individual... into a part of a much greater whole.”<sup>22</sup> The Legislator is thus part of the Absolutist tradition, but turns against it. However, the character is also a fiction, invented to overcome the *aporia* in Rousseau’s attempt to historicise the mythical and revolutionary origin of the “people” as a sovereign subject. This, as we shall see below, is the site occupied by Roa Bastos’s *El Supremo*. It also constitutes his drama: on the one hand, he writes in his “Private Notebook,” “the people have made me their supreme potestate. Identified with it, what fear can we feel?” whilst, on the other, the function of his “Perpetual Circular” is to ensure the formation of a “people” with common knowledge of and investment in the nation’s past and struggles for independence and freedom.<sup>23</sup> The Supreme Dictator is thus “in the service of the power that dominates:” impossibly identified with those he is attempting to construct a civic and national identity for.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the place occupied by the Lawgiver and *El Supremo* is not, cannot be, one of the identities, but of “difference.” Paradoxically, however, it is from this very “difference” that the fiction of “identity,” the people and their nation, emerges (as a State production).

If we return to the above passage glossed from *The Social Contract* in *I the Supreme*, and compare it to Rousseau’s original, it is now possible to appreciate an important variation relevant to the story narrated in the novel. Rather than the law (of the people) acting to secure equality and freedom, as in Rousseau’s text, *El Supremo* suggests that the Revolution, or more precisely, he (“I”) would serve that function. This is the *aporia* of the Lawgiver at work: *El Supremo* usurps the “rule of law” as authored by the people. In other words, he re-appropriates the “new” moment of citizenship back from the new political subject, only to return it to them as his invention and gift: he is the law(-giver) and they (the people) are now subjected to it.<sup>25</sup> Roa Bastos’s resolution in *I the Supreme* of Rousseau’s theoretical problem is twofold. First, a practical and Machiavellian one: he unites in one person what in Rousseau’s work are kept as separate functions, the Lawgiver and the Prince, combining Rousseauian theory with Machiavellian practice. Together they form “the gigantic tree” of the absolute: redistributed sovereignty re-appropriated.<sup>26</sup>

Roa Bastos’s gloss of Rousseau’s text, therefore, (a), provides the novel with a political model in which to inscribe the story of *El Supremo* (as Lawgiver and Prince), locating his drama within the context and

dilemma constituted by the formation of a people; (b), it furnishes the story with a particular set of political contents that foreground the republican tradition of subordinating the “will of all” to the “general will,” that is, the economic (private property) to the political (citizenship), which in turn, (c), makes it relevant to the arguments concerning the origins of the modern State in general and more particularly to the development of bourgeois nation-States in Latin America.<sup>27</sup> This, (d), clarifies the particular form in which El Supremo, as Lawgiver, believed he embodied the enlightenment ideals of sovereign redistribution, universal reason and the Absolute—here, Rousseau’s “people,” whose subjectivity as citizens he, nevertheless, betrays, re-appropriating the power of sovereign decision (law-making) that should lie with them. In this sense, (e), it is now possible to locate El Supremo’s discourse-dictation: his words are, so to speak, the letter of the *law*, and the “Perpetual Circular,” his legacy.

### TO READ, TO WRITE, TO REPRESENT

But how did he embody these ideals? If we return to Rousseau’s text describing the Lawgiver, the answer to this question becomes evident. It is because he had the power of interpretation. This is Roa Bastos’s second resolution of Rousseau’s *aporia*. He can see what the people cannot: “the good.” The people, on the other hand, are blind. The history of this competence, “the foresight necessary” in Rousseau’s words, is traced in *I the Supreme*. Indeed, it describes his rise to power: before he can dictate he must be able to read and interpret signs, to see the “good” others cannot.

As a child, the dictator reads nature for its secrets: “Rejected by human beings and even by animals, I gave myself over to books. Not to books of paper, to books of stones, plants. Above all, the famous stones of the Guayrá. Very crystalline stones.”<sup>28</sup> With these stones, El Supremo had wanted to make the alchemic “stone of stones: The Stone” in his laboratory.<sup>29</sup> He was not successful. We find out later in the novel, however, that he did manage to invent something “much better:”

I discovered the line of perfect rectitude passing through all possible refractions. I fabricated a prism that could break a thought down into the seven colors of the spectrum. Then each one of them into seven others, until I caused a light to come forth that is white and black at the same

time, there where those capable of conceiving only the double-opposite in all things see nothing more than a confused jumble of colors.<sup>30</sup>

This “semiotic prism,” perhaps a parody of Greimas’s “semiotic rectangle,” is an instrument of decipherment and abstraction enhancing the gaze and interpretative faculties of the dictator, enabling him to read and impose order on thoughts, and to discover the basic semes (the minimum units of signification: black/white, etc.), constituting the deep binary structures that make meaning possible.<sup>31</sup> It is this reading ability that, in giving El Supremo the power to see (and Roa Bastos the occasion to parody structuralism), makes his rise to power possible. Here, as reader of the sky—and it is from the sky that his power comes (as does writing), in the shape of a captured meteor—he tells his civil and military functionaries—and us, his readers—in the “Perpetual Circular” that:

I understood then that it is only by ripping this sort of thread of chance out of the weft of events that the impossible can be made possible. I suddenly realized that to-be-able-to-do is to-be-able-to-enable. At that instant a shooting star traced a luminous streak across the firmament... I had read somewhere that falling stars, meteors, aeroliths, are the very picture of chance in the universe. The force of power lies then, I thought, in chasing down chance: *re-trapping* it. Discovering its laws; that is to say, the laws of oblivion. Chance exists only because oblivion exists. Subject it to the law of counter-oblivion. Trace counter-chance.<sup>32</sup>

Everything must be readable, that is, foreseeable, so that out of “chance,” and against it, necessity (“law”) may emerge. There are inscriptions everywhere to be decoded. El Supremo must find and take hold of the “thread... of the weft of events” (or “plot”—*trama* in the Spanish original) and decipher the stories that surround him. Hence, the importance of certain technologies of vision such as El Supremo’s telescope (*lente-de-ver-lejos*) with which, once in power, he spies on the nation and reads the “book of Constellations,” where he must continually keep an eye out for “chance.” Indeed, the end of his power (the “fall”) comes from the sky (upon high), when El Supremo is sucked into the mud (below), in the form of a flock of blind birds that fall at his feet. He is then “lost in two” (“I/HE”) and overtaken by history, to become its object, or in historiography, its third person: the subject of enunciation and subject of the enunciated.<sup>33</sup>

The importance of a specific competence, combined with instrumental reason, is underlined: “to-be-able-to-do is to-be-able-to-enable,” or “*poder hacer es hacer poder*” in the Spanish, in which “to-be-able” [*poder*] also means power; thus, the “power-to-do is to make power.” Knowledge is thus intimately associated with power. In true Machiavellian fashion, “chance” (“fortune” in Niccolò Machiavelli’s sense), as represented by the meteor, must be captured in El Supremo’s technologically enhanced gaze and controlled. Being able to read its traces in the sky, and decipher its message, is thus fundamental to the dictator’s power on earth. He will capture chance (the meteor) and chain it to his desk. Doing so will ensure his position, from where he can counter chance’s “writing” with his own (dictation). Thus, El Supremo must not only be able to read, but also to write, so as to combat “chance,” because interpretation is not enough if not re-encoded in writing: in other words, the dictator’s writ must be “traced,” that is dictated. This is important to the dictator because chance has a subjective dimension too: forgetfulness, or *olvido*, translated above as “oblivion.” As Lawgiver, the dictator will have to dictate (his own) history, “trace counter-chance,” so that it will not be forgotten, and thereby produce new “enlightened” subjects, citizens aware of their past and the struggle for national independence: the virtuous cultural prerequisites of a sovereign and popular nation-state. A sense of “will” that is socially “general.” In Étienne de la Boétie’s terms: freedom remembered, imposed and learned overcomes servitude.<sup>34</sup> As it appears in the “Perpetual Circular,” this history makes up a substantial part of the novel; it is what the reader consumes too as El Supremo dictates it to his secretary Patiño. However, it is too late, for the dictator is dead, his people still “blind” (the birds) and his “Perpetual Circular” the never-ending dictation, or “ramblings” in Alberto Moreiras’s terms, of a dead man.<sup>35</sup>

The historical context of this acquisition of interpretative power is that of a society emerging from a colonial province into the “chaos” of post-colonialism. El Supremo tells his readers how he participated in these developments, but also how he distanced himself from them. He retires from the government twice, dissatisfied with the manoeuvrings of the creole military elite, and from his farm watches the post-colonial drama. To read and interpret “correctly” needs the perspective (here, El Supremo’s perspective and distance remind us of the author’s own exile) from which the eye can read the signs from a privileged location, as if looking through a telescope (*lente-de-ver-lejos*). Paradoxically, it is this



distance that enables him to see and interpret (read) the “general will” of the people and bring him close to what he was “looking for,” the people and power:

Awake, I *saw* this dream vision: My rat nursery had turned into a caravan of men. I was walking at the head of this teaming multitude. We reached a column of black stone, in which a man was buried up to his armpits... Stuck fast there he appeared to be crying out to be dispetrified. The caravan behind strained and squeaked... I crossed the *Plaza de Armas*, followed by a growing crowd acclaiming my name. When I came back, I was another man. I had learned a great deal at my farm-lookout in Ybray. The retreat had brought me closer to what I was seeking. From that point on I would yield to nothing and to no one opposed to the holy cause of the Fatherland... total autonomy, absolute sovereignty of my decisions. Training, under my command, of the forces necessary to see that they were obeyed... From the people-multitude I picked the men who formed the skeleton organization of the army of the people. An even more invincible support than that of cannons and rifles in the defence of the Republic and the Revolution.<sup>36</sup>

I have already noted the ideological importance of Rousseau’s text in providing *I the Supreme* with some of its political and historical contents. *The Social Contract* also provides the novel with a complex hero relevant to this politics, the Lawgiver, which defines the relationship of the dictator with the “people.” Here, we would now seem to be in the presence of the dictator’s fantastic narrative dramatization of his rise to power. It is the consummation of the “social contract” itself as a revolutionary act: rats become “men” (the natural human species becomes explicitly social in constituting itself as a specific community through the “social pact” establishing the “general will”), and a “new” once petrified subject makes its appearance on the stage of political history: the “people” as sovereign.<sup>37</sup> With this pact, a new order is established: a Republic. Here, however, with the dictator (Lawgiver plus Prince) at its head as the privileged interpreter-subject of the “general will,” representing and indeed appropriating sovereign power. It is HE (“ÉL”) who comes to power out of the flux of events: the Supreme Subject. What is to be done? “[E]rect hierarchy in the midst of anarchy”—that is, construct a new sovereign independent and popular State.<sup>38</sup> It is El Supremo’s ability to read and interpret signs that gives him the power to *represent* (the “people”).<sup>39</sup>

## THE SUPREME DICTATOR

Returning to our passage summarizing the story of the novel, I would like to make two points here. First, at the level of “content,” we have arrived at its beginning, when, the dictator reminisces he laboured, read and dictated under the signs of universal reason, the absolute and his own sovereignty, free from tutelage. In other words, we have arrived at the stage in his history in which, in Carl Schmitt’s terms, he “decides,” or, in the novel’s, when he dictates.<sup>40</sup> The dictator, of course, will still need to read, but the weight will now be shifted from the interpretation of signs to their ordering and dictation—to the production of discourse. He will be the privileged “supreme” practitioner: rather than just “interpreting the world,” he will “change it” in the name of the “people-multitude.” We are not to witness the “withering away of the state,” however, as prefigured in the political philosophy of Rousseau, according to Lucio Colletti, but its post-colonial (national) reconstruction.<sup>41</sup>

Second, a related but more formal point: a minimal story is usually considered to be constituted by three events: the first and last by the moments of stasis and order; the second tracing a process of change, disrupting the harmony of the first order and marking a path of temporal movement and transformation towards the third. At the general level of the narrative, as summarized in the passage above, we find that in *I the Supreme* we are rather confronted by an inversion of this model: the movement towards order which, we have been warned, is undermined by movement. Out of the flux, as the dictator sees it, of post-colonial Paraguay we are told about El Supremo’s order which, in the end, as suggested by “the full stop,” is overtaken by the implication of further change (the history and historiography of which the dictator has now become the object).

In the light of our argument so far, what does the dictator do? “I the Supreme Dictator of the Republic Order...” are the opening words of the novel, as they are of the “pasquinade” parodying the dictator’s script and sentencing him and his functionaries to death or oblivion, informing the readers right from its beginning about the dictator’s role: it is both regulative and imperative.<sup>42</sup> There are three interrelated ways in which El Supremo orders and dictates: politically, he is a republican Prince; pedagogically or culturally, he occupies the centre of the nation’s symbolic order—he is the Lawgiver: “I am that PERSONAGE (*personaje*) and that NAME. Supreme incarnation of the race... I am the SUPREME

PERSONAGE who watches over and protects your sleeping dream;” and semiotically, he is a writer of a story in which he is the main character (*personaje*).<sup>43</sup> In what follows, I shall briefly conclude my observations focusing on the political and the pedagogical modes of dictatorship, leaving the dictatorial practice of writing for another occasion.<sup>44</sup>

As a dictator, El Supremo is positioned in the heights of post-enlightenment politics (or as Jean-Luc Nancy might say, its sovereign “summit”). Armed with his “telescope” in the House of Government, from where he surveys his realm, he reads the needs of the “people-multitude” and defends the nation from foreign interests in their name—because, as we have seen, in El Supremo’s (and Rousseau’s) view they are not equipped to represent themselves. In telling his story in the “Perpetual Circular,” the dictator also narrates the constitution of a sovereign “people.” But, in representing them as Lawgiver, he effectively takes their place. His presence, as a dictator, entails their absence, like in linguistic representation: he is, in other words, their political sign. The people are moreover, at least in his story, complicit in the production of this sign, in the re-emergence of the “noxious weed” of absolutism: having elected El Supremo perpetual dictator, the “people” have given up (that is, forgotten) that sovereignty which, in republican thought, lies solely with them.<sup>45</sup> In Étienne de la Boétie’s terms, *I the Supreme* is thus also a drama of “voluntary servitude,” of what Roa Bastos will subsequently call “the monotheism of power:” sovereignty reconceived as a broader—that is, cultural (or religious and theological)—state fetishism.<sup>46</sup>

Inside Paraguay, however, El Supremo uses his position to undermine the economic and cultural power of the military–landowner–merchant alliance. He puts his and the peoples’ enemies in prison, or even has them shot against the “orange tree.” Under El Supremo’s rule, the upper class suffers... and produces pamphlets and “pasquinades” (the primary sources for much of the Paraguayan historiography of the period of Dr. Francia’s rule, its archive). The dictator, for his part, responds with his own “writing,” putting a “full stop” to their “plots” so as to get on dictating his own: “Sudden full stop. Death blow to their logorrhea (*parrafada*). The avalanche of words meeting with a sudden quiet, the wordmongers with a sudden quietus. Not the full stop of a dot of black ink; the tiny black hole produced by a rifle cartridge in the breast of the enemies of the Fatherland is what counts. It admits of no reply. It rings out. The end. Finis.”<sup>47</sup> It is this same “dot” (*punto*), of course, that eventually puts a “full stop” (*punto*) to El Supremo’s own dictation.

The absence in the novel of any kind of heroic or transcendental embodiment of the “people” is striking. In *I the Supreme*, Roa Bastos has not subordinated his literary work to any easily identifiable political logic, “popular” or not, but instead dramatized the contradictions of a revolutionary dictatorship by working one side of the Rousseauian political structure occupied by the dictator (revolution) against the other (constitution) as Lawgiver. In sharp contrast to Roa Bastos’s first novel *Hijo de Hombre* (*Son of Man*), published in 1960, there are no Cristobal Jara’s or Macario’s in *I the Supreme*, models of political action and narration, respectively. Instead, the appearance of popular characters has a transgressive or carnivalesque, rather than “exemplary,” role. One such character is the unnamed “peasant.” With the invasion of colonial Paraguay by Argentine forces led by Manuel Belgrano, the “Governor” decides to flee:

In order to keep from being recognized, he hunted up a peasant and gave the man his brigadier’s uniform in exchange for his rags. He also made him a present of his eyeglasses and his gold cigar holder. Then he hid himself... He left the Paraguayans to get along as best they could all by themselves.<sup>48</sup>

The creole leaders of the Paraguayan forces watch in awe as the “Governor” risks himself in battle, “disappearing at times and reappearing at others as though to lend the troops courage... They were amazed at the cleverness, the bold, completely unprecedented courage of the governor, who had left his mount behind and hidden himself so well in the guise of this bearded, dark-skinned man with callused hands and bare feet.”<sup>49</sup> The military chiefs manage, at last, to get the “Governor” back behind the lines where he could be more easily consulted: “The mute presence answered them with motions of his head, showing them all the ins and outs of how to trounce the enemy.”<sup>50</sup> Then a peasant appears, and the real “Governor” is unmasked. The military leaders then turn to the man (un)dressed as the Governor: “And where did you come from? They ask the completely naked peasant, half dead with fear. I... the poor man murmurs covering his privates with his hands. I came... I just came to have myself a peek at all this pantomonium!”<sup>51</sup>

There are two points to be made with regard to this humorous episode: first, in momentarily donning the clothes of the representative of the Spanish Crown, the peasant, in carnivalesque fashion, turns the

world upside down, signifying thus the emergence of a new sovereign subject. However, he does so, and this is the second point, inadvertently. Although he helps secure the victory of the Paraguayan forces, the event that inaugurates national independence is merely a “pantomonium,” a harmless spectacle in which he may participate, but which is of no real concern. For the “peasant,” the battle is anything but a transcendental event. His political presence is, as the text (the “Perpetual Circular”) suggests, silent.

The structure of this episode thus repeats that of *The Social Contract*. Although “naturally” predisposed to sovereignty—he is the “good”—the peasant is nevertheless “blind” to its meaning. In other words, he is only “unconsciously” free. El Supremo will, nevertheless, represent him, be his sign, and speak for him. He will dictate for him and in his name, so as to defend popular interest from the creole economic and military elites. In this sense, following the Rousseauian political tradition, El Supremo occupies that extremely problematic “Jacobin” space of the political avant-garde, dictating for those who supposedly cannot (for whatever reason) represent or govern for themselves. And this is what perhaps makes *I the Supreme* unique, for at one and the same time it dramatizes in literary form the origins of a State as well as the contradictions of political representation in the context of revolution.

If we now return to the passage glossed by El Supremo from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* with which we began, it becomes clear that the text not only quotes Rousseau but rewrites him too, underlining the tension between the revolution and the constitution that characterizes his work, in the light of Marx; that is, according to Balibar’s account of political modernity, in the retrospective light of the historical emergence of “the people’s people,” the working class.<sup>52</sup> This is the significance of what Roa Bastos has El Supremo refer to in his version of Rousseau’s text as “the labouring-procreating populace.” Such a transformation of Rousseau’s text has both political and historical significance. It pulls El Supremo’s discourse (dictation) into the present of his writing and literary construction by Roa Bastos, such that the story of the novel might resonate with the revolutionary enthusiasm emerging in the Argentina of the late 1960s and early 1970s when *I the Supreme* was composed. In this sense, the novel projects its post-colonial drama of revolution-and-constitution into its fictional future, most notably, for example, in the figure of the “montonera” guerrilla-woman María de los Ángeles who, in the novel, returns from exile to set revolutionary time

going again. This same gesture works in the opposite direction too, as a historical anachronism: Roa Bastos's "addition" to Rousseau tells us that the novel simultaneously projects its author's present back into the fictional past of its dictator, El Supremo. It appears there in the form of the Compiler.

El Supremo is also a dictator in the pedagogic sense, for he "dictates" (*dicta*) classes, a common expression in the Spanish language. For example, he "dictates" a "writing lesson" to his amanuensis Patiño, who is unable to adequately transcribe the real meaning of the dictator's voice (his dictation) representing the unrecorded voice of the people not included in the historical archive. He also, as we have seen, dictates a "history lesson:" insofar as it narrates the story of the Revolution, the "Perpetual Circular" is designed to produce new citizen subjects imbued with a sense of national identity and political purpose. When bringing his(s)tory to an end, he underlines its importance for the future of the nation: "Reflect at length on these points that constitute the foundation of our Republic. Focal points of its progress into the future. I want chiefs, delegates, administrators who are skilled in their various functions. I want to find integrity, austerity, value, honesty in each of you."<sup>53</sup> They are to follow his own virtuous example. He then informs them that there is to be a Congress in September so that "the Supreme Government may be strengthened and made uniform."<sup>54</sup> It is too late, however, for the dictator dies. It is at this point that El Supremo's dead dog Sultán, "shaking off the dirt" from his skull, also returns from the dead, to accuse him of the death of his servant "Pilar the black"—an ex-slave whose freedom was bought by the dictator—and of betraying the "people."<sup>55</sup> Sultán forces El Supremo to write about Pilar and the dictator agrees, for, he says, "letters couldn't care less whether what is written with them is true or false."<sup>56</sup> This is the point at which El Supremo becomes history's "amenuensis," and is now dictated to.

Pilar was also the beneficiary of El Supremo's instruction: he receives a "reading lesson." The dictator teaches his servant to read the skies (from where, as we have seen, his own power comes) with his "telescope" (an instrument of that power). The sky, in El Supremo's view, is also a mirror of souls. Pilar's reading lesson is, therefore, a lesson in "almastronomy" too: "A meaning is hidden in each thing. A sign in each man," says the dictator. "What is yours, Sire?" asks Pilar. "Capricorn," he answers. After the lesson, El Supremo muses that "The black won't get past Capricorn... His false inventiveness keeps him stuck fast (*clavado*)

in treacherous irreverence.”<sup>57</sup> And the dictator is right, although it is he that is at first “stuck fast” or “stopped... dead” (the two translations of *clavado* in the English-language version of the novel):

One afternoon, on returning from my outing, astonishment stopped me dead in my tracks at the office door. Wearing my dress uniform, the black was sitting at my desk dictating, in strident tones, the most outlandish decrees to an invisible scribe... The worst of it is that in the hallucination of my anger I see in that emaciated black a perfect portrait of myself! He is faultlessly imitating my own voice, my appearance... He gets to his feet... Takes out the thick file containing the trail records of the Conspiracy of the year '20... screaming insults at each of the sixty-eight traitors put to death... He leaps upon me... Dances round me... forcing me to play a role in the farce being staged by this monkey disguised as the Supreme Dictator of a Nation. One after the other, in a dizzying whirl, he transforms himself into each of the sixty-eight traitors put to death. It is they who insult me now, curse me, judge me... Sixty-eight voices from beyond the grave, commingled in a single shriek from the black. Guards!<sup>58</sup>

Pilar's carnivalesque mimicry of El Supremo reveals that it was not necessary for him to be able to read beyond “Capricorn,” the dictator's sign. Indeed, in this case, El Supremo's reading lesson seems to have worked all too well, for Pilar was able to interpret his “significance,” perform it and put it on the show. In having at one and the same time occupied, parodied and judged the Lawgiver, however, Pilar is, unlike the *silent* “peasant,” executed for his interpretative pains. El Supremo thus re-imposes his own power to judge. This “point” (or “full stop”) in El Supremo's dictation–dictatorship, however, also marks its end.

It is a beast's voice, Sultan's, and not that of a peasant, that finally condemns El Supremo in the novel. In the dog's view, “Pilar the black was the only free being” to live at the dictator's side: “He found everything good in what you call everything evil; from the line round his middle downward. Do you consider that the waterline of what you keep pompously referring to as the arguments of Universal Reason?”<sup>59</sup> As we saw above, it was from “the sway [*imperio*] of universal reason,” its new “empire,” that El Supremo thought he dictated. But then, he says, “suddenly a full stop.” The “full stop” here, of course, is the one that puts an end to Pilar's parodic discourse, to his own “logorrhea.” It is also the one that marks the limits of Enlightenment rationality as El Supremo's radical political project runs aground on the very constituency it

supposedly represents (the fate, need it be said, of cultural enlightenment throughout Latin America and elsewhere). In the end, says Sultán to the dictator:

You kept at a distance the people from whom you received power and sovereignty: well fed, protected, taught fear and veneration, because in your heart of hearts you too feared the people but did not venerate it. You turned yourself into a Great Obscurity for the people-mob [*gente-muchedumbre*]; into the great Don-Amo, the Lord-and-Master who demands docility in return for a full belly and an empty head.<sup>60</sup>

This accusation is not only a critique of El Supremo's version of the Rousseauian political project—"You stopped halfway and did not form true revolutionary leaders..."—but also a suggestion that in his very betrayal of the "people" he was instrumental in creating the chimeric myth that outlived him (that, even, the very notion of the "people" itself may be such a constitutional fantasy). Sultán even attacks the very competence that enables El Supremo to dictate, his interpretative power; that is, his ability to *read*: "You misread the will of the People [*voluntad del Común*]" says the dog, "and as a consequence you misused your power [*obraste mal*]." In the end, as El Supremo's micro-narrative of his political career makes clear, it is he that is to be written by history and not the other way round. Sultán condemns him to having to return from the dead, to account [*contar*] for his actions and respond to history (historiography): "Oblivion [*olvido*] will devour the others. You, ex Supremo, are the one who must render an account of everything and pay up to the last quarter..."<sup>61</sup> It is in compliance with this condemnation that the novel—and El Supremo's discourse—begins, repeatedly, each and every time it is opened and read.

## NOTES

1. For example, Alberto Moreiras writes: "There is no story line in *Yo el Supremo*. Its many pages give us the ramblings of a fellow who is either dead or dying" ("A Beggaring Description: the Republican Secret in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo*, Together with Some Comments on Symbolic Production and Radical Evil." In *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 27,1. 2013: 71–87). The quotation I have used as my subtitle is the opening line of Ricardo Piglia's novel *Artificial Respiration* in which the tension between *historia* as story and *historia* as history is



- dramatized—a tension performed in *I the Supreme* too. See Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración artificial* (Buenos Aires: Pomaire, 1980). Formally and compositionally, *I the Supreme* is a precursor of *Artificial Respiration*.
2. The Compiler, however, also feeds the text with a cinematic desire for four dimensionality: movement back and forth in time. From this perspective, its compositional principle is that of *montage*.
  3. The story of the novel as told by the Supreme Dictator in his “Perpetual Circular” is the story of the independence of a nation and its transformation into a republic. It doubles, however, as the biography of the dictator—that is, of dictation and dictatorship—himself. Roa Bastos has used Julio César Chaves’s biography of El Supremo as both his narrative model, which he more or less parodies and reproduces, and as his historiographical resource. See Julio César Chaves, *El supremo dictador: biografía de José Gaspar de Francia* (Buenos Aires: Ayacucho, 1946). In this sense, *I the Supreme* is both a criticism of history as well as of its writing up as historiography.
  4. Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). As brilliantly noted by Alain Sicard, this is why in the novel “la Révolution ‘involue’ á la recherche d’elle-meme. C’est cette ‘involution’ qui... engendre l’espace Romanesque.” Alain Sicard, “Yo el Supremo de Augusto Roa Bastos: le mythe et l’histoire.” In *Hommages des hispanistes français a Noel Salomon*, edited by Henry Bonneville (Barcelona: Editorial Laia, 1979), 788.
  5. “The House of Government was turned into a receptacle that received the vibrations of all of Paraguay...” (44). For an account of Argentine revisionist historiography, see Tulio Halperin Donghi, *El revisionismo histórico argentino como visión decadentista de la historia nacional* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2002). Jean-Luc Nancy has recently insisted on how tropes associated with “height” feed the idea of sovereignty as the “summit” of the political. See his “Ex nihilo summum (Acerca de la soberanía),” in *La creación del mundo o la mundialización* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 121.
  6. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 410–411.
  7. In both senses: he becomes an object of History and of historiography. It is to challenge the later that he has “returned”—this, in a sense, is the founding fictional moment of *I the Supreme*: the return (as *revenant*) of the dictator of Paraguay between 1811 and 1840 and “hero” of its independence, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. Like all *revenants* he too seeks justice.
  8. Roa Bastos. *I the Supreme*, 147.

9. In “What is Enlightenment?” Kant writes: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another... *Sapere aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.” See Immanuel Kant, *On History*, edited by L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1981), 3.
10. John Locke. *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: New American Library, 1965).
11. For the transfer of sovereignty to the “people” as a body politic, see Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).
12. Roa Bastos. *I the Supreme*, 97.
13. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. by Greg Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 125.
14. In “Autocracia o Democracia” Roa Bastos insists that “Dr. Francia... did not read Rousseau, as I had his imaginary double do, the character from the novel.” Augusto Roa Bastos, “Autocracia o Democracia,” in Euclides Acevedo and J. C. Rodríguez, *Manifiesto Democrático: una propuesta para el cambio* (Asunción: Editorial Araverá, 1986) -my translation. He refers the reader, however, to Irala Burgo’s *La ideología del Dr. Francia* (Asunción: Universidad Nacional de Asunción, 1975), which suggests, through a reading of a *Note* of July 20, 1811 sent to the “President and members of the Ruling Junta of Buenos Aires,” and signed, amongst others, by Dr. Francia, that in fact he may have read Rousseau’s text, or at least known its arguments quite well.
15. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 38. Here is Rousseau’s original: “If we enquire wherein lies precisely the greatest good of all... we shall find that it comes down to two main objects, *freedom* and equality... equality because freedom cannot survive without it... this word must not be taken to imply that degrees of power and wealth should be absolutely the same for all, but rather that no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself... Do you want coherence in the state? Then bring the two extremes as close together as possible; have neither rich men nor beggars... from the one class comes friends of tyrants, from the other, tyrants... Such equality, we shall be told, is a chimerera of theory and could not exist in reality... Precisely because the force of circumstances tends always to destroy equality, the force of legislation ought always tend to preserve it.” *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 96–97.
16. This is what also makes of El Supremo a kind of nationalist and revisionist hero. Apart from glossing Rousseau, he also ridicules Bartolomé

- Mitre—who will later become the President of Argentina as well as a key architect of the War of the Triple Alliance (1865–1870) against Paraguay and an important liberal historian.
17. In “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” Rousseau writes: “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying ‘This is mine’, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society.” In *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1973), 76. Of course, Hegel and Marx refer to the latter as “bourgeois society.”
  18. Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 59.
  19. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 166.
  20. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 83.
  21. The theoretical problem in Rousseau’s text is the “social contract” itself *qua* contract; the discrepancies are its theoretical effects which serve, each in its own way, to disavow the original problem: the idea of a social contract presupposes its subjects. According to Althusser, Rousseau later flees from the “failure” of political philosophy to the “triumphs” of “fiction” in his later novels such as *Emile, or On Education* and *Julie, or the New Heloise* (160)—much as Roa Bastos has done in *I the Supreme*, but via Rousseau’s own fictional supplement in *The Social Contract* itself, which he generalizes as a problem for revolutionary politics as a whole (but which Althusser, interestingly, does not mention in his own critical analysis). See his “Rousseau: The Social Contract (The Discrepancies),” in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 113–160.
  22. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 84.
  23. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 166. The Renaissance writer Étienne de la Boetie is also mentioned in *I the Supreme* (71). In his view, people live in “voluntary servitude” because they have forgotten that they were once free—hence, perhaps, the importance of memory in the novel.
  24. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 40.
  25. Étienne Balibar shows how the modern concept of the “subject,” as both the active subject of an action, *and* as that which is dominated, emerges at the same time as the post-enlightenment re-distribution of sovereignty discussed here. See his *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d’anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 1–84.
  26. In Rousseau’s words, “The lawgiver is the engineer who invents the machine; the prince is merely the mechanic who sets it up and operates it” (*The Social Contract*, 84). The novel’s parodic evocation of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* rightly occurs in one of the many moments *El Supremo* is underlining the importance of “the birth of the Nation, the

- formation of the Republic.” He says: “Only I know how many times it was necessary to add a bit of fox fur when the lion’s skin rampant on the shield of the Republic wasn’t enough to cover its ass” (Ibid., 24). In Machiavelli’s political manual for Princes, he suggests that they must learn from the beasts: “he must learn from the fox and the lion”—the former because of its cunning, and the latter because of its power. See *The Prince* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 99.
27. For a discussion of the effects of this on Latin American literature, see my *Capitalism and its Discontents: Power and Accumulation in Latin American Culture* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2017).
  28. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 280.
  29. Ibid.
  30. Ibid, 410.
  31. See Greimas, A. J. and Courtes, J. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytic Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
  32. Roa Bastos, 95–96. Translation modified.
  33. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 54, 420.
  34. Étienne de la Boetie. *El Discurso de la Servidumbre Voluntaria* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1980).
  35. Moreiras, “A Beggaring Description,” 74.
  36. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 163–165.
  37. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 49–68.
  38. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 96.
  39. In this regard, the novel might also be interpreted as providing a critical, fictional account of populism as it is set out, for example, in the work of Ernesto Laclau—as well as setting out its historical and political conditions within the republican tradition. Indeed, the work of Roa Bastos emerges in the 1940s in a developing and overlapping—Argentine and Paraguayan—context of populist ruptures (associated with generals Juan Domingo Perón and Alfredo Stroessner, who, on important occasions, helped each other out).
  40. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19–81.
  41. See Lucio Colletti. “Rousseau as a Critic of ‘Civil Society’,” in *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London: New Left Books, 1972), 143–193.
  42. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 7.
  43. Ibid., 320.
  44. I make some preliminary observations on the dictator’s writing in *Capitalism and its Discontents: Power and Accumulation in Latin American Culture* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2017), 65–76.
  45. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 267.

46. This is the term Roa Bastos uses to name his Paraguayan trilogy of novels: *Hijo de hombre*, *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal*.
47. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 61–62.
48. *Ibid.*, 106.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. See Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*. For Roa Bastos's views on the political conjuncture in which he was writing the novel, see his "América Latina en *Marcha*." Echoing the language of El Supremos's revolutionary enthusiasm, Roa Bastos over-optimistically writes: "At a time in which, having crushed an anti-popular and repressive system precisely because it was allied with foreign imperialism and local oligarchies whose agents have been rightly labelled forces of occupation...; at a time in which this popular will is translated into acts of sovereign power..., or its definitive relocation amongst the countries of the Third World struggling for their liberation under the sign of revolutionary socialism... Latin America's second emancipation is unfolding [*está en marcha*]. Its wave is overwhelming. No force on earth can stop it now." Augusto Roa Bastos, "América Latina en *Marcha*," (*Marcha*, Montevideo, June 8, 1973), np. -my translation. On the political horizon at the time is the foreseen return of General Perón, the conflict between Peronisms of the Right and Left, rural and urban protest and guerrilla warfare, and the unforeseen ferocious military coup of 1976, one year after the publication of *I the Supreme*, that will put an end to the enthusiasm and dreams of Roa Bastos and so many others.
53. Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, 369.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 374.
56. *Ibid.*, 378
57. *Ibid.*, 379.
58. *Ibid.*, 382–383.
59. *Ibid.*, 386.
60. *Ibid.*, 423.
61. *Ibid.*

PART II

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Preaching Popular Art in Paraguay

# Indigenous Art: The Challenge of the Universal

*Ticio Escobar*

## INTRODUCTION

This text attempts to think about the prospects for the affirmation and continuity of popular, indigenous art in the strange setting of a globalized world. It is well known that the native cultures dwelling in the diverse regions of Latin America prior to the conquest had developed powerful forms of art—be they the pre-Columbian high-cultures or the popular cultures from the forests and plains of the Southern Cone which, if not attaining the same level of monumental institutionalism, fashioned the complex systems of artistic production nonetheless. It is also well known that the intercultural encounter that developed during the colonial period produced not only cases of extinction and ethnocide but also powerful symbolic and imaginary processes of transcultural readjustment and revival.

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One must now ask: Will the art born from these cultures be capable of surviving and growing in conditions dissimilar to those in which they were conceived? This question is complicated due to the fact that it involves not just the general concept of culture but also, specifically, a concept of art, in the context of a tradition that disputes the artistic validity of non-Western systems, during a moment in which the very notion of universal art appears dubious.

A large part of the contemporary debate about culture requires the reconsideration of figures that, as forms reinforcing essentialisms, had previously been dismissed. Faced with the contingency and accident produced by countless conflicting voices, such concepts can forge new paths through the problems that have flouted the bounds of a new century—those familiar ghosts that keep appearing with the same tired grievances. Consequently, without attempting to answer such a complex question—which, obviously, cannot be resolved—this article steals up to it by looking into the notions that might be able to enrich its formulation and link it to other important issues. To this end, it takes on a discussion of several of its defining concepts, starting with the term “indigenous art” itself.

## IN REGARD TO INDIGENOUS ART

### *The Western Canon*

A vital question arises upon broaching the matter of indigenous art: How can the limit of “the artistic” be defined within the context of cultures in which the beauty and the aesthetic completely pervade the social body? Even formulated in such a cursory manner, the question turns out to be extremely similar to one that is raised these days in regard to a diffuse contemporary aestheticism. This matter will be dealt with in due course, but it is worth formulating it here in order to mark a horizon of coincidences on the backdrop of a stage crossed by seemingly irreconcilable differences.

But let us return now to indigenous art. When one speaks of “art,” one refers to a set of objects and practices that call attention to their forms in order to produce interference in the ordinary signification of things and intensify an experience of the world. Indigenous art, like any other, resorts to beauty to represent otherwise inaccessible aspects of reality, and in this way becomes capable of mobilizing meaning,



processing memory with it, and projecting the future of the community through a code of images. Nevertheless, when it is time to confer upon these operations the title of “art,” an objection obtains: in the context of indigenous cultures, the aesthetic cannot be separated from a complex symbolic system which, at its core, fuses together the forces that are differentiated by modern occidental thought (such as “art,” “politics,” “religion,” “law,” or “science”). In this situation, aesthetic forms find themselves confused with the other mechanisms that society uses to organize its knowledge, beliefs, and sensibilities, which is to say that for indigenous cultures, it does not make sense to cut off the splendor of form from ordinary utility or profound transcendental ends, either of which might require its auraticizing function. Truly, such cultures disregard the autonomy of art and artistic genre: expressions of visual arts, literature, dance, and theater intertwine and become entangled along the ambiguous and fertile course of their social signification, and brace one another down in the obscure depths of inaccessible truth.

These confusions are representative of various theoretical impasses derived from the economy of modern thought itself, which sets out to establish its reign in foreign lands but then becomes disoriented upon its arrival there. Beginning with Kant, Western theory autonomizes the space of art, separating form and function with the definitive and solemn adage that the only truly artistic phenomena are those in which form imposes itself over and above any functionality that would muddle its appearance (ritual, economic, and political uses). For reasons bound up with its own particular history, modern occidental art demands a fulfillment of certain requisites by the works that comprise it. Not only must each work achieve formal autonomy, but then also genius, perpetual renewal, transgressive innovation, and qualities of uniqueness and originality. The problem is that these requirements, which are specific to a modern historical model, then proceed to act as a universal canon of all artistic production and as an argument to disqualify any work that does not conform to its conditions. In so doing, they are driven by the fatal logic of hegemony, transforming the perspective of a particular group into the one and only manner in which to perceive and describe the world. In this way, certain ideas defining the art created during one short interval (from the sixteenth to the twentieth century) of its extensive history became the normative archetypes and ineluctable requisites for all production that aspires to be called artistic.

This abusive extrapolation from the features of modernity establishes a paradox deep in the heart of the concept of the artistic. In principle, the classical Western theory of art understands that it is constituted at the mysterious intersection between the aesthetic impetus (of the perceptible form, the site of beauty) and the poetic impetus (of content: the lightning bolt suggestive of the real, the fugitive manifestation of an apprehended truth). According to this definition, art is an essential expression of the human condition from its inception through all its subsequent peregrinations; and yet upon applying this definition, the only productions that can be taken as being legitimately artistic are those that fulfill the strict criteria of modern dictate.

The expressions of indigenous art, like almost every other type of art that is not modern, do not fulfill these criteria. They are not the product of individual creation (despite the fact that each artist reformulates patterns pertaining to the collective), nor do they generate transgressive ruptures (although they involve a constant renewal of the social bond), nor do they manifest themselves in unique compositions (even when the serially produced work powerfully reiterates the repeated truths of its own history). Therefore, from the reproving perspective of modern art, such expressions are considered to be mere handicraft, folk art, “intangible patrimony,” or “material culture.” They do not meet the requisites of modern formal autonomy, that is, they are not useless, in the Kantian sense of the word: They are bound up with archaic rites and common tasks, mired in the density of their murky pasts, encumbered by the materiality of their media and the laboriousness of their rudimentary techniques.

The dichotomy between the grand system of art (deriving from creative production illuminated by the spirit) and the circuit of minor arts (occupational wares testifying to simple beliefs) brings that system into the ambit of the sacred. On the one hand, the world of art becomes the field of a battle between higher truths, which are liberated from the conditions of productivity that mark handicraft and liturgical expediency demanded by barbarous worship. On the other hand, it becomes a secluded enclosure for the artist-genius, who opposes the resourceful and practical artisan, or superstitious and exalted priest.

### *Two Claims*

In spite of any disobedience to modern paradigms, it remains useful to talk about indigenous art. Recognizing this requires one to accept the difference existing between diverse cultures; it is to admit the validity of conceptions of art alternative to Western models, and it implies the rejection of a colonial model that discriminates between the superior and the inferior cultural forms—those which are and are not worth being considered as privileged expressions of the spirit. As is suggested by its title, the present work advocates in favor of using the term “indigenous art,” and will do so by way of two basic claims.

*On Difference and its Forms.* Out of the misty beginnings of history, across the earth, and into its farthest reaches, diverse non-modern societies work the dark alchemy of meaning through a sophisticated manipulation of appearance. They do so by mingling forms and functions, beauty, and utility. The garland that inflames the brow of a shaman or exalts that of the hunter, the paintings that adorn human bodies with opulence so as to instill them with divinity or bring them into contact with their animal condition, the vessels purified by their designs or excessively ornamented for worship or profane festivity, like the remarkable designs of so many common utensils lost in the everyday life of indigenous peoples: All these gestures and objects, more than appealing to aesthetic pleasure (though clearly using beauty as a means) seek to reinforce social signifiers that go far beyond the realm of art. To reiterate, beauty has no absolute value, but rather serves the claims of other truths.

Lack of aesthetic autonomy does not signify an absence of form, however. Even camouflaged, immersed in the thick plot of the socio-cultural ensemble, amid the confusion of the many forces that impel the collective endeavor, the aesthetic form is unmistakably palpable. It is the animating force operating within core certitudes, silently driving the heavy and variable memory of the community. Beauty clandestinely works to bolster truths and ends that require the guarantee of their own image cast upon the stage of representation. It marks out duties, inflames truths, and intensifies basic figures: stretched to its limit, made to say that which is beyond its grasp, it suffuses the cultural horizon with flashes of lightning, anxieties, omens.

Thus, in indigenous cultures while the aesthetic is a powerful force, it is one that is nonetheless contaminated by both trivial utilitarian

operations and lofty cultic aims, entangled with the residues of unknown forms, and dark around the edges that will never coincide with the crisp contours of a preconceived notion of the artistic. The beautiful upholds more than just harmony and gratification. It awakens the dormant powers of things, confers strangeness, and wonders upon them; it distances them, violates their ordinary presence, and tears them from their habitual frameworks in order to confront them with a perennially inconclusive experience of the extraordinary. In these cases, the religious beliefs and mythical figures that animate ritual representations must be accentuated through the manipulation of the senses and the administration of forms. Intense images and suggestive colors—light, composition, and disquieting figure—help the world to manifest itself in all its complexity and shadow, in its radical uncertainty, suspended within the irresolution of originary questions that cannot be answered.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize those artistic operations that go beyond the purview of the aesthetic. This is especially apparent in non-modern cultures and in certain operations of contemporary art, though it can be seen all along the history of art in general. In order to better define this kind of operation, the example of ritual—a privileged field in indigenous art—is illustrative. The stage of ceremonial representation finds itself demarcated as a circle of restrictive contours. Upon entering it, persons and objects are bathed in the luminescent distance of the other side, impossible to touch, and beyond ordinary time and common sense. On this side of the line marked by the enclosure of the ceremonial space, men and things correspond to their names and roles—they are profane utensils, the sweating, expectant multitude assembled around the scene. Upon crossing the invisible line that maintains distance and inaugurates a play of gazes, men and objects become doubled. Each one ceases to correspond strictly to itself and moves past itself to become a cleric, God, or sacred element. What has authorized them? What has distanced them and made them into disquieting indications of this thing that exists beyond itself? Two crossed and weaving paths proceed from this question, in the pursuit of art in general: one that privileges aesthetic appearance, and one that places emphasis on the concept.

Standing before this question about what, precisely, has bestowed the excess of meaning or exceptional value to those objects and persons radiantly appearing on the stage of the ritual, the first line is the

above-mentioned path of beauty. The other itinerary is that which opens upon the concept, where that which has made these objects and persons strange and distant—that which has authorized them—is having *experienced* their employment within the circumference that separates them from the mundane and places them into view. Stretching the terms a little, this long path can be qualified as the conceptual, in the sense that would coincide with the line that was opened or inaugurated in the modern art by Duchamp: the idea that the authorizing inscription of objects exists independently of their expressive or formal values. Beyond the circle established by the museum or gallery, the urinal or bicycle wheel will not shine or attain distance and exposure to the gaze; they signify nothing beyond that which is designated by their prosaic functions. Outside that circle consecrated by indigenous culture, things opaquely coincide with themselves and do not refer to the original scarcity or foundational plenitude. Here, beauty is irrelevant, and all that matters is the position or the notion of position. Distance is established by a concept.

*Other Rights.* There are still other reasons—political in nature—to argue in favor of the term “indigenous art.” Recognizing the existence of a different kind of art can refute a discriminatory view that occidental culture maintains right of access to certain privileged sensory experiences. Additionally, it can provide a different vision of contemporary indigenous people, opening the possibility of seeing them not as marginalized and humiliated creatures, but rather, as true creators of forms: sensitive and imaginative subjects who are capable of making breakthroughs and contributing new figures to a universal symbolic patrimony.

Finally, recognizing a different kind of art can support indigenous claims of self-determination, the right to their own territory, and a good life. On the one hand, for whatever ethnicity it might be, the pursuit of a historical project requires a defined imaginary and fundamental self-esteem, which is the basis of, and corollary to, artistic expression. On the other hand, in indigenous culture, the symbolic territory is just as important as the physical territory: the former an expression of the latter, which is itself a projection of the former. Consequently, it is difficult to defend the realm proper to a community that does not vouch for its own right to difference—its ability to live and think, to believe and create in its own fashion.

## INDIGENOUS ART INsofar AS IT IS POPULAR ART

Once the utility of the term “indigenous art” has been asserted, it is suitable to use it as a specific modality of popular art. This suitability is a result of the expansion of colonial and postcolonial processes that include the “popularization” of the indigenous, *mestizaje*, and intercultural hybridization. But it also stems from the asymmetrical position occupied by indigenous peoples within the context of national Latin American societies, a position that puts them at the same level as other sectors excluded from full social participation—those which, in a strict sense, can be called *popular*. Popular art—which includes indigenous art, and which we will presently consider at greater length—affirms itself through the expression of difference. It does so through the diverse practices of marginalized sectors that must retell their own histories in response to the challenges that hegemonic culture imposes and proposes.

Employed for decades by thinkers such as García Canclini, the concept of hegemony introduced by Gramsci has been useful for the work being done on the concept of the popular in Latin America. According to such work, intercultural conflict does not necessarily entail a forcible imposition carried out by the dominant over the dominated, but rather, a set of processes including capitulation—not to mention retreat and loss—complex games of seduction, strategies of resistance, and movements of negotiation and agreement. The popular affirms itself in the face of hegemonic power not as a pure exteriority to it, but rather as an alternative position: The disadvantaged position of great majorities and minorities which, relegated to an effective participation in the social (the economic, the cultural, the political) produce discourses, effectuate practices, and elaborate images at the margin of, or against the hegemonic current which today strongly reflects capitalist culture.

Thus, the subaltern popular and the hegemonic relate to one another not as integral substances confronted in an absolute disjunctive logic, but rather as momentums in a contingent conflict comprised of a provisional and unforeseen series of events. Accordingly, the tension between one term and the other corresponds to variable positions rather than fixed emplacements, uncertain dispositions that can repel one another, intersect, or even appear to be the same during short stretches of their distinct itineraries. These ambivalent tendencies run to the heart of popular culture itself, which can either support conservative positions or impel

dissenting claims. The same ambiguity causes said cultures to suspiciously turn upon their own reserves of memory and desire, or to resolve upon raiding enemy territory to steal new arguments by which they might corroborate their distinctiveness and perhaps take back their old ways.

If these assumptions are true, we can characterize popular culture as a set of practices, discourses, and figures particular to groups that are unfavorably positioned in the social setting, and therefore distanced from the means by which to petition power. Due to this disrepute, popular cultures would gain little advantage from the established model of representations and opt to continue developing alternative forms of symbolic production. The concept of “popular art” designates a specific area within the field of popular culture. It refers to its own points of difficulty and intensity: the tensions, discords and ruptures, folds, contradictions, and formal rigidities occurring in this field, pushing to readdress social meaning by way of various formal maneuvers. So long as they are maintained, such maneuvers—carried out in parallel to those of hegemonic art—do not function in an autonomous manner, but rather in concurrence, and even in fusion with other movements that construct the social.

Starting with these considerations, popular art can be identified through three qualities: negation, affirmation, and difference.

### *Negation*

The quality of negation derives from the asymmetrical situation in which popular sectors find themselves—kept from being fully present for the decisions that affect them, excluded from effective participation in the distribution of social goods and services, and ignored as contributors to the collective’s symbolic capital. Historically, the concept of the people is defined thus, through repudiation: as the *plebs*, residues of the republic reconciled to itself, the *Third Estate* (that which does not pertain to the nobility or the clergy), that which is *not* dominant, *not* proletarian, *not* occidental, etc. Popular art would take its place as the remainder of that which is neither erudite nor massive and would develop marked by the stigma of that which it is not.

### *Affirmation*

The debates of critical cultural theory have involved a discussion of the term “popular” not so much as the function of lack (as that which is marginal, excluded, subaltern), but rather, by focusing on a productive movement that intervenes in the constitution of identity and the affirmation of difference. Accordingly, if it is clear that the concept of “popular art” has been defined by omission, and thus developed antagonically (as the opposite of hegemonic art), today it seems appropriate to highlight its positive impulses. Popular art involves a project of history construction, an active interpretation of the world, the constitution of subjectivity, and an affirmation of difference. Through the creation of alternative forms, individual collectivities elaborate their own histories and anticipate sustainable models of the future. They reposition the landmarks of memory and reimagine the reasoning of the social contract. The self-affirming consistency of popular art constitutes a referent of vital importance to the collective identification, and consequently, a key ingredient for social cohesion, and a factor in cultural resistance and political response.

### *Difference*

Popular artistic creation has specific features that are different from those that define modern occidental art. It does not erect a separate setting for beauty, posit the originality of each piece it produces, or aspire to genius and constant innovation. But it is capable of proposing other ways in which to represent the real and mobilize (or interfere with, or upset) the flow of social signification. In diverse regions of Latin America, remote and intense peoples create works that repeat or renew traditional guidelines, which do or do not depend on various functions, are produced individually or serially, corresponding to recognized creators or anonymous and/or collective authors, are able to mobilize their own perspectives in order to push their expression beyond the latest fashion. It is nothing less than the purpose of art, its destiny, or its doom.



## POPULAR ART INsofar AS IT IS LATIN AMERICAN

*On the Periphery*

This section attempts to develop a discussion of the relations maintained in the concept of popular art, so as to confront it with the circumstances presented by the setting of a global stage, and the unavoidable necessity of taking a position in regard to the universal. In so doing, it is necessary to resort to a broader framework and to consider an idea of Latin America insofar as it is peripheral.

The defining imperative for all subaltern forms of art and culture is to determine the extent to which it is possible to become aware of their own histories using (albeit in a limited way) the systems of representation shaped by hegemonic standards. Peripheral art—in this case, that which is produced in Latin America—develops as much through the strategies of resistance and conservation as it does through the practices of appropriation, imitation, and transgression of metropolitan standards. Such practices, therefore, find themselves facing the challenge of assimilating, distorting, and rejecting the key paradigms in their relations with local memory and in the face of particular historical projects.

The oppositional center–periphery model that tends to serve as the basis of work addressing the concept of “Latin American art” is problematic. Described from the center (which is called “The First World”), the periphery (or “Third World”) represents the place of the *other*. As such, it is the ineluctable dark side of the occidental “I,” a degraded copy or inverted reflection of exemplary identity. According to this perspective, the *other* does not represent a difference that might be taken up and adopted, but rather a discrepancy to be corrected; it does not act as an alien “I” that correspondingly interpellates the enunciating “I,” but rather as an opposite that is both necessary and subaltern to it. Additionally, both find themselves joined together through an essential, specular conflict that ossifies difference. Within this schema, the indigenous art is understood either as an ahistorical cradle of originary truths or as an ingredient or condiment in the happy salad of postmodernity—the kitsch stew that has replaced the exotic bazaar.

In order to effectively dispute this model, one must imagine the strategies by which the hegemony of the center can be countered without resorting to mere reactive antagonism. Given the metaphysical opposition between the one and the other—the center and the periphery,

the Latin American and the universal—it is proper to acknowledge the mutual inclusion of the opposed terms and imagine a third space of confrontation and transit. One should not expect a definitive outcome for the opposition between the center and the periphery, whose terms remain in a state of perpetual flux, alternately driven by discord and harmony. The unmooring of these terms facilitates the claim of the difference of Latin American art, not through the abstract impugning of models of art upheld by the center, but instead from unique and variable positions determined by specific interests. Oscillating and detached from fixed emplacements, peripheral (not to mention central) positions find a mobility that permits them to maneuver with great agility. They can change position in order to agree with, dispute, or confront those movements that arise from the unpredictable vicissitudes of historical contingency (as opposed to a formal framework of logical opposition). This freedom permits the exercise of cultural difference not as a mere reaction or defensive resistance, but rather as an affirmative political gesture, operating in accordance with its own strategies. It is not a matter of impugning or accepting that which arrives at the center for no other reason than its being from there, but rather, because it is or is not useful to one's own project.

In light of these considerations, Latin American art can begin to be understood as something other than a self-sufficient, self-identical figure: a sanctuary for the mythical origin, the happy ending of a heroic historical synthesis, or exile at the underbelly of universal art. To speak of “Latin American art” can be useful insofar as the concept refers not to an essence, but rather a category, the result of a pragmatic circumscription defined by political imperative, historical convention, or methodological effectiveness—insofar as it permits the naming of a discursively constructed space, in which the alternative tactics of signification cross and intersect with proposals that resist being enunciated through the logic of the center.

### *In Praise of the Dis-encounter*

Always seeking to downplay conflict, official history has employed the euphemism “cultural encounter” to refer to the brutal intercultural clash brought about by conquest in indigenous territories. Fortunately, in Spanish the term “encounter” follows two distinct usages that are at times counterposed. Even as it refers to the coincidence, it refers also to

the collision: the “dis-encounter.” A large part of cultural difference can be understood by taking up this double meaning: it is a crossing and a clash, and even more, a deferral, a disjunction.

In Latin America, as with other forms of art, the modernity of popular art begins to unfold with the “dis-encounter,” the moment when the modern language of the center names other histories and is named by other subjects. Its finest forms find their origins in slip-ups, mix-ups, misunderstandings, involuntary errors, and oversights. Furthermore, they arise from the distortions produced through subsequent copying of these forms, the difficulties posed by an adoption of signs that call for unfamiliar techniques, rationales, and sensibilities, and of course, from conscientious attempts to adulterate the meaning of the original. In this way, many works that might have been mere degraded copies of metropolitan models recoup their originality insofar as they skew the bearing of its primary meaning through error, ineffectiveness, and deliberate transgression. Latin American art in its many forms, sometimes through fidelity to anticolonialist aspirations or the rhythms of its own pace, but just as often bound by error, confusion, and impetuosity, has made dramatic alterations to the temporalities, logic, and contexts of modern projects.

Thus, the cultures of the periphery find themselves to be out of joint with the figures proposed (or imposed) by the modernity of the center, always arriving deferred and altered. If it is the case that hegemony is no longer exercised through geographical emplacements, and is no longer enunciated in absolute terms, the positions that are taken up in the face of its precepts and siren songs still represent a fundamental referent for a Latin American art that is defined in large part through the play of coy glances it exchanges with the center and with awkward attempts to derive meaning. It is for this reason that the tension between the models of the center and those forms that the periphery has appropriated, stolen, or copied (or those that have been imposed upon it) continues to be an important issue that demands continuous reassessment.

This conflict was ongoing during the earliest times, and in its own way, is still occurring. European colonization of Latin American territories has involved a process of dismantling autochthonous cultures and violently imposing imperial languages. Subsequently, insofar as popular art of the colony is able to maintain its own individual position in this situation (be it resigned acceptance or angry outrage, willing appropriation or calculated confiscation), it manages to forge unique forms of expression. At its origin, it retains the memory of terrible trials—ethnocide,

rancor, displacement, and persecution. Its forms, however, do not faithfully translate these conflicts, nor do they resolve them, either effectively or symbolically. Quite simply, they affirm themselves, invigorated by their tensions, the effort required to deal with them, and perhaps the energy they expend in doing so.

Following in the footsteps of the first evangelized indigenous peoples who submissively began to copy baroque models only to end up derailing their original meaning, many forms have managed to warp the straight path of hegemonically imposed design. The *mestizo* popular art that developed afterward consolidated itself in its profound distortions and untimely interpretations, fierce struggles in the field of meaning that gave way to a different kind of art. What started out being a second-hand copy ended up constituting a new form of expression.

The designs of domination can never be fully consummated. This is not just because at a certain point the strategies of power lose their grip on control, but rather, because the symbolic realm is essentially equivocal and harbors an absence at its center that cannot be filled. Even the harshest processes of cultural domination and the cruelest cases of ethnocide cannot pervade the entirety of the colonized field, and despite themselves, leave a small space that remains free from their influence. Difference occurs in this wasteland; here, first indigenous peoples and later mestizos and Creoles managed to produce their own unique (sub) versions, works that managed to latch on to the momentum of some distinct truth, and in this way escapes the spurious destiny to which the colonial project had assigned them. As has been said, in many cases indigenous people started out meticulously imitating occidental patterns and ended up twisting the meaning of the originals. In the same way, all throughout the ensuing period, the greatest forms of Latin American art were (and are) those that succeed in affirming themselves from within the cracks left open by the maladjustments of power and extravagances of the image, nurtured by the condensed violence that takes refuge there.

### INDIGENOUS ART IN MODERNITY

The devastation of the artisanal system of production brought about by the industrial revolution deeply unsettles and redirects the trajectory of popular culture, and in truth, of all culture. For one, it instates a separation between the privileged space of art—related to formal autonomy—and the inferior realms of handicraft, which assume a prosaic, utilitarian

function. Additionally, that revolution establishes the definitive separation between utilitarian products that are manufactured in a traditional, artisanal way, and those that are fabricated industrially. These separations become exacerbated in the postindustrial era defined by the hegemony of global markets, in which the commodification of culture and its massification through technology and media reach unprecedented levels. For this reason, the future of the popular arts largely based on handicraft seems to be conditioned by its conflicts, connections, and interminglings with Enlightened art on the one hand and mass culture on the other. This double bind raises questions about exactly how much popular art has changed.

### *The Privileges of Change*

In Latin America, much of the discourse regarding indigenous popular culture is colored by nationalist and populist discourses from which official definitions of the popular itself originate. Nationalism considers the Nation to be an integral substance incarnated by the People, conceived as a homogenous and compact social whole: an ideal subject that has nothing to do with the exclusion and misery suffered by real indigenous individuals. When made into myth, artistic production becomes a fetish or relic, a static remnant of a world condemned to extinction. Frozen in its most picturesque form, popular art is converted into a surviving example of an originary, archaic world whose integrity must be protected from the avatars of history.

This romantic view, alleged by nationalist ideologies seeking to lay the foundations of the National Being on stable ground, affirms the basic difference between cultivated and popular art. The former must continually innovate under the threat of losing its novelty; the latter must remain identical to itself if it is to avoid debasing its true values and corrupting its original authenticity. It is according to this unyielding, categorical schema, or historically prefigured script, that roles and duties are assigned; popular art corresponds to the past, cultivated art, to the future. The one must acknowledge its roots and act as a depository for the indigenous or *mestizo* soul; the other must hurtle as fast as it can down the linear and unending path of progress.

Although the present work will return to this topic, here it is worth mentioning that a similar dichotomy affects the thinking of the relation between the universal and the particular: art that is local, authentic,

original, and belonging to a specific group of people stands in opposition to universality as if the latter constituted something complete and closed, foreign. This dichotomy is responsible for that long-standing dilemma between either maintaining ancestral purity or diluting the legacy of the past in the abstract flows of the One. This false binary has promoted innumerable dichotomies and simplifications that might better have been avoided. Since its modern beginnings, Latin American art is guilty of struggling with its relation to disjunctions based on the same principle: fidelity to the memory of a specific group of people *versus* access to contemporaneity. Which is to say: backsliding in the provinces *versus* submission to the power of the metropolis. Still, it is clear that choosing between self-enclosure and alienation is pointless. The sequestering of ostensibly pristine identities turns out to be just as pernicious as the servile adoption of colonial canons. Withdrawal is not a good strategy. The best response to imperial expansion is to waylay it and to try to reformulate and transgress the rules of its game to the advantage of one's own projects.

For this reason, a question as to whether traditional cultures can or cannot change—what part of their mores should be conserved and what part sacrificed—is unfounded. Beyond the ambit of the specific cultures it involves, the question is meaningless. Any one of them is capable of adapting to new challenges, formulating responses and solutions according to its own needs. Accordingly, popular art can conserve or discard age-old traditions just as it can categorically reject or enthusiastically adopt unexpected innovations introduced by technology or artistic *avant-gardes*.

Any “authenticity” in art does not exist outside the project of the community that produces it. Consequently, any appropriation of foreign elements will be valid insofar as it represents a viable cultural option, while at the same time even the smallest imposition of foreign standards might upset the ecosystem of a subordinated culture. Obviously, this appropriation and that upheaval have nothing to do with origins or foundations: They are a political matter. As such, they point to the disputes about meaning and, again, involve the issue of difference.

### *Other Modernities*

Although Latin American popular art and the enlightened vanguard share in a common peripheral, asymmetrical condition, it is important to

note their differences in regard to the project of modernity. When popular artists, specifically indigenous ones, appropriate modern or contemporary images, they are not carrying out a straightforward program of assimilation or opposition to metropolitan languages. Such actions correspond to the strategies of survival and expansion; they naturally make use of new resources in order to continue along their own trajectories, more often than not initiated during pre-Columbian times; they seize upon figures with which they had exchanged a look of recognition or a seductive wink.

Which is to say, the use indigenous art makes of modern, occidental symbolic capital does not constitute a position systematically taken up in relation to a question of whether it is appropriate to give into the enchantments of modernity or sacrifice its “authenticity.” Consequently, these intercultural seizures, loans, or exchanges lack the gravity and guilty air that is manifest in appropriations of enlightened art by the *avant-garde*. Popular cultures utilize contemporary forms, resources, and procedures with little affectation and consideration, and can even involve themselves in circuits traditionally reserved for erudite or mass cultures with great facility.

The fact is that the subaltern’s access to modernity materializes in a way that is foreign to modern logic, and consequently, implies a blockage—if not a countervailing force—to its orderly unfolding. The pivotal themes of the modern agenda (programmatic ideology, figures of tendency, progress, modernization, and rupture, the autonomy of the aesthetic, the burden of authorship, etc.) remain absent from popular artistic production, even when it strays into fields dominated by modern rationalities. For this reason, indigenous and mestizo artists accept, or pick and choose new images and concepts insofar as they might be useful for their own purposes. When they do so with talent and conviction, the results they produce are genuine, reanimations of recent forms or old figures, authentic in their radiant impurity.

### *Other Postmodernities*

These impure processes of mixture that produce other modernities, parallel modernities, or submodernities constitute one of the forces that arise to perturb the promiscuous setting of contemporary culture. The concept of “cultural hybridity” refers in part to the vague global space in which cultivated art, massive art, and popular art coincided, deformed,

and mingled together often in a precipitous manner. There can be no question that this concept allows for an easier engagement with the thick plot of transculturation and helps mobilize arguments against epistemological realism that stereotype the popular, as well as historicisms that see enlightened development as the only true and well-founded path. But the same concept of “hybridity” becomes problematic when it betrays itself and falls into the trap of becoming an essentialized concept. This risk raises two issues: The first has to do with the “absolutization” of the fragment; the second, with the essentialization of hybridity.

*Meditations.* The first issue (in regard to the previously mentioned topic) arises in response to positions that concretize particularity and turn Diaspora into an inevitable destiny. The disrepute of totalities and foundations, and the abandonment of modern master narratives, has given way to a situation that is favorable to the pluricultural difference. Still, the proliferation of individual demands acts to the detriment of principles of universal emancipation based on Enlightenment thinking. Turned in upon themselves, positions that glorify fragmentation and consider it to be an end unto itself ultimately promote their own disarticulation and work against the possibility that they might find a shared horizon of meaning. Furthermore, when it comes to collective projects, they weaken a convergence of interests dispersed among the diverse sectors indispensable not only to the congruence of the social body but also to the effectiveness of its maneuvers. Confronted with one another by common codes for facilitating negotiation and exchange, indigenous cultures now have a better chance of inscribing their demands in a forum open to the public interest.

On the other hand, the essentialization of diversity acts as an impetus for various new sectarianism and authoritarianism, and can obscure the universalist perspective that all artistic projects must maintain within their horizon of possibility. Therein lies the necessity of once again—in light of new complexities—considering the tension between the particular and the universal. This operation demands the conceptualization of both terms not as autonomous referents or momentums in an unavoidable binary relation, but rather as variable forces whose interplay mobilizes negotiation and entails repositionings, advances, and retreats—conflicts that sometimes remain unresolved, and provisional, unforeseen solutions. Still, the confused, fecund situation in which these forces act demands a mediation of cultural politics, public spaces oriented from above by the logics of diverse sectors. Just as much as they should insure diversity,



these mediations must promote conditions conducive to intercultural confrontation. They should encourage the hope that minority rights can coexist with a vision of the greater whole: A vision that permits exchange among projects and prioritizes such exchange over the “immediatism” of individual demands, and can coordinate discourses and practices without concretizing the whole or putting difference at risk.

For this reason, it is important to introduce and establish the issue of local identity into the space of civil society, a setting designed for a negotiation of the dispute between the partisan demands and the common good. And once established there, it is expedient to link it to the figure of citizenship. If one highlights the force of the particular, the other accentuates the universal. The idea of indigenous citizenship is fundamental to formally guarantee the symmetrical conditions for the interplay between the particular and the general—the personal and the foreign—that impels the development of culture and exposes it to risk. This idea is essential to the imagination of participation of “other-peoples” in the necessary utopia of a global citizenry affirmed above and beyond difference.

*Miscellany.* Certain postmodern tendencies—generally academic and related to North American multiculturalism—glorify cultural mixing and see it as the emblem of a “typical” postmodern Latin American subject: the marginal and exotic hybrid who celebrates his ancestral rites while drinking Coca-Cola. As such, the essentialized concept of identity based on “authenticity” is replaced by the fetishized concept of identity lodged in a moment of pure mixture, and transformed into a banal potpourri: the folkloric image of extreme contemporary alterity is that which is capable of ingenuously fusing those elements that are most disparate.

Along similar lines, ideas about the abolition of all intercultural borders and the absolute deterritorialization of identity reimagine the symbolic planetary space as a homogeneous, unconflicted, and unfurled surface. With the borders lifted, and all signs and images intermingled, the new global stage is conceived as a nervous, trembling totality within whose intricate interior it becomes impossible to distinguish the signs of diversity. This position makes it difficult to recognize that although distinct cultures might look blurry at the edges, exchanging techniques, ideas, and images among themselves, and drinking—with resignation or enthusiasm—from the fount of an increasingly undifferentiated symbolic capital, each occupies a unique location from whence it partakes in the global banquet or scrounges the leftovers. And while such arguments

remain valid, indigenous cultures will nevertheless be able to stave off the domination of their matrices of signification and the particularity of their historical projects. In the face of these arguments, they will combine the ingredients of the global menu in their own way and, in response to the situation at hand, make something different out of them every time.

For this reason, although today indigenous art cannot be considered to be a complete and closed corpus, with forms that are impermeable to erudite and industrial cultures, it is important that its difference be preserved. The binary disjunctions that fatally confront the popular—caught between the Enlightened and the massive—must be dismantled. Still, this operation must not assume the happy equivalence of all forms or ignore the plurality characterizing processes of identification and subjectivity. From different positions and places of memory, facing issues that they share increasingly with one another, ethnic communities maintain the right to inscribe collective memory as they so decide, and to produce objects and events that imagine another possible future—a future whose sundry shadows can only be penetrated by a blade of images that these collectivities themselves construct.

*Brief Intersections.* With the specificity of indigenous art now having been secured, prior to concluding this article, it is fitting to mention the dealings that such art maintains with other cultural systems present on the contemporary stage: cultural massification and Enlightenment-affiliated art.

*Mass Challenges.* Regarding the first system, one begins with the fact that culture industries, mass communication, and information technologies have gained a powerful influence over the recomposition of everyday life, education, the transformation of social imaginaries and representations, and consequently, the dynamics of public space. There can be no doubt that the processes of public massification, like the homogenization and international exchange promoting the industrialization of culture, provide a wider, more equal access to universal symbolic goods, enrich local estates, and permit the active appropriation of audiences. Still, the realization of these possibilities will require the aid of favorable historical conditions: the existence of basic levels of social symmetry and cultural integration, proper functioning of elemental forms of democratic institutionality, state mediation and cultural politics capable of promoting local symbolic production and equitable transnational relations, through

the regulation of the market and synchronization of its interests with the interests of civil society.

It is obvious that these conditions have not yet come close to being established in the afflicted societies of Latin America. Consequently, there is a grave risk that, confronted with an extenuated and vulnerable sociocultural counterpart, the subjugating expansion of the new technological-cultural complex will exacerbate inequality, demolish difference, and end up holding back cultural integration—not to mention social mobility and cohesion. And so, any politics that would seek to facilitate democratic access to the new cultural market, and help this movement bolster itself with its own symbolic capital, must confront big, multidimensional issues: How will it be possible to bolster local production significantly, so as to serve as a platform for endogenous culture industries, and counterbalance transnational ones? How can they be turned into channels of democratizing experience? How can a more participatory consumption be promoted? And looking further, how will it be possible to promote social integration and convoke the presence of the State in culture? And even further still, how to eradicate exclusion and asymmetry, invigorate the public sphere, and promote effective solicitations for indigenous self-regulation?

Obviously, this article cannot seek to situate itself in relation to each of these countless questions. Nevertheless, it wishes to keep them open for discussion; such questions trace the outline of the great challenges facing traditional forms of art in the preservation of their relevance within sharply altered circumstances.

In fact, those traditional forms know how to adapt and overcome the difficulty of transiting this embroiled space. Today, negating the sharp opposition between the massive and the popular constitutes a common task in the study of culture. Running parallel to the annihilation of countless civilizing experiences, a new popular culture constituted by an active system of consumption clearly emerges: various strategies which, despite the previously mentioned asymmetries, permit the appropriation of technological and industrial systems and generate bonds with the local experience and the local project. Still, coinciding in large part with these systems—and sometimes entwined with them—models of traditional origin, organized around local symbolic matrices continue to exist, fighting to preserve their difference, while at the same time appealing to increasingly mixed forms.

*The Promiscuity of Aura.* Around the second issue—that which is concerned with the relations between indigenous art and contemporary erudite art—an unexpected coincidence appears, running parallel to the interest that the one inspires in the other, and the more or less furtive exchange they maintain. The fact is that in annulling the autonomy of art, the diffuse aestheticization of the world cancels the Kantian distinction that separates the form of the object from its uses and utilities. Contemporary art vacillates before the unforeseen turn in its privileges and the downfall of its protected dominions. In principle, the immolation of the autonomy of art—the sacrifice of aura—has a progressive meaning and corresponds to a democratizing desire: It permits the reconciliation of art and everyday life, as well as access to beauty by the masses, which will produce a happy reunion between the form and the function. But paradoxically, the old utopian dream of aestheticizing all spheres of human life has been realized not as an emancipatory conquest of art or politics, but rather as a triumph of the market—not as a basis of universal emancipation but rather as a figure of profitability on a planetary scale. The global society of information, communication, and spectacle aestheticizes everything in its path. This overabundance of instrumental reason—this metastasis of the beautiful form—neutralizes the revolutionary potential of undoing the autonomy of art. The old *avant-garde* dream is snatched away by the obliging, omnipresent images of design, media, and marketing.

In this situation, taking back the dark arena of art, recovering the disturbance of absence—the density of the auratic experience—can become a political, anti-establishment gesture, a way in which to resist the authoritarian flattening and formatting of meaning by logics of profitability. The autonomy of art has not been annulled with a view toward the liberation of creative energies constrained by the bourgeois canon; it has been annulled in the name of new imperatives of global production that makes the splintered elements of art (beauty, innovation, provocation, surprise, experimentation) into an information stimulus, a marketing commodity, or a condiment of the spectacle.

Resistance is obviously not a matter of restoring the authoritarian and idealist tradition of aura, but rather, of analyzing its critical and dissident potential: auratic distance opens a space for a play of gazes, suspends the plenitude of meaning, and permits the inscription of difference. It is at this point where indigenous art—lacking autonomy in its forms, and tense with auratic vigor—can demonstrate that the defining features

of the idealist tradition are contingent. Thus, it enables the imagination of other means by which to herald the enigma, and through the work of distance—the thrust and parry of gazes—the maintenance and upkeep of the (un)place of difference, and (un)time of the deferred.

The secret of indigenous art reserves an open space for the question and the flow of desire, without buying into those features that maintain the exclusive privilege of Enlightenment aura: individualist obstinacy, enthusiasm for synthesis and conciliation, totalizing vocation, pretensions of uniqueness, boastful claims of authenticity, or the absolute rule of the signifier. In “primitive” art, the aura that sets the object apart, and which causes it to enter into trembling dissonance with its own appearance, does not invoke the power of pure and self-sufficient form. Promiscuously, it illuminates the simmering body of all culture from within. And in a way that contemporary art can only dream of doing, it makes beauty into a small, rough vestige of the real.

## Inheritances of Carlos Colombino: Painting and the Making of a Democratic Paraguay

*Horacio Legrás*

In 2008, at the suggestion of Ticio Escobar, I contacted the plastic artist Osvaldo Salerno and asked him for permission to use one of his paintings as the cover of my book *Literature and Subjection*. Salerno graciously provided an excellent copy of a beautiful painting titled “Composición,” and only asked that in the book it was clearly acknowledged that it was the work of a Paraguayan artist. There is a small but instructive paradox in the history of this request. The petition is understandable because anybody who produces art and lives as an artist in Paraguay—but of course, the same is true of many other places in Latin America—does so against the background of enormous difficulties that are worthwhile to recall at the moment of recognition. Simultaneously, there is nothing in the painting that one may call Paraguayan. If I were to tell my readers that the painting was by an artist from Singapore or New Zealand, nobody would have objected this affirmation on the basis of the painting alone. In other words, there was nothing necessarily Paraguayan in the work of the Paraguayan artist, and yet Salerno thinks of that national determination as important and even essential to his own artistic production.

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This essay is dedicated to show how the intellectual and artistic trajectory of Carlos Colombino exemplifies the conditions that allowed a painter like Salerno—and also others—to claim feeling at home in the realm of abstract universality and at home in the realm of a national expression. Many commentators have referred to Colombino in terms of a Renaissance-like man. Although he was above all an artist, a painter, engraver, sculptor, and architect, he was also a man of letters, who published poems and novels, critical studies and quasi-ethnographic pieces on indigenous and popular cultural practices. He was a man of action, a passionate militant for democracy who experienced censorship, persecution, and exile. He was a builder of institutions in the figural and literal sense of the word builder. He founded museums and different centers devoted to the study of the visual or to the recovery of his country's rich cultural traditions. To this end, he cultivated a savvy approach to donors, international institutions, and foreign embassies.

To Colombino's eyes, all that and even more was necessary to provide the notion of Paraguayan artist with a meaning of its own. The results of his multiple involvements with the vast spheres of culture, art, and politics should not be understood, however, as a construction in any positivist form. It was from beginning to end a gift of freedom. At stake was the freedom of any Paraguayan to be an artist—that is, to validate his/her work in a sphere beyond any immediate response to his/her medium. Conversely, at stake was as well the freedom of the artist to be Paraguayan.

A first comer who is introduced to Paraguay's artistic scene through its most representative institution, the Museo del Barro which Colombino co-founded, designed, and directed, is surprised by a display that puts contemporary art on an equal footing with crafts of popular ascendancy and a variety of indigenous manifestations. As the Web page of the Museum informs, this democratic use of space is quite intentional and seeks to reflect the fact that these three components are given an equal valorization in terms of their contributions to the formation of a national culture. More importantly, this implicit conversation between popular and learned art is turned by Colombino into a principle of modern artistic production itself. There is an internal and necessary connection between popular art and contemporary aesthetics grounded in their common share of an artistic task. This relationship is not one of "citation" because this would imply a hierarchy between popular and

contemporary art that I think is absent in the design of the museum and in the creative project of Carlos Colombino. It cannot be described in terms of motives either; not only because popular and learned art do not share the same motives but more importantly because what Carlos Colombino seeks to accomplish is a revaluation of the artistic and disclosing nature of popular art, a feature that has been veiled for reasons of historical and political expediency. While this connection between the popular and the learned may be taken for granted in some contexts—I think, for instance, in Jorge Luis Borges’s revisitation of *criollismo* in his early poetry—the situation is quite different in Paraguay, where an emancipated notion of the popular seems only to be possible under the guise of what Augusto Roa Bastos described as an “absent voice/absent text.”<sup>1</sup>

### INSTITUTIONAL KEY

All the different theories of the aesthetic agree perhaps on just one point: Art needs a background from which to detach itself. Often art is nothing but this detachment. In the process of detaching itself from this background—in the process of becoming unconditional—art carries with it, however, the determinations it refuses. This becomes particularly clear when the world from which art departs is the world of art itself. Every genuine form of art wants to leave behind the inherited values, the over-used languages, and the recognizable techniques. But insofar as rupture becomes a tradition, the negated element of art is taken into account at the level of its constitution. All this is well and fine, but it provides us with a purely intellectual version of artistic creation. Intellectualism arises when we think that a given set of conditions equally grounds all possible art. But is not the figural, the kitsch or the naive that art negates to become art but its own conditions of possibility. It will be always superficial to say that realism “produced” impressionism or that the romanticism of the late eighteenth century was a reaction to the neoclassicism of post-Renaissance culture. Art does not negate its determinations by means of parody or transgression. In order to do that, art needs to be already art. Beyond what the artist or the writer may believe or say, one movement supersedes another not in terms of the failure of the previous one, but in terms of the new movement’s or style’s capacity for assertion. The conditions from which art departs are then not only different for every form of art or even for every work, but also they do not exist



in their relevance—qua conditions of possibility—before the work of art thematizes them, directly or indirectly, as such. This is why we cannot fathom the art of the future or even the art of tomorrow. For art, the invention of its future is one with the invention of its past.

Of course, all this is a matter of common sense, almost a semantic exercise in defining what for some time now we have been calling the autonomy or the sovereignty of art. This autonomy of the aesthetic has always been a contested terrain in Latin America. In this case, the freedom of art was so deeply captivated by the morality of the emerging society that the whole violence of the beautiful was necessary to shake the chains that tied the expressive word of the poet to the convenience and conventions of the time. Nobody excelled at the task as Rubén Darío, who with wicked tongue grounded the whole autonomy of modern literary expression in just one verse: “La princesa está triste... ¿Qué tendrá la princesa?”<sup>2</sup> [The princess mourns... Why is the Princess sighing?] Darío mocks decades of civic or moralizing poetry in the space of a completely banal verse; and with this gesture, he distances his poetry from any use and from any interest. One does not need to wait for Theodor Adorno to know that these lines could not have been written in Paraguay. The excessive history of the country, the ghosts after the battle of which Rafael Barrett talks in memorable lines, put the whole past to be inherited in a perspective quite different than the one that can be simply assumed by an aesthetic affirmation, even by a violent or ironic one. What does it mean that an art or an expression lacks in irony? It can only mean one thing: That the spectacle of the real is so intense, its drama so palpable, that its weight upon the subject tolerates no deviation, no second route or short circuit of meaning. It means that art has no alibi. In the geometry of meaning the direct line prevails over all other possible figures. The dominance of the line forces the aesthetic toward a gesture of self-foundation that implies, out of necessity, a dispute over the meaning of the past. But in Paraguay, many people have said, the meaning of the past is trauma. It is in an important sense a lack of meaning, the sign of an insufficient elaboration—even the lack of an attempt at elaboration since dominance, not hegemony, has been the fundamental tone of the social link for most of its modern history. Under these conditions, where the background from which art detaches itself is either lacking or so contaminated by the barbarism of domination that any use of it as a foundation—even a negative one—is tantamount to complicity, art finds its own conditions of possibility in a past that needs

to be rewritten and as it were thought anew. In doing so, art becomes political in a radical sense, because insofar as the prevalent version of the past is the ground of the domination of the present, its revisitation cannot come to pass without eliciting a series of questions and decisions that concern in principle and de facto the subject of all historical narrative and all practical undertakings.

This complex configuration in which art ties itself to history and the world commands three strategies that demark Colombino's intricate cultural project: First, this project, whose complexity will become apparent only as we progress in its interpretation, cannot be the doing of an isolated individual. It entails a practical dimension that demands a politics of friendship grounded on a commonality of feeling. This means that it is difficult to speak of the institutional, political, and cultural horizon of Carlos Colombino's work without incorporating into the discussion, at least, the names of Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno to name just the two long-standing friends in this politics.

In the second place, this politics does not express itself in terms of opinion but it takes the form of a doing. It is not my intention to ignore the multiple political commitments in the life of Colombino, because they are both meaningful and abundant. When I say that this politics is a doing, I am pointing to the fact that the revaluation of popular art is a fundamental determination of the production of learned art in the present. After all, we have to ask ourselves: Why do modern, conceptual artists deeply interested in challenging the authoritarian traits of their society and their incarnation in different dictatorial governments spent hundreds of hours collecting and curating religious artifacts and indigenous masks; discussing with anthropologists and combing the countryside in search of altarpieces; seeking funding to open museums, publish books and find venues for the display of popular artifacts side by side with modern artistic productions?

The intervention favored by this art takes the form of a disputation about the meaning and significance of the popular in history. In official history, the popular is often revered but also immobilized and put to rest. The people are not perceived in their becoming, and this historical stiffness jeopardizes the political charge of the concept, since the people, we can say with Jacques Rancière, is nothing but its becoming.<sup>3</sup> Any determination of the people as either this or that remains always profoundly anti-political because it does away with the sovereignty of the political to draw and redraw the coordinates of social existence.

Colombino needs to contemplate the popular in its becoming and to this end he seeks to capture the popular at the level in which becoming is the rule and not the exception. The realm in which change prevails absolutely is the realm of art itself. Obviously, the problem is not one of simply renaming crafts as art. The artistic nature of the craft is not obvious. It has to be unveiled and exhibited. What is important here is that the unveiling and exhibition of the artistic creates a continuity between popular art and contemporary art and provides a renewed foundation for the political claims of the committed artists. Popular art is the background from which modern Paraguayan art detaches itself, and this detaching becomes its foundation.

Those familiar with the Paraguayan context will not have troubles recognizing an air of familiarity between this treatment of the popular and the one executed by Augusto Roa Bastos in *I the Supreme* and other novels. Colombino was a sophisticated reader of Roa Bastos, and he was conscious of the parallelisms between what he set out to accomplish in the realm of the artistic and what Roa Bastos has accomplished in the realm of literature. The difficulties of Colombino's project are not only of a different nature of that of the writer but also, perhaps, higher. Roa Bastos's denunciation of the tradition of sovereign exceptionality in Paraguay could feed from the historical record itself—to which is tied by the nature of the medium: language—and from a larger imaginary sphere which at the time of the publication of the novel, in 1974, have already engendered the canon of the “novela del dictador.” It is in the horizon of books like Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* that González Echevarría established an intimacy between the archives of the law and the state on the one hand, and the production of literature on the other for the whole history of Latin American literature—including its colonial past.<sup>4</sup> Tradition weights differently in the case of the painter. This is so, in part, because in areas of high levels of illiteracy, the visual sphere tends to be much more controlled than the sphere of writing. When one thinks of the most immediate visual evidence of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Paraguay, the body of work seems to coalesce under two equally policed realms: the religious iconography and the emblems of the state. In *I the Supreme*, Roa Bastos was able to evoke the duplicitous nature of writing (and henceforth of literature) under the recurring pamphlets that forced the dictator to sequester even the paper from the city. Where can the beginning of a counter-history appear in the sphere of the figure? And even before that: Why is such counter-history necessary?

The counter-history is necessary because it exists. An exemplar of its elicitation is the work undertaken by the Museo del Barro on the soldier-engravers of the Great War (1864–1870) and whose drawings appeared in a number of war newspapers such as the *Cabichuí*, *Cacique Lambaré*, and *El Centinela*. Osvaldo Salerno and Lia Colombino, curators of an exhibition of these engravings, were careful to recover the names of these artists along their work: Inocencio o Ignacio Aquino, M. Perina, Francisco Ocampo, JBS, J. Bargas, Gerónimo Gregorio Cáceres, Gregorio Baltasar Acosta, Francisco Velasco. Names are not just a form of belated justice to these creators. It is an assertion of finitude. Since we have the names of the soldier-artist, we know that these productions do not belong to the eternal spirit of the popular. Finitude, in turn, acts as a clue to deduce the value of work implicit in the work of art.

As in the example just quoted, the rescue and revalorization of popular drawings and carvings do not uncover an alternate tradition of popular expression, but rather wrestle the existing one from the interpretive grip of the church and the militarized state. Of course, the religious engraver produces religious images, but let us ask ourselves, What is it that gives these images the power to signify outside their most immediate and obvious context, e.g., a church? What is that the religious woodcut signifies once it is placed in the context of a museum, like the Museo del Barro? Their signification is in this case sustained by the excess of the material over the conceptual. A popular, liberating art is not such in terms of its message, but rather in terms of the work encrypted in its objects, on the manual rather than an intellectual aspect of the artistic act. This re-evaluation of popular art completely reverses the venerable Kantian tradition of the primacy of the formal over the material. It is in the materiality itself of the popular tradition that Colombino and his friends “read” the art-like character of these productions. It is in terms of the material considered as something else than support for the work that allows us to think that even the artisan artist who worked under an ideological or religious yoke managed to turn his/her labor into a product that testifies to something else than a complete subsumption or even annihilation of his/her singularity in the conventionalism in which the craft finds its immediate justification.

Neither citation nor an identity of motives serves as a bridge between a re-imagined form of popular art and artistic production in the present. Learned art repeats the fundamental gesture of the popular in the very form of its production. In this way, the form and meaning of the

contemporary work become a clue to understanding the operation performed upon a popular cultural legacy. This repetition is essential for the existence of a counter-history. Otherwise, we would be confronted with the absurd situation of a history which has dried up in the sterility of its initial gesture—which is precisely the dominant position regarding the exegesis of the popular. The modern artist has to make of work, materiality, and finitude the non-deconstructible elements of his/her own artistic practice. Colombino's art exhibits the laborious nature of aesthetic creation. When Colombino irrupts in the plastic scene of Paraguay in the sixties, he does so through the presentation of a new technique, the *xilopintura* which consists in carving a wood surface as if it were to be used to imprint another material (paper or cloth) but in order to use it instead as the work itself, which is then completed by painting its surface in the traditional oleo fashion. The thread thus created between the tradition of the engraver or the carver of religious figures and the quasi-abstract but committed painter is clearly non-thematic in nature. It is a relationship that we may call situational. The present production of art brings with it a condition of possibility that has always inhabited the work of the popular artisan but was never thought as such, in part because the integration of the material support into the work itself is a modernist accomplishment.<sup>5</sup>

This redescription of the popular as the work of art liberates popular objects (the altar piece, the engravings in the *Cabichuí*, or the religious carving) from the historical limbo to which it has been consigned by the negation of the political nature of the people. Conversely, it is the repetition of this process of grounding and the use of the popular as a reference and as a horizon of contemporary aesthetic production that inscribes so firmly this production in a dimension that is politically meaningful in a most immediate way. The politicization of the present is dependent on the politicization of the past, and both are achieved by aesthetic means. This operation on the popular seriously disturbed the unanimity that the discourse of power had cast upon the life of the people. Its political consequences are immediate and more far-reaching than the activities that cost Colombino censorship and rejection.

Third, and the last strategy: It is the instinct that defines the institution. Although Colombino was a maker of institutions, not all of them are permeated by the same instinct. Impressive as the restoration and conversion of the Manzana de la Rivera into a multi-artistic cultural center is, the project does not carry with it the same distinguishable

personal imprint that is visible in the Museo del Barro. From the street where the *Museo* sits (*Grabadores del Cabichui*), to the name of the Museum itself, the disposition of its rooms, the patios as space for recreation, the cultural, educational, and social uses to which the Museum is put, everything bespeaks here the ambitions and effectiveness of Colombino's vision. Simultaneously, nothing has been left to chance and everything has been arranged in such a fashion that life—and chance itself—can breathe in its space. In other words, no element in the Museum should be grasped in isolation. In the Museo del Barro, the frontiers between high art and popular art are not abolished but rather shown in their mutual interconnectedness. Such interconnectedness is not a given, but rather the product of an operation that the Museum itself exemplifies. In a striking inversion, the Museum comes—at least conceptually—before the work, because it is designed to contain the horizon from which the work itself detaches to become meaningful. The reason for being of the *Museo* is inextricable from the actuality of the political project of its members. Its space contains works as much as it contains people and their hopes. The Museum appears as an instance where the counter-history can take place in the presence of a democratic horizon.

At the *Museo del Barro* contemporary conceptual art, an art which in itself is not popular exists alongside the popular. In a strong sense, it is this “existing along” that the project envisions as its horizon of comprehensibility. The coextensiveness between the work of art and the recapitulation of the popular is secured through a double process that I will call reference and grounding. Both notions are in an inextricable relationship with each other, so that the more we describe the dimension of reference the sooner we end up in the realm of grounding. Reference does not offer just the possibility of perceiving the contemporary work of art against the background of the essential division between the urban, the rural, and the indigenous as three layers of manifestation of a Paraguayan spirit. Neither do references relate to the religious wood cut, the recovered altarpiece, or the ceramic just in terms of their objectivity. It relates to them at the level of their ability to manifest a form of habitation, seeking to describe the dense world that goes into the act of carving, the festivity implicit in the completion of an altarpiece, the communion alluded to in the design of a mask or the laborious hands that sustained the creationism of the ceramist. This is the exact point at which reference becomes grounding. Popular art may work—although does not necessarily work—as one referent from which the contemporary work of art

detaches itself to become art: It provides to new art with a context even in the process of its withdrawal.

### IN A PERSONAL KEY

At stake is the work of an artist, who needed to be more than himself in order to be the one artist he wanted to be. The dialectics of grounding tells us that the artist is characterized above all by his/her capacity for asserting. Whatever the artist asserts, a community of interpreters arises correlative to his/her statement. This process is far from pristine. Carlos Colombino has an internationally recognized career. He was invited to present his works in different institutions and venues. He won several international prizes—which sometimes resulted in censorship and persecution in his own country. His works have been purchased or are in exhibition in museums around the world, from Rio de Janeiro to Los Angeles, from Lisbon to Texas. In all these different spheres, he was welcomed as a Paraguayan artist that spoke in a particular intonation the universal language of modern art. In several occasions, Ticio Escobar mentioned the duality between Colombino's attention to the local or the historical on the one hand and to the formalism proper of contemporary art on the other. In *Colombino. La forma y la historia*, we read that both “the quests and the solutions of his work answer as much to the intrinsic requirements that are formal in nature as they answer to questions and challenges posed by history in an everyday bases.”<sup>6</sup>

We will miss Escobar's point if we read his description as suggesting something along the lines of a universal treatment of a local problematic. Universal treatment of the local is the formula of exoticism. Exoticism, in turn, is always grounded in that imaginary dimension of the intercultural of which the work of Homi Bhabha remains the most subtle and profound description.<sup>7</sup> Colombino's work is utterly irreducible to any attempt of exoticism not only because of the formalist, uncommunicative nature of his trace, but more importantly because if something is communicated in it is the resistance that reality puts to any and every form of domestication. Of this site of resistance to symbolization, Jacques Lacan says that is the mark of the real itself.<sup>8</sup> An art that hinges on the real is a realist art. By realism, I do not mean an artistic school to which Colombino clearly did not subscribe, but rather an openness to the most immediate condition of production. Realism means this vitality of the artistic expression by which art, in general, is tied—to say it with

Heidegger—to the disclosure of the “there” of the artist. The system of references, which in the case of the Museo del Barro unifies in a single set indigenous masks and the work of a Migliorisi, is ultimately grounded in this obstinate realism that is always, preeminently, the obstinacy of art in relation to its “there.”<sup>9</sup>

That Colombino was worried by the possibility of exoticism is proved, to my mind, by the distance that he always kept between the popular traditions that he unearths and the composition of his own works. Such a distance does not arise from a misconception of popular art as naive art. The xilogravers of the Cabichuí or the carvers of sacred images represented in the Duarte Burró collection or even in the collection of *retablos* that Colombino was determinedly collecting for many years, worked under conditions which are not unlike those that prevail in the case of the modern artist. They too have to affirm the immediateness of their existence in a medium that was permeated by an awareness of the universalized features of representation: be it the long history of Christian iconography or the neoclassical and republican iconography of the political. Colombino reads these aesthetic interventions in terms of the same radical realism that he applies to his own compositions, even if for the popular artist was the yoke of religious–military domination that kept his/her gaze fixed to the transcendental, while for Colombino is the brutal force of history that condemns him to an endless engagement with the real. This is why what matters in popular productions is not the “message” that can be so easily policed, projected, or reworked, but the work itself as that site where the artist declares the uniqueness of his/her relation to the world. What matters is the brute matter which is no longer brute although it still retains a primordial reference to the world, as Colombino’s *xilopinturas* retain the flavor of the wood from which its figures never quite manage to detach. The reading of the past creations and the connection to the present are made in terms of what remains beyond the grasp of any appropriation, in terms of what cannot be iterated under the form of any ideality: The artistic act itself, which while vanishing in the work, leaves its mark in the material.

One can always object that this form of realism is normative in modern art. Picasso introduced pieces of newspapers in his paintings, and Paul Klee added clips and pieces of wood to his work. Imitating them, Edward Weston sought to give to his photography the ruggedness of the real wood and the luminous sensuality of the actual pepper. Already in the late nineteenth century, Auguste Rodin, with a full theory of art



as a formative creation on his back, envisioned a hand emerging from a chunk of marble into the light of forms and gave it the title of “The hand of God or Creation.” These examples are instructive because they diverge so much from the work that occupies us here. In Colombino, the play between material support and figure is much more subtle than in the previous examples. There is not detaching and no creation—at least in the idealized form that it takes place in Rodin. In Rodin, the power of art is still attached to an ideology of beautiful form as an agency that proposes an order out of the chaos of the undetermined. In Colombino, the bodies or part of bodies that emerge from the woodcuts are not triumphantly detaching themselves from a dark bottom. His figures live in a certain indecision regarding the exact limits between the body and what with Merleau-Ponty we may call “the flesh of the world.”<sup>10</sup> The carver of religious images worked under the command to re-produce in the present a constellation of already assigned meanings, and yet it was possible for him/her to testify to the immediate and irreplaceable present of the work in the very resistance of the wood to the strokes of the *talla*. Likewise, the rugged surfaces of Colombino’s *xilopinturas* speak of the resistance that the immediate surroundings provide to the project of the artist. And we know, how difficult it is to comment on the meaning of Colombino’s painting, how much the presence of the material imposes itself on the viewer, interposes itself between the image and the possibility of interpretation.

A deep-seated suspicion of ideality is expressed in this difficult emerging of the human from its background. The concept of what appears—fingers, hands, arms, heads, figures—appears also as the criticism of the concept. The wood that threatens the figure with re-absorption is also a figure of home, and home is always the declaration of the power of art to confront and vanquish the feeling of the uncanny. What the woodcut is saying is simply yes, we belong here. The whole counter-history is there to prove the soundness of the judgment. Actually, its belonging is so intense, that at times, it seems that the wood only lacked a little bit of adventurousness to produce by itself and without the mediation of the artist the figure that so delicately merges into its texture. One needs to go back to Zeuxis to find, on the other side of artistic technique, such a radical form of realism.

To the double determination of Colombino’s art as simultaneously local and universal, Ticio Escobar adds another one, a layer of personal expression ciphered in anguished, contained figures of pain and

suffering. This expressive trait, over present in Colombino's work and which often results in the production of grotesque figures, enters into a sort of contradiction with the increasing purification of his work. Seeing in rapid historical succession, there is in his art a steady cleansing of different elements in favor of a formalism that ends up underlying the world as a mere stage that was once occupied by figures either pitiful or heroic. We can locate this shift that takes the figure of the artist itself as its object around the time of Colombino's vast engagement with the work of Durero, a project that starts in 1974 and withers away as Colombino advances in the relocation of the Museo del Barro to Asunción and in the establishment of different collections of popular and indigenous art in collaboration with Osvaldo Salerno.

If the pain is not eased by the virtual disappearance of the human figure (which is, in this case, the synecdoche of sympathy), this is so because the event to which this pain alludes surpasses any immediate reference and reaches the conditions of possibility of the work itself. I will give the name of solitude to this expressionist trait in Colombino's art to underline another condition to be added to the motives of emotions and personal angst underscored by Escobar.

On the one hand, solitude seems to be the destiny of all artists. The modern artist dances alone. His/her work involves a whole set of institutions, dispositions, practices, forms of reception, and circulation which are communal in nature. But it is only through the utter severance of his/her voice and sight from the general chorus of the present that the artist is allowed to enter the dance. The solitude of the artist is enhanced by the untimely nature of art. The proposition that art lives in a sort of afterlife is not one that we can dismiss as a metaphysical reverie, of which the latest and most notorious instantiation belongs to the work of Giorgio Agamben.<sup>11</sup> Modern art is untimely because in detaching itself from one of its original determinations, it ended up carrying that determination inside itself as one of its conditions of possibility. We hear that poetry was once religious incantation, painting invocation to the gods of good fortune, statuary an apotropaic gesture toward the dead. But what is the meaning of that "once"? And if poetry has ceased to be incantation and painting an invocation, what fine thread still unite the expressions of the present to those of the past, forcing us to use the same names for what look like as two quite different activities? As a culture, we have certainly left behind these ancillary functions of the artistic; however, these functions survive in the work at a structural and structuring level.

Art has as one of its conditions of possibility this remembrance of a time in which a knit community was the recipient of its word and the boundaries of its sense. This is the determination of the artistic that Kant transcribes punctiliously under the form of the paradoxical universality of the aesthetic judgment—in other words, the conviction that the beautiful concerns everyone. What does it mean that in principle art does concern and must concern everyone? It means, that modern art—the only art—has conquered its universality at the very moment that it lost its world. Actually, the difference between world and universe has become meaningless from an artistic perspective. Under the old conditions, although roles did exist, it did not matter who was doing the speaking and who was doing the listening, because the circuit itself returned always to the same point. Modern art has irremediably broken with this orbital model, but art itself is structured along the lines of its ghost.

It is at this level, I believe, that we should grasp the referential value that indigenous expression has for this project. The indigenous does not seem to hold the same weight in Colombino's artistic creation as the manifestations of mestizo expression in its sacred and secular intonations. As far as the art and the artist are concerned, the indigenous is co-present although not contemporaneous. We do not haste to condemn this lack of contemporaneity as yet another colonial practice grounded in a "denial of coevalness."<sup>12</sup> In the same way that not all twos form a binary, not all asymmetries are made of imperial disavowals. As in the case of the relationship to the mestizo religious art, the link proposed to indigenous expression remains strictly ethical in nature, provided that by ethical we understand not the dreams and nightmares of sympathy, but rather the relationship to an otherness that remains beyond thematization. In the case of the mestizo religious expression, the ethical link to the past is secured in terms of the repetition of a relationship to the material production of the work as the anchorage of artistic expression in the *there* of its situation. In the case of the indigenous, the link to contemporaneous art is provided by those forms of effective communality that I described above as structural conditions of the work of art (in virtue of which it concerns everybody) but performed under forms of existence permeated by the de-realization of aesthetic expression in the horizon of its utter impotence—or disinterest. It is when the artist looks at itself in the mirror of indigenous art that he/she can become conscious of the full depth of his/her solitude.

Dressed in the language of the ethnographer, Carlos Colombino comments on the *kamba ra'anga*, a festivity centered in the use of

masks, which, unsurprisingly, are well represented in the permanent collection of the Museo del Barro. Tellingly, Colombino subtitles his essay: “The last masks.” As the essay itself makes clear, Colombino perceives in the mask a remnant of a bygone function of art—and this despite the fact that the festivity of *rúas* that he describes have had a sort of revival in Paraguay in the last years. The essay is not always transparent in its communicational intention, a fact that bears witness to the difficulty of accommodating indigenous traditions and their masks in the general ensemble that Colombino is putting in place. We read that the *kamba ra’anga* is a colonial tradition, an impersonation of a black person in the context of a festivity that recalls for Colombino the *autos sacramentales*. There are in the *rúa* some carnivalesque features that would be obscene in the context of the sacramental act. The *kamba ra’anga* not only wears a mask but dresses itself in old clothes and sometimes in women clothes as well. Several passages make clear that the forgetting of the connection of this art to its immediate context is one with its drift into the space of art. These manifestations reach us devoid of their original force since they lack “the attachment to immediate life, the belonging to a history, and the capacity to exorcise collective fears by turning them into a form of art by the very power of a *mise-en-scène*.”<sup>13</sup> It is not farfetched, I believe, to postulate that these three conditions—attachment, belonging, and exorcism, which correspond to what I have called grounding, reference, and solitude—are the conditions of art in general. The mourning for a bygone indigenous tradition is one with the mourning of the incantatory function of art, with its ability to express and ground a community. The solitude of the modern artist emerges as a correlation with the structural impossibility of art to play its ancient role in a collective catharsis. Hence, perhaps, the melancholic tone of the closing sentence of the essay, where, in a figuration that is tellingly Western and almost classical, the *kamba ra’anga* is described as “Fragments of a vase that will remain broken for all eternity.”<sup>14</sup>

Although contextually significant, the mask is not itself an element that is revisited or re-elaborated in the work of Colombino. All in all, it seems to me that the playfulness of the mask is relatively absent from his pictorial work. (Of course, Colombino the *conversador* was a completely different thing as the interview included in this volume testifies.) Colombino makes certain attempt at irony in the 1970s with xilographies such as “El mariscal del aire,” “El cosmonauta,” or “El general a cuerda.” But the trace of irony becomes manifest in the verbal

dimension. When the work itself becomes too ironic, it menaces its own structural integrity. In the end, any reference to the immediate is subjected to an economy of representation in which what is really primordial are the motives of reference and grounding. This much, I believe, is suggested by a late *xilopintura* like “Silla” [chair]. In this work, we have the usual treatment of wood as simultaneously support and theme of the composition. In the foreground, there is a figure of three quarters of a chair whose horizontal endings merge with a wooden wall. On the left, the chair grows feathered wings which are neither thriving nor defeated. The whole ensemble is tied together with the recognizable ropes that traverse so many of Colombino’s compositions and which yesterday symbolized prison and torture, but in the today of this work point to other significations as well. They may point, for instance, to a meta-representational figuration of the principle of reference itself. Reference could even be said to be thematized in this painting. The *silla* in question certainly implies a reference to “Silla tomada”—an object that Colombino presented in 1983, and to the *xilopintura* “La silla.” But while “Silla” shows us a figure in dialogue with the rest of the artist’s work, “La silla” is a representation of a ruined world with its chair barely standing in a landscape marked by desolation. We could certainly multiply the associations, bringing in the process an air of world. The figured chair may evoke the projected museum of Paraguayan furniture, the wings attached to it, the feather *ñanduti* collection housed in the Museo del Barro, the wooden wall that secures the chair may refer to an expression finally satisfied with its moorings in a reality that have managed to constitute rather than suffer, and the whole work may well signify the fatality of an existence that can be experienced, also, as a form of freedom.

## NOTES

1. In Roa Bastos the expressions “absent voice” and “absent text” refer to the structuring role played by Guaraní in verbal and literary expression in Paraguay. Although Paraguayan literature is written in Spanish, Roa Bastos argues that its deep structure is provided by the affective tonalities of the indigenous language. See Augusto Roa Bastos, “El texto cautivo. Apuntes de un narrador sobre la producción y la lectura de textos bajo el signo del poder cultural,” *Hispanamérica* 30 (1981), 7.
2. Rubén Darío, *Prosas profanas* (Madrid: El Mundo, 1918), 36.

3. In Rancière's eyes, a political event is defined by the presence of the people as a political actor. However, in any political action those who mobilized themselves do so to reject or abandon a previous state of things. It follows then that the people can only emerge or appear as an active negation of whatever identity they have represented so far. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy, Philosophy*, transl. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 85.
4. Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive. Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 9–10.
5. See my reference to Picasso, Paul Klee and Edward Weston below.
6. Ticio Escobar, *Colombino. La forma y la historia* (Asunción: El lector, 1985), 6.
7. I use the term “exoticism” in the same sense that Homi Bhabha uses the word “stereotype.” Stereotypes are ready made notions that live off the disavowal of actual inter-subjective exchanges. In the psychoanalytic emphasis that underlines Bhabha's argument, stereotypes are grounded on imaginary relationships, while true communication bespeaks the primacy of the symbolic. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 75.
8. Lacan's consistent use of the notion of “real” to denote whatever is not symbolized begins with his first two seminars in the 1953–1955 period. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar I. Freud's Papers on Technique*, transl. by John Forrester (New York: Norton and Co. 1988), 66.
9. My reference here is, of course, to Martin Heidegger's analysis of Da-Sein as that entity which in producing itself reveals the essential features of the surrounding world. For Heidegger see *Being and Time*, transl. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008), 147–149.
10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, transl. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 148.
11. Agamben plays repeatedly with the motive of the death and impossible dismissal of art, what condemns artistic expression to a sort of nocturnal after-life. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Contents*, transl. by Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
12. My reference here is to Johannes Fabian by now classical treatment of “denial of coevalness.” See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other, How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31.
13. Carlos Colombino, *Kamba ra'anga. Las últimas máscaras* (Asunción: Museo del Barro, 1989), 11.
14. *Ibid.*, 41.

# Interrupted Visions of History: Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Newspapers and the History of (Popular) Art in Contemporary Paraguay

*Sebastián J. Díaz-Duhalde*

This chapter explores the critical work of Josefina Plá, Ticio Escobar, and Osvaldo Salerno, three of the most salient art historians of Paraguay who have focused their work on the nineteenth-century Paraguayan illustrated newspapers *El centinela* (The Sentinel) and *Cabichuí* (Wasp). These newspapers were published during the war that the Triple Alliance of Argentina, Uruguay, and the Brazilian Empire waged against Paraguay from 1864 to 1870.<sup>1</sup> My analysis is an attempt at meta-criticism in that I approach a vexing question regarding visual representations produced during a nineteenth-century war from a contemporary perspective. I pursue this inquiry in keeping with an interest in understanding

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twentieth-century forms of criticism that, for the first time, opened up the very possibility of studying nineteenth-century popular art using newspapers. Even though the notion of the “popular” was inaugurated inside the hegemonic practices of the State to monopolize meaning (as these newspapers were part of the State media complex), at the same time, I claim, Plá, Escobar, and Salerno consider the “popular” as a new arrangement for reading and understanding art in the history of Paraguay as well as the Paraguayan history of art.

In the following pages, I offer a reading of these weekly publications to highlight not only the craftsmanship of amateur Paraguayan soldiers who wrote the articles and printed the accompanying illustrations but also to consider the reinterpretation of popular origins that has enabled nineteenth-century critics to convert these papers into political statements about their own space and time. Forming a visual and textual community of meanings, these war newspapers came to be acknowledged, as well as included in cultural and historiographical analyses as unique products of Paraguay. This is important because they combine both the material of contemporary art criticism and a methodology to account for history and art history as a discipline.

Three driving forces guide my reading of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*. The first accounts for specific contexts of production, consumption, and circulation of the newspapers at the front. *El centinela* was published in Asunción, and *Cabichuí* was produced in strategic points near the battlefield in Paraguay. Written and illustrated by soldiers and produced in both Guaraní and Spanish, these Paraguayan journals lasted one year (roughly from 1867 to 1868) and disappeared with the death of the soldiers who produced them. The second reflection aims at articulating a reception reading of the nineteenth-century Paraguayan newspapers in the context of a quite different Paraguay: that of the second half of the twentieth century. When art historians Josefina Plá, Ticio Escobar, and Osvaldo Salerno turned their attention to these illustrated newspapers for the first time in the 1960s, they considered these tabloids as bearers of popular resistance with meanings that defy hegemonic power. Especially under Alfredo Stroessner’s rule (1954–1989), art historians started to suggest that the Paraguayan people participating in those newspapers (both as producers and as readers) were able to claim for themselves institutional channels and media to forge a new power, the power of popular expression. The third and final inquiry explores the





Guaraní) on its pages, and for the massive use of wood engravings, a colonial practice abandoned and replaced by lithography in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Also, both newspapers were edited, written, illustrated, and printed mostly by soldiers and *letrados* related to Francisco Solano López's government. Intellectuals such as Natalicio Talavera, Juan Crisóstomo Centurión, Tristán Roca (founder of *El centinela*), and the North American journalist Porter Bliss were responsible for the written pieces. Soldiers at the battlefield were in charge of visual representations, and perhaps they taught the basics of visual art to their fellow soldiers as they were under attack at the front. Some of them were renowned already in Paraguay such as Saturio Ríos, Manuel Colunga, and Alejandro Ravizza. But the majority of the engravers did not enjoy the same reputation: A shy signature identifies a few of them. For instance, G.I. Aquino, Gerónimo Gregorio Cáceres, M.S. Perina, F. Ocampos, J.B.S., Gregorio Baltasar Acosta, J. Bargas y Francisco Velasco, and the rest remain anonymous or lost in an unclear signature impossible to recognize.

There are no exact numbers that account for the circulation of these illustrated papers. Paper and ink shortage may indicate a far from massive print run. Maritime commerce with foreign markets had been interrupted due to the Imperial navy's blockade of the River Plate Basin. Thus, *Cabichuí* and *El centinela* were printed on paper made with local tree cores (*caraguatá* and *ybyrá*). The ink was crafted using black bean pigments (*porotos*).

*El centinela* claimed itself to be "a serious and comical newspaper." Its pages were full of laughable criticisms to the Triple Alliance, yet many written pieces remained formal, judicious, and extremely well supported by arguments. In this fashion, it remained very close to the Argentinean, the Uruguayan, or the Imperial press, otherwise known as "erudite press."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, *Cabichuí* was a textual and visual parody of the newspapers that circulated at the battlefield and in the home front. Packed with insults, racial slurs, and merciless jokes against all "the enemies of Paraguay," *Cabichuí's* discourse represented Alliance's soldiers as *cambá* (slaves) of the Brazilian Empire.<sup>6</sup> Presidents did not receive better treatment: They were portrayed as animals—the Emperor Pedro II as a monkey, Bartolomé Mitre as a goat or a dog, and Venancio Flores as a donkey or a dog (Fig. 7.2). Thus were the coordinates to talk about the conflict: "Praise to the Commander in Chief, extol to the soldier's bravery and women's patriotism, demonization of the enemy."<sup>7</sup> Referred to as *matamoros* (moor slayer), the Paraguayan soldier was introduced as a perfect fusion of Guaraní and Spanish cultures.<sup>8</sup>

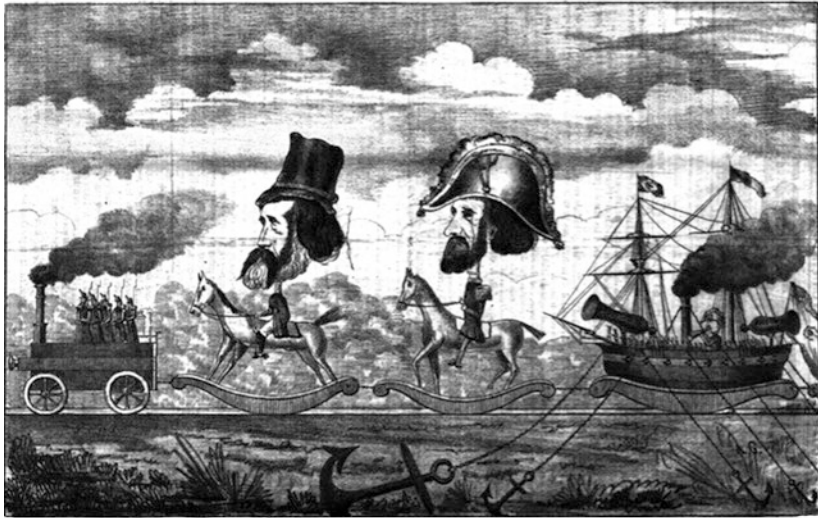


Fig. 7.2 “The Triple Alliance: The Brazilian Emperor riding Mitre, followed by Flores.” *Cabichuí*. August 12, 1867, 3

Alliance newspapers followed visual styles set forth by European models for political satire and social parody. The French *Le Charivari* and *La Caricature*, both illustrated by Honoré-Victorien Daumier, and the British *Punch* were imitated and used to shadow a cosmopolitan visual culture in the River Plate Basin, São Paulo, and the Carioca court.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* shared a unique visual language in the continent during this century, separate from European visual idioms: unprepared artist, local comedy, and woodcuts overlap on their pages. This unique merger created the possibility to consider these newspapers as spaces for popular expression.<sup>10</sup>

By comparing Figs. 7.3 and 7.4, it becomes apparent how the Paraguayan tabloids presented two different visual dynamics with a radical dissimilar economy in their deployment of visual resources. *La Alianza marcha a vapor ...* (Fig. 7.3) from the Uruguayan *El pica-pica* resorts to an archetypal nineteenth-century caricature style, which features silent people with small bodies and big heads. Their static and sharp facial

## ACTUALIDAD



De este modo la cuestion Caballos • igual á.....Cero...  
La Alianza marcha á Vapor...

Fig. 7.3 “La Alianza Marcha a Vapor.” *El pica-pica. Periódico picante y de caricaturas*. July 22, 1866

expressions enable the audience to perfectly identify the public figures to which they refer. In this case, the public figures are Venancio Flores and Bartolomé Mitre, mounted on two wooden toy horses. On the other hand, *Cabichni*'s image of the Uruguayan General Castro “scared in his pants” by explosions (Fig. 7.4) is a wood engraving with simple lines that is able to create perspective, expressions, depicted here as eyes full of horror, and sequence, exemplified by the bomb detonating in the air next to Flores's tent, followed by his leaving the tent, and then his disgrace in his pants. The composition is thus distant from a foreign “visuality” or from forms that mimic the European designs for caricature, as Alliance newspapers showcase.<sup>11</sup>

There was a period, before and during the war, that was tantamount to the apogee of communication and media in Paraguay. Francisco Solano López had organized the highly technological National Press right after the end of his father's presidency, Carlos Antonio López (1844–1862). He moved it to a permanent site to upgrade the machinery that was



**Fig. 7.4** “El General Castro asustado en sus pantalones por las bombas.”  
*Cabichuí*. August 26, 1867, 2

hitherto quasi-colonial. The National Press built itself up to become one of the most powerful communications and broadcasting media networks boasting the longest tradition in the region.

From the early 1700s, the itinerant press from the Jesuit Missions had been a pioneer in the vast territories of the Viceroyalty of Perú, side by side with Lima's.<sup>12</sup> The project of modernizing the printing press bore fruits just as a new lettered community was maturing. Thanks to this modern press *El paraguayo independiente* emerged—this was the medium where they published official announcements, edicts, and other

updates on Paraguay's situation in regard to other nations in the region; *El eco del Paraguay* was a fleeting attempt to produce independent journalism; the journal of the *Aula de Filosofía*, *La Aurora*, *El semanario de avisos y conocimientos útiles*, which substituted *Paraguay independiente* as the official bulletin, added literary publications, theater reviews, editorials, and so on.

Identified as “the” Paraguayan Press, these publications were clearly framed as a national project of lettered productions. In other words, the National Press was the material catalyst of a very specific cultural production in the country, both cultivated and written in Spanish, already in line with stately practices to define “one’s” culture, i.e., the national culture. The use of the press as the government’s instrument was very widespread and it peaked during the war against the Triple Alliance, which contrasts with the obvious decimation of the “cultivated elite” and the technological conditions of the letterpresses during the times of peace. But during the war, the newspapers became massive, and as instruments of propagation, they acquired a “modern” scale. This transformation is accounted for by the fact that Paraguay was at war. It is crucial that the growth of media and the military as producer and consumer of the former is understood as the propeller for the journalistic, literary, and visual production, and the production of meaning as well as an enormous scope of distribution during the war years.

The media complex was part of Marshal Solano López’s strategy to inform, form, and deform a massive audience that was fully or partially militarized. López was able to enroll and to mobilize almost all Paraguayan men from 12 to 70 years old to the front and to organize the majority of the civilian population to assist the army.<sup>13</sup> The illustrated newspapers were censored by López, who was in charge of all decisions regarding the visual and textual content of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*. Capdevila even suspects that there was also a “mandatory” practice of reading the newspapers out loud to the soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Undeniably, they were financed and upheld by the government, thereby becoming available and visible to the public, and therefore they can be regarded as part of the State apparatus. The cultural analysis of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* is often blurred by the fact that the newspapers were State-financed publications. Reducing these cultural expressions to López’s war propaganda takes away from the meaningful expression of visual forms and the complexities of the written word. As much as they perform a propagandistic function, the newspapers can be also read as a

locus of mass propagation and popular participation of the Paraguayan people, one unique in Latin America.

On the one hand, the appearance of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* together with *Lambaré*, *La estrella* and *El semanario* created a network for a massive audience that included different languages, covered distant locations, and grouped conflicting social classes inside Paraguay before and during the war. On the other hand, they were written for the first time under the Republic (from 1811 onwards) in a vernacular language that is not Spanish, the official language of the State, and engraved by soldiers without academic or any formal training.

In sum, the illustrated Paraguayan newspapers have been interpreted in these aforementioned distinct directions. The first implies the creation of a document incapable of informing the audience, which disguises or ventriloquizes power in order to manipulate the populace. This strategy works in tandem with a historiographical discourse during the twentieth century that eulogizes the “lettered” soldier and the abnegation of a patriotic people able to wield both the pen and the sword to fulfill “the honorable and sacred commitment at the altar of a threatened motherland.”<sup>15</sup> A second standpoint from which newspapers have been studied is as a means/medium of propagation of popular voices expressed via textual and visual discourse. This is a unique process of creation, at once social and socialized, that enables the Paraguayan people to participate in all of its potential. At the same time, the newspapers inaugurated a visual language that rejected all identification with European esthetics.<sup>16</sup> Both interpretations should be understood as complementary since they are intrinsic dialectical driving forces that constitute all modern journalistic expressions, as Baudrillard maintains.<sup>17</sup> A twofold constriction of the visual and the textual exists in trench newspapers, which at moments emerges as the communal voice while simultaneously instilling the voice of the sovereign power.

The following section aims at articulating a reception reading of the nineteenth-century Paraguayan newspapers in the context of Paraguay in the second half of the twentieth century. When art historians Josefina Plá, Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno turn their attention for the first time to these illustrated newspapers, they consider these tabloids as bearers of resistance, meaning that they defy hegemonic power. Art historians, especially under Alfredo Stroessner’s rule, started to suggest that the popularization of the newspapers and participation (both as producers and as readers) had to be understood as a legitimized political practice of resistance (Fig. 7.5).

**A Dios á Caxias.**

Preciso es partir, por que así lo manda fuerza mayor.

¿Y qué irá á decir el Marques á su soberano y Señor, cuando le diga: qué habeis hecho en el campo de la guerra?

¡Bombardear . . . árboles. De seguro Caxias va llevar el Zarrigo prometido, pues es el que menos ha hecho y el que llegó con mas pompa.

El caballo está ensillado, y el clarín anuncia la partida del Marques—Nos deja en un llanto eterno, y tal vez sin esperan-

za de volverlo á ver. . . .  
¡A Dios, adorado tormento! ¡A Dios, ruidoso cascabel! ¡No olvidéis, pues, en la corte á los amables paraguayos, y especialmente al Centinela—

*Mateo.*



De á cuatro á cada uno, parece suficiente dosis para curar el cólico miserere de la alianza; despues se puede aumentar el jeringazo, siempre que los pacientes no tengan vejovía, y especialmente á Caxias, á quien en despedida le ensartaron algunos hitocazos; por que se va

**Curacion hidropática.**

Ya hemos dicho algo sobre la homeopatía, y debemos recorrer ahora todos los sistemas hasta que encontremos el específico ó medicamento eficaz para curar el cólico «miserere» que adolece la alianza.

Por de contado, hemos ensayado el método de Prusit, y los jeringazos de agua fría parece que alivian la situacion del triunviro. Hemos mandado hacer en el arsenal de guerra una jeringa, que los entendidos en la materia, la llaman «Acéberá» no sé por que analogía que han encontrado. Lo cierto es que el Acéberá hará sus efectos magníficos, y los tres ramos de la alianza, chuparán calidad, por no decir caibre, que

es término de artillería, y no de la ciencia de Esculapio ó Hipócrates.

La jeringa la hemos colocado cerca del río, para no tener el trabajo de acarrear agua á la distancia—Ya ha principiado á funcionar con buen éxito, y no dudamos que el terro saldrá pronto del cuidado, pues la Acéberá abre conductos, rompe corazas y se lleva por delante cuanto encuentra.

Esa postura en que está la alianza es la mejor para un feliz suabramiento; y así, así encaramados unos sobre otros, la jeringa puede funcionar con mas presteza. No hay que moverse, Señores aliados: quietitos, que allá van algunos jeringazos.

**CORRESPONDENCIA DEL EJÉRCITO ENEMIGO**

Tuyuti, Junio 5 de 1867.

*Al Centinela Dr. Mateo Matamoros.*

Hasla el miércoles de la semana pasada hemos estado con mucho juicio sin que nada de notable haya ocurrido en nuestros campamentos.

El Marques, que no puede dormir sin que la escuadra truene, hizo en los dias sucesivos que continuase el fuego con los bosques, y la tronadera ha sido inoportable.

Todos los encorazados se pusieron de gala y echaron de carnaza al Bahía, en ya cáscara se erce mas gruesa; pero no

Fig. 7.5 *El centinela.* April 9, 1867, 3



The first scholar to bring attention to these newspapers was Josefina Plá in 1962 in her work *El grabado en el Paraguay*.<sup>18</sup> One hundred years after their disappearance, she is the first scholar in Latin America to examine the illustrated newspapers *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*. *El grabado* focuses on the different stages of Paraguayan woodcut and wood engraving throughout its history: the Jesuitical missions, the Spanish colony, the Independence period, and the War. During the latter, commenting on *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*, Plá coined the notion of Paraguayan illustrated newspapers as “instruments of defense,” that is, as weapons to resist the military and cultural power of the Triple Alliance.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, her work emphasizes the configuration of a collective voice in the newspapers by highlighting their use of popular visual resources: “The woodcuts are popular by their very inclination and essence. The artists filled the pages with caricatures of a relentless humor, an exact intuition of graphic demands, and a design that has the charm of spontaneity and the primitive.”<sup>20</sup>

She often underscores artists’ dynamics of lines in the engravings and their distribution of black and white in the images. Plá also points out to the rise of various artists by tracking their signatures and identifying the individual features that, to her, suggest the evolution of style and the unforeseen development of popular art. Most of the soldiers did not have any formal education in the art of engraving or even drawing, but they were enlisted in the army and forced to serve as artists for the pages of *Cabichuí* or *El centinela*, thus becoming artists through the very practice of making art.

The illustrated newspapers are analyzed by Plá as a crucial cornerstone of “popular culture” for the above-mentioned reasons: first, because of the renewal and re-appropriation of woodcuts as a forgotten colonial practice by artists without formal training, and second, because of the use of vernacular Guaraní on their pages:

This fact [*the use of guaraní*] is a logical consequence of the material and moral importance suddenly acquired and in virtue of the popular masses’ circumstances, *whose spirit was encouraged to harness the sense and meaning of the national enterprise*, which otherwise could not had been efficiently obtained through the Spanish language, in turn still insufficiently assimilated by the majority of the population (second emphasis is mine).<sup>21</sup>

Now, the most crucial and nuanced concept proposed by Plá is two-fold. She is responsible for having brought to center stage the “popular

character” of these newspapers while, nevertheless, recognizing that it was the national cause, the State, and Solano López who generated a space for the popular culture to express itself. The newspapers in Plá’s work are a site where the “popular” and the “official” meet, a point of convergence between two different practices: the practice of popular creation and the practice of the State trying to generate “consensus” by monopolizing different discourses in the media. These two practices intersect to find a space of coexistence in the illustrated newspaper. Yet, it is still extremely difficult to find the “voices of the soldiers” in the Paraguayan media, affirms Roberto Amigo: “How to uphold the voice of soldiers when only admiration for the regime, the adoration of personalities, the plea for sacrifice, and the heroic death remain?”<sup>22</sup>

Beginning in 1980, Paraguayan art historians Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno set out to search again for the voices of the soldiers, asking that “how” that Roberto Amigo has recently called for. Escobar and Salerno “return to the popular” with their inquisitive reading of the distance that separated images and words in the newspapers. That is, these scholars bring to light the unstable dialectics of images and texts, implicit in these illustrated media:

If the written articles express with clarity the lettered pretensions like the inflexions of a republican ideal, the woodcuts often converge in an open scene on another arena. Although they illustrate Lopez’s panoply, they belie him (because they don’t feel it, because they do it distractedly from a diverse sensitivity) [...] Thus the image moves autonomously from the text and on occasions opposed it.<sup>23</sup>

Notably, not only is the written dimension of the newspapers displaced from the analysis at once but so is the importance of the Guaraní language.<sup>24</sup> According to this new wave of critics, both *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* are, or should be, valued as long as they bear the image of the popular and they uphold the popular expression: “only the valorization of the popular image is able to rescue the aesthetic potential and the creative dimension of war engravings, which usually are aspects forgotten by those visions stuck at the expressive values of the cultivated aesthetic.”<sup>25</sup>

Centered on the image, these new readings are inaugurated with Ticio Escobar’s *Una interpretación de las artes visuales en el Paraguay* from 1982. This study pans over Paraguayan popular expressions from the Hispanic–Guaraní Baroque period to indigenous productions including

ponchos and other textiles, ceramics, wood carving, and ornamental sculpture. But in his “interpretation,” the climatic axis of the intersection where Guaraní and Spanish traditions intertwine is precisely in “trench newspapers” from the nineteenth century. Escobar unearths the backstory and back-history of the “official culture” as he highlights how the Paraguayan State stands behind policies of monopolization of meaning. These relate directly to both the production and consumption ends, since they affect a process of visual signification. For example, the State supported a Eurocentric taste strongly rooted in neoclassical architecture and painting. Thus begins to sprout an idea of the “popular” in light of the local productions set apart by a State mostly interested in modernizing tastes. Specifically, the popular is in lieu of local practices defined in opposition to “foreign forms of expression” or European forms that “represent well authoritarian ideologies of the ‘lopizta’ type and their grandiose monumentality [...] and even a possible patriotic-heroic ethics, which was tantamount with Marshall’s spirit.”<sup>26</sup> Notably, these visual languages are far from those that the war generated.

This notion of the popular appears for the first time in the circles of Paraguayan art historians, artists, scholars, and critics, such as Osvaldo Salerno. His work is invested in a new concept of the popular, as we read in the introduction of his facsimile edition *El centinela*:

Popular expressiveness often succeeds in reverting to conditions [imposed by official art] and reveals truths beyond an official and excessively simplifying version. That is, when creating, the soldier gets away from stereotypical or refashions them through his own way of seeing and feeling that intense *époque*.<sup>27</sup>

For Salerno, those artists trained in “real circumstances” end up discrediting learned models to then embrace foreign ideas that enable them to express the reality of the war with visual forms depicting suffering and pain. While the presence of other visual “trends” in these illustrated newspapers is undeniable (such as the neoclassic strand—mostly devoted to eulogizing; the romantic repertoire—that narrates battles and military feats; or the journalistic caricature of the “erudite press” for political satires), for Salerno it is crucial that we still acknowledge the improvised Paraguayan artists that deform figures and transgress schemes with creative enthusiasm, for “they commit to more concrete truths.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Salerno poses a tension between official and popular expression by way

of proposing a taking over of power. He sees the popular as occupying the space and media of Solano López's propaganda to express "the popular's" own reality. This, in fact, would be one of the most important characteristics of the popular (Fig. 7.6).

Two traits are thus articulated from the standpoint of the new criticism about the newspapers *El centinela* y *Cabichuí*, which follow the work of Josefina Plá, to shape a view of the popular. On the one hand, the popular is configured from the margins and in tension with the Official; on the other hand, the popular is able to claim for itself institutional channels and media to forge its power. These trends are vibrantly elaborated in Escobar's later book, *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo*, from 1986. While this essay does not focus on war newspapers, it is framed between the above-mentioned features about popular culture and artistic expressions in Paraguay. As for the first one, Escobar states that popular culture "is neither organized nor centralized" and it manifests itself always in peripheral positions and through unexpected forms.<sup>29</sup> Popular art expresses itself in the margins, atomized as a multiplicity of small and helpless cultures of local resistance. Popular art is relentlessly able to tell the challenges of a community in a concrete present; it is capable of inhibiting preset languages, thus thwarting standardization and ready-made solutions of the official and Western art.<sup>30</sup> As for the second one, Escobar claims: "Popular culture has the right to use all the channels and institutions (that, from hegemonic standpoints, intercept and interpellate it), in order to transform these into a shelter, into a trench, into a ledge of salvation, or even into a trampoline to gain momentum and fly away."<sup>31</sup> Notably, this last function is one of the most significant ones in relation to nineteenth-century newspapers under the mandate of Solano López during the war. As we shall see in what follows, it is one of the most crucial claims coming from contemporary historians of Paraguayan art.

The visual popular dimension of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* is a force without a center that works as a collection of small resistances. It is the expression of a living community that uses official communication media to gift itself with its own history and to depict its own present. That history of popular resistance bears witness, thematically, to the deadly power of the Triple Alliance and, formally, to lettered and erudite molds that shaped textual and visual productions in Paraguay. It comes as no surprise that this very point in time and space is carefully selected by Paraguayan art critics to construct *their* own locus of resistance.



¡ Francisca Cabrera !

«Chezoemby cuera, uná cumbá oñá co ñante reraha se baerá: che co co kyspe añerávo hadá hendie cuera amano pebe, hœ nde che menby, co che amano ríé, que eipéy co kysé hœ choráro abei hendie cuera hœ kyspe neme que eicutu erumbos pebe ichigui cuera; che co amanda píeme pién mbœ nante : hopenaunobá que hœ aui tñ penemba pebo káguá cumbá rumbagái ramo.»  
(Véase el N.º. 28 del «Cabichú.»)



Nada ha sido el amandá que estos días casi nos ha apastado con la coprosa lluvia que ha caído sobre nosotros: la avenida de los negros, después de la saendida del 3 es el verdadero diavio, que si continua con la misma fuerza de aver á hoy por cierto que tendríamos que acudir á la Arca de Noé para no ahogarnos. Se abrieron las compuertas de la desesperacion macanuta, y los amaldorados empujados se desplomaron como chaparrones de aguacero sobre nosotros. Pobres diablos! Nuestra columna se está u viendo el refugio peccatorum; pero el «Cabichú» los ha de ir absolviendo con indulgencia plenaria, conforme á los cánones de su columna.

La brecha está abierta, y adelante macaros! Decimos está á proposito de lo que, hace tres mas, ha sucedido en el

llera, como de 40 arrepentidos, se mandaron mudar con sus armas dejando memorias á los gefes ratiangos, quienes resolvieron por mas pronto no perseguirlos, teniendo que los de mas tomasen el mismo destino, y se hiciese el remedio peor que el mal. Qué tal la moralidad y espí tu militar en el ejército aliado!



Cierta cosa.

Con esta frase, y un ademán de cruzar los brazos y curvar las manos, nos ha expresado un pasado la idra, de algo inexplicable para él que habia entre Coxias y Mitre. Pero el «Cabichú» que ha comprendido su mente, ha traducido esa cierta cosa por el gratidido, que encabeza. Manes de D Francisco Quevedo y Villegas, el «Cabichú» os evoca en este momento! Venid del lugar donde descendais, y decidnos si esas manos con esas uñas no son las del diablo zurdo y las del escudado Alguaril que visitastis en los infernos. Si, ellas son

las uñas encontradas, cada cual pellizcándose, y procurando sacar las últimas monedas de la alcancía de S. M. rabiocortos. Qué uñas dejan esas uñas en las arenas y bolidos de los pueblos!

¡Haced bien! aprendidos los rabiocortos por los tres elementos destructores, el hambre la peste y el frío, como que los consumen, se desertan por los 32 vientos en gruesas bandadas. Como gaviotas y golondrinas emigran á las regiones de la ventura, sacando la cuenta de que mejor es morir en aire libre por donde el diablo le ayude, que perecer bajo la sofocante atmósfera de la esclavitud corrijada con todas las ausierias que le son inherentes.

Qué hay? Observad!... Si, un movimiento general en toda la línea que sigue por la parte del Est. Esta novedad habia antayer, y orojedamos todos: vamos, que el Marqués ha templado su humor: la fiebre le ha subido de los talones, está bravo! Excelente, dijimos: un ataque nos amaga!... Pero; qué chasco nos llevamos! Habia sido que los corajudos conquistadores, creyeron ver no el Mallon de los nuestros salir de las trincheras, y que se estaba en ellas. Canales, Mitre, Osario, Ojeda & C. se alarmaron: cruzaron los irónicos, y el ejército se formó en batallas, dotado de sus fusos! Así pasaron esos miserables al pié de las armas sin probar un bocado en todo el día. Cuanto terror tienen á los paraguayos!

Consiguiente á las mudanzas de los principales bigulados del ejército rabiocortos; muchos gefes levantan la voz del descontento por que no se les paga, y declaran no pocos de ellos, que con sus batallones en masa se tendrán que venir á nuestra parte, antes que permanecer presenciando hasta el fincillo que se les ha de robar sus sueldos 3 y 4, y paquechicia de Indos. Recordais, lectores, lo que habíamos dicho, que esos macaros, del primero al último, tienen su patriotismo en los bolsillos? Alerta, Pedrito! Cuidado, levan de malvados! Estos rumores no son del monte de la fábula, que va á parir un raticonio.

A. B. Rufino y su cola.

O RUFINO de Elizalde, Mhata tazue conserera, La óica dispuachado Oñá higué zua ricá me, ARA va cielo y un cielo Cielo de no Elizalde Aha rás me upelca-piote



To pñeraha feliz viaje, Pero abay a embayvase Enricha gva embusiero Oí hoesene Durao-Sa pe Orechido á los argentinos, Allá va cielo y un cielo Cielo de no Elizalde Para moché tomhaxer, El Durao hœ fagua ppi Manes en jcho Elizalde Oí Cuesta, hœ no Elizalde, Peho pa pñeraha refugio Oí haje el Macaco? Allá va cielo y un cielo Cielo de tres bandoleros Oñá ehœca refugio Ndo iquii mas que el infierno, In que nlo tuboi ahue El rabiocorto rendápe Ni michi mi de consuelo, Oñas hielado á haje, Allá va cielo y un cielo Cielo de vlaro, toroneto, Belchelo amœ ehue cuera Aha rás me el asiento.

Fig. 7.6 Cabichú. October 10, 1867, 4

Significantly, these nineteenth-century newspapers readings broke a deep silence of monotonous official voices that had been engendered during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, a regime that had thwarted any intention of local historical recapitulation. Stroessner had made History and Historiography an instrument of power, as Luc Capdevilla has suggested: “an essential instrument of power, projecting onto the past the foundation of national unity, the legitimation of his regime and the enlightening focus of governmental decisions.”<sup>32</sup> Stroessner protected some circles of Paraguayan historians, who from an official standpoint glorified the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay as the “patriotic *epopeya*,” enshrining it as a foundational instance of essentialism for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: “the national identity.” The figure of Marshall Francisco Solano López was thus eulogized and tied together with the Paraguayan people. Such was the close interpenetration of the image of the people and its leader in the mythical context of the nation. A strategic movement of the *Partido Colorado*, Lopez’s image was construed as or at least juxtaposed with that of Stroessner’s, and introduced in a sort of genealogy of power and patriotism. Besides the party, other collaborators of the State apparatus were in thrall to this ideology, like Juan O’Leary (1880–1969), who was the “greatest propagandist of Lopizmo.”<sup>33</sup>

Juan O’Leary was one of the directors and advisors of *Revista paraguaya*, the annual publication of the Paraguayan Historical Academy. In the twelfth issue of the publication (*anuario* 1967–1968) that comprises the second volume of the Special Edition “Homage to the National Epopeya,” we find a long article by Víctor Simón Bovier (1968) about the Paraguayan Press during the war, entitled “Combative journalism of Paraguay during the war against the Triple Alliance.” Interestingly, the article identifies *Cabichuí* and *El centinela* as a part of “the definite advocacy of the Paraguayan cause.”<sup>34</sup> The newspapers are presented as “the hidebound defense of sovereignty and liberty as supreme ideals,” which was accomplished with “the sacred honor’s commitment to the altar of an endangered Motherland.”<sup>35</sup> Along with this “subtle” interpretation of the function of the newspapers, the special issue also showcases, albeit minimally, a discussion of the use of the Guaraní language and of engravings. In talking about the Guaraní, the article emphasized Marshall López’s attempt to create a committee to define a uniform orthography, and it discusses a novelty: a National Letterpress that was authorized to print in the vernacular.<sup>36</sup> Lacking any type of actual visual analysis of

the engravings, this form of visual language is interpreted by the article as solely positive “psychological weapons” in the service of the army.<sup>37</sup> Bovier’s article is devoted to a lettered people who not only write, read, and engrave in wood but are also able to fight with sword and pen for the Paraguayan nation.

In such panegyric of a people comprised by enlightened combatants, the people and the popular are in thrall to erasing internal differences as they long for a common oppression that comes from the outside: the Triple Alliance. Clearly, such a monochromatic take on the lettered press coincides with autarchic tendencies under Stroessner’s totalitarian regime. As Gareth Williams in *The Other Side of the Popular* underscores: “The idea of the people and, along with it, the concept of the popular, came to be construed as a potentially hegemonic formation designed to suture the totality of the nation’s demographic and cultural differences to the formation and expansion of the nation-state.”<sup>38</sup> The formation of “equivalences between diverse population” was fundamental for the formation and strengthening of state hegemony, “for the formation of disciplined national industrial labor forces, for capitalist/socialist development, for the successful nationalization of society and, ultimately, for the end to Latin America’s socioeconomic and cultural backwardness.”<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, continues Williams, “the category of people very often came to be articulated from within popular sectors in direct opposition to the power bloc that had created the conditions for its initial emergence, organization, and institutionalization.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, for Escobar the “popular” refers to majorities and minorities excluded from an effective participation in civic and economic life, and whose discourses “grow at the margins or against a dominant direction.”<sup>41</sup> The popular emerges always as a communal practice defined by (1) the objective circumstances of domination and subordination; (2) the experience of a group or community in a given historical situation; and (3) a “consciousness” of a common belonging to a particular group, class, or community.<sup>42</sup> This communal practice can (co)exist in parallel or in alternative realities with hegemony in as much as popular practices for Escobar can “refuse, incorporate, resist or assimilate” elements of a given hegemonic culture.<sup>43</sup>

Particularly, Plá, Salerno, and Escobar are able to give an account of popular images that come “from within” *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*, and take their pages to express themselves, to express “a present” of life and death of a community, and to display for the first time in the twentieth century a unique visual imaginary that had never existed in the life of

that independent nation after the dictatorship. The new critic has the capacity to recover gravitating expressions of popular classes, of indigenous and *mestizo* populations that are beyond the cultural canon of Modern and Contemporary Paraguay.

In what terms did this new art criticism produce a history of Paraguayan art that construes popular art expressions as a space for political resistance, while at the same time undertaking to examine its own present? Certainly, these scholars envision their own practice “and the discourse about art history” as a place that may serve as a space for political opposition as well. In the first place, Salerno, Plá, and Escobar write a history of art in Paraguay that evokes and contains the afterlife and intermittence of Hispanic–Guaraní productions (of the indigenous peoples in the missions), of popular expressions during the Republic, going beyond “vulgar militarist myths” that exceed the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>44</sup> Ceramics, textiles, woodcarving, woodcuts, musical instruments, and local attires become expressive systems of various peripheral cultures, whence scholars can visualize trajectories of Paraguay’s artistic history. From this point onwards, and in the second place, the “popular” is invoked clumsily as boundless and not embraceable:

[The concept of the popular] is theoretically uncertain and ideologically unclear. It is a source of problems more than a useful resource. And yet, it is here, attached to many names, concealed in so many histories and stories, that it cannot be replaced by a new concept, which ignores its ingrained presence.<sup>45</sup>

The concept of “popular art” should always remain unclear since in its unclearness it is able to express the ambiguity of a moment in time: A present in which “different histories and times overlap showing in the juxtaposition a complex and elusive reality that cannot be named with a word.”<sup>46</sup> Salerno (1998) often refers to the present as a “loaded time:” in the present several stories/histories intersect, some of which are silent and some, silenced (such as indigenous cultural expressions); yet they exist in the same present.<sup>47</sup> Most of these stories/histories cannot be named and are left ambiguous or unresolved in formulas such as “a reality that cannot be named by a word,” a “sign that refuses to be exhausted by meaning,” or an “image that rejects to be captured by an aesthetic system of thought.”<sup>48</sup> Most of these stories/histories remain



unresolved or ambiguous because the “colonized language” or the “hegemonic model of thought” that seeks to refer, call, or talk about them is unable to do so. Hence, the practice of writing a history of art should strictly maintain an “ambiguous present.” Even more, the challenge in the history of (popular) art is to produce a discourse that refuses that “colonized language.” Even if that new language is possible or not, ultimately, the Paraguayan history of art asks us to ponder its own conditions of production and the place of enunciation, and makes important inquiries about its own practice as a discourse in the present time. Thus, this art history frames its own necessity of writing a narrative about the past for which writing History should be a purposefully interrupted or rudimentary narrative. As such, writing becomes a place of resistance and confrontation with its own present of enunciation.

The writing of (popular) history is conceived as a simple attempt, a sketch. Josefina Plá, aspires to a mere *apunte* (“draft”) in her *Apuntes para una historia de la Cultura Paraguaya*, and also in *Las artes plásticas en el Paraguay. Breve esquema histórico, El grabado en el Paraguay* or *Aspectos de la cultura paraguaya*. For Ticio Escobar, the writing of history (of art) becomes “an interpretation” or “interrupted visions, stuck, crisscrossed, unable to focus on one point, incapable of drawing a full line or a closed contour,” according to his *Una interpretación de las artes visuales en el Paraguay; La imagen como arma de combate; Paraguay: el grabado*; “Sueño ajeno” or in *El arte fuera de sí*. For Salerno, historicizing is to (re)arrange a group of “revealing signs” in heavy or “loaded times” that return and emerge in the present, as he articulates the notion in “El grabado del Cabichuí como expresión popular” or in the “Presentación” of his facsimile edition of *El centinela*.

For twentieth-century art and cultural historians, reading war newspapers *El centinela* and *Cabichuí* seems to be tantamount to meeting with the fragment, with the sketch or draft, in other words, facing certain series of Paraguayan history that function as a conglomerate of “dis-similar temporalities.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, Paraguayan twentieth-century cultural analysis probes the question of popular art *from* the nineteenth century, in search of those types of registers that subvert and use sovereign power for its own reproduction. Such is the need of contemporary cultural analysis, an essential component of art history politics and of art history as politics. As policy and politics, the visual analysis may engender an art history that will account for both artistic expressions and a History of Paraguay charged with “simultaneous views,” each interrupting one

another. Or as Escobar states, these views intersect the narration of the past to go beyond concrete hitherto conditionings of history, to say and denounce a present that is multiple, that is the nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first century.<sup>50</sup>

When the history of popular expression's resistances, occupations and fleeting *coupes* of institutional channels is accounted for by intellectuals, they are doing the greatest service to the field of nineteenth-century visual culture. Illustrated war newspapers are in themselves a barricade of resistance for contemporary critics who point at the most basic iterations of history, that of a dialectics between power and resistance that overshadows over two centuries of Paraguayan history: "Cultural history in our country is often interrupted by deep cuts; in some cases there are lost and forgotten figures, in other cases it would seem that there is a continuity that reappears and then goes back to hide for long periods."<sup>51</sup> The task at stake here is nonetheless making those fragments talk, but always through the impossibility of their weaving into a master narrative of History, so as to prevent that, other counter-hegemonic narratives ends up becoming hegemonic. Either as "draft," as "an" interpretation, or as a reading of "loaded fragments," these critics were able to uphold a disarrangement and the interruption of linearity in the historical narration, for "distortion, offbeatness, unfaithfulness to substance open possibility for what it is one's own. It is widely known that the uncoupling produced by deferment inhabits a margin to inscribe difference."<sup>52</sup>

## NOTES

1. For an historical analysis of the War against Paraguay, I only mention a few contemporary works from an extensive bibliographic list: Luc Capdevilla, *Una guerra total: Paraguay 1864-1870* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sb. 2010); Nicolas Richard, Luc Capdevilla, and Capucine Boidin, Eds., *Les guerres du Paraguay aux XIXe et XXe Siècles* (Paris: Colibris, 2007); Hendrix Kraay and Thomas Whigham, *I Die with My Country: Perspectives on the Paraguayan War, 1864-1870* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Miguel Ángel De Marco, *La guerra del Paraguay* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 2003); Francisco Doratioto, *Maldita Guerra: nova história da Guerra do Paraguai* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002), Thomas Whigham, *The Paraguayan War: Causes and Early Conduct* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); and Chris Leuchars, *To the Bitter End. Paraguay and the War of Triple Alliance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

2. The most complete edition of *Cabichuí* appears in 1984 edited by Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno, in Asunción printed by Museo del Barro. This publication has 81 numbers, starting from the first to be released in May 13, 1867 to the last (number 94) in July 24, 1868: number 34 and 40 are incomplete, and number 24, 33, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, and 55 are missing. *El centinela* has an 1998 edition printed by the Centro de Documentación e Investigaciones (CDI) of the *Centro de Artes Visuales y Museo del Barro de Asunción*. It has all the 36 numbers of the newspaper (from Apr. 2 to Dec. 26, 1867). This facsimile impression was made with the original newspapers owned by the Paraguayan historian José Antonio Vázquez who had also published in 1964 a compilation by the title *El Centinela. Colección del Semanario de los Paraguayos en la Guerra de la Triple Alianza (Buenos Aires: Fondo Editorial Paraquaricae, 1964)*.
3. There is a modern edition of *Lambaré* also known as *Cacique Lambaré: Cuatia Ñee Ybyty Güi Osè BAE*. (Asunción: Imprenta Nacional, 1995). During the war also circulated the traditional *Semanario de Avisos y Conocimientos Útiles* released for the first time in 1853.
4. For more considerations on Guaraní and *Jopará* in Paraguay, see Lustig Wolf's article, "Mba'éichapa oiko la guarani? Guaraní y Jopará en el Paraguay," *Papia* 4, 2 (1996), 19–43.
5. Adriana Johnson in "Cara Feia al Enemigo: the Paraguayan Press and the War of the Triple Alliance," *Colorado Review of Hispanic Studies* Vol. 4 (Fall 2006), 169–185, makes an excellent account of *El centinela's* discourse on war, Nation, and nationalism.
6. The term *cambá* or *kamba* had a widespread use in Paraguay during the 19th century to refer specifically to black slaves. Although, the word does not belong to Guaraní language, it reflects the colonial legacy in the everyday speech. Indeed, the term is incorporated during colonial times "as part of the experience of slavery in Paraguay and as a way to establish a racial hierarchy in the Spanish colony." See Michael Huner, "Cantando la república: la movilización escrita del lenguaje popular en las trincheras del Paraguay, 1867–1868," *Páginas de guarda* 4 (2007), 121.
7. Capdevila, *Una Guerra total*, 77.
8. This is not a fusion without frictions. The most representative example of the conflicts between the Hispanic-Guaraní heritages in the Paraguayan population is the alteration of titles in *Cacique Lambaré*, which changed the name to *Lambaré*. In my opinion this modification was made to reduce associations with Cacique Lambaré who led the indigenous resistance against the Spanish colony (although today there are doubts about the existence of a native chief with that name). Even though this association highlighted the tenacity of the resistance against a foreign oppression, it ended up linking the Paraguayan people with a "violent and

- barbaric tribe.” For more information on the Hispanic-Guaraní conflicts during the war see Huner, “Cantando la república.”
9. Between 1864 and 1870, there were five illustrated newspapers in Paraguay: *El Semanario*, *El Cabichuí*, *El centinela*, *Cacique Lambaré* and *La Estrella*; at least ten in Brazil including *Vida Fluminense*, *Semana Ilustrada*, *Cabriao*, *O Arlequim*; and more than twenty in Argentina and Uruguay such as *El Correo del Domingo*, *El Correo Porteño*, *El Mosquito*, and *El Pica-Pica*. For an excellent study of Brazilian illustrated newspapers during the War see Mauro César Silveira, *A Batalha de Papel. A Guerra do Paraguai através da Caricatura* (Porto Alegre: L&PM Editores, 1996); and André Toral, *Imagens em desordem. A iconografia da Guerra do Paraguai* (São Paulo: Humanitas, FFLCH/USP, 2001).
  10. The Paraguayan illustrated newspapers do not display any sequential images nor do they use consecutive panels to be considered a comic. For an excellent discussion on the history of caricatures, vignettes, and comics and their relationship with texts see Robert Harvey “Comedy at the juncture of words and images.”
  11. One of the most important works that studies in depth the making of the woodcuts and engravings is Roberto Amigo’s *Guerra, anarquía y goce. Tres episodios de la relación entre la cultura popular y el arte moderno en el Paraguay* (Asunción: Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro, 2002). Amigo offers a fragmentary history/story of Paraguayan art in three episodes. First, a reading of *El centinela* and *Cabichuí*, second, an analysis of the oeuvre of Ignacio Núñez Soler at the beginning of the twentieth century, and finally, a brilliant reflection on Ricardo Migliorisi’s happenings, his use of audiovisual materials, and photomontages.
  12. Josefina Plá, *Las artes plásticas en el Paraguay. Breve esquema histórico* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas de la Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, 1967), 16. For a history of the letterpress in the Southern Cone, see William Garrett Acree Jr. *Everyday Reading: Print Culture and Collective Identity in the Río de la Plata, 1780–1910* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011).
  13. Capdevila, *Una Guerra total*, 22–23.
  14. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
  15. Víctor Bovier, “El Periodismo combatiente del Paraguay durante la Guerra contra la Triple Alianza,” *Historia paraguaya. Homenaje a la epopeya nacional* (Asunción, 1968), 48.
  16. Ticio Escobar, *Una interpretación de las artes visuales en el Paraguay. Tomo I*, (Asunción: Centro Cultural Paraguayo Americano, 1982), 293.
  17. For Baudrillard this tension is intrinsic to the analysis of the social in the media: “About the media you can sustain two opposite hypothesis: they are the strategy of power, which finds in them the means of mystifying the masses and of imposing its own truth. Or else they are the strategic

- territory of the ruse of the masses, who exercise in them their concrete power of refusal of truth, of the denial of reality” (Jean Baudrillard, “The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media,” in *Jean Baudrillard. Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 220. This is, I believe, a tendency that gets repeated in the critical analysis of the Paraguayan illustrated newspapers.
18. Plá’s work (critical and artistic) got deeply marked by the visual oeuvre and xylographic work of the Brazilian artist Livio Abramo. Abramo had and has a crucial and invaluable cultural work in contemporary Paraguay. See Fernández, *Livio Abramo*.
  19. Josefina Plá, *El grabado en el Paraguay (Asunción: ALCOR, 1962)*, 26.
  20. Josefina Plá, *Las artes plásticas en el Paraguay*, 12.
  21. *Ibid.*, 27.
  22. Amigo, *Guerra, anarquía y goce*, 16.
  23. Ticio Escobar, “El arte de la guerra: Los grabados del periodismo durante la Guerra Guasú.” In *Les Guerres du Paraguay*, Ed. By Nicolas Richard et al, 4.
  24. Adriana Johnson will suggest that the separation of *logos* and *icon* is a unique moment, “a symptom,” that indicates the “failure of the written word” in Paraguay, “a country that was not able to produce the foundational fictions that sprang up elsewhere in Latin America.” See “Cara Feia al Enemigo,” 178.
  25. Ticio Escobar and Osvaldo Salerno, “El grabado de *Cabichuí* como expresión popular.” In *El Cabichuí. Periódico de la Guerra de la Triple Alianza* (Asunción, Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro, 1984).
  26. Escobar, *Una interpretación*, 268–276.
  27. Salerno and Escobar, “El grabado de *Cabichuí*.”
  28. *Ibid.*
  29. Ticio Escobar, *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo. Hacia una teoría americana del arte* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1986), 110.
  30. *Ibid.*, 152–153.
  31. *Ibid.*, 176.
  32. Capdevila, *Una guerra total*, 229.
  33. *Ibid.*, 204.
  34. Bovier, “El periodismo combatiente,” 48.
  35. *Ibid.*, 48.
  36. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
  37. *Ibid.*, 77.
  38. Gareth Williams, *The Other Side of the Popular. Neoliberalism and Subalternity in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4–5.
  39. *Ibid.*, 5.
  40. *Ibid.* I am using Gareth Williams’s work on the popular as a frame for the concept of the popular in Latin America, since I believe *The Other Side* offers one of the most concise and solid analysis of the term. I am intentionally

avoiding the comparison of the popular and the subaltern in Williams and Escobar, to keep these pages focused on the Paraguayan art historians.

41. Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 127. "... at the margins or against a dominant direction:" I call attention to this phrase as it poses a conundrum for the reader. The particle "or" seems ambiguous. If it is a substitute ("at the margins" is equal to "against a dominant direction"), then the popular gets intertwined in a dialect of hegemony vs. counter-hegemony with a reasonable doubt that a counter-hegemonic practice acts like an hegemonic one (following Williams' work). Now, if the "or" is not a substitute and it is an exclusion (it is either at the "margins" or "against a dominant direction"), then we can consider that the popular, for Escobar, can be at a margin, aside from the tension between hegemonic and counterhegemonic forms of thought. Such interpretation invites us to reflect on the "subaltern" and "the popular" in tandem Escobar and Williams.
42. Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 139–40.
43. *Ibid.*, 140.
44. Ticio Escobar, *El arte fuera de sí* (Asunción: CAV/Museo del Barro, 2004), 30.
45. Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 87.
46. *Ibid.*, 87.
47. Osvaldo Salerno, "Presentación," in *El centinela. Periódico de la Guerra de la Triple Alianza* Ed. By Ana Sofía Piñeiro (Asunción: Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro, 1998).
48. *Ibid.*
49. Ticio Escobar, "Sueño ajeno," in Roberto Amigo, *Guerra, anarquía y goce*.
50. Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 24–26.
51. Ticio Escobar, *Paraguay: el grabado* (Asunción: Museo Paraguayo de Arte Contemporáneo, 1983), 19.
52. Escobar, *El arte fuera de sí*, 28.

## The Wings of Carlos Colombino: Architect, Artist, Writer (an Interview)

*Adriana Johnson and Horacio Legrás*

### ASUNCIÓN

Asunción del Paraguay is a small city in relation to the aura that surrounds its past. History books often refer to Asunción as the mother of cities. It was from Asunción that the streams of people who colonized and founded the cities of Paraguay, Uruguay, and the Argentine coast set off. But Asunción itself, the founding city, seemed unfounded when we visited it for the first time in 1998. We found it hard to orient ourselves in spaces that were not always evident and within an urban memory that was elusive and fragmented.

One spot that showed up insistently in the recommendations of friends was the Manzana de la Rivera, a group of colonial houses facing the government palace that had been slated for demolition under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroesner in order to make way for

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A. Johnson (✉)  
Irvine, USA

H. Legrás  
Irvine, USA

the construction of a plaza. The tenacity of a group of Paraguayan intellectuals, including José Luis Alder (then Mayor of Asunción), Derlis Esteche (Director of Tourism), Juan Cristaldo (President of the Comisión V Centenario), and Carlos Colombino, prevented the historic houses from being torn down and turned them into an inescapable referent. It was at the Manzana de la Rivera that we met Carlos Colombino in 1998: architect, lithographer, painter, writer, poet, director of the Museo del Barro, agent of cultural politics, and, above all, obstinate founder of memory in a city and country whose greatest crime, in his words, is “unproductive forgetting.”

Six years earlier, Colombino had bemoaned the lack of an institution in Paraguay that could foment exchanges, alliances, and cultural connections. Paraguay, he said in an interview, is “not only those four musicians that go around singing at barbecues, not the football player who wins a contract at one club or another, not the gentleman who travels alone, paying for a trip in order to play tennis. What is lacking here is an organized system that can haul our culture out of the ditch.”<sup>1</sup> The Manzana de la Rivera was one of Colombino’s many projects to take Paraguayan culture out of that ditch. When we returned to Paraguay in 2000 and Colombino agreed to an interview with us, he explained that the project behind the Manzana de la Rivera was to “*create a cultural center in the city, rescue part of the urban text of buildings and, at the same time, bring some vitality to a place in the city that was abandoned, that was forgotten.*”

In 2000, the Manzana de la Rivera included a newspaper library, a video library, spaces for art exhibitions, the Municipal Library, the Museum of the Memory of the City, office spaces for organizations like the Centro Cultural de la Ciudad or UNESCO, the Ruy Díaz de Guzmán Auditorium, and several open-air garden spaces used for outdoor performances. It also had a small apartment which was used to lodge visiting investigators and artists from all over the world, and previously, it had a small bar restaurant. The nine houses that made up the compound had been built at different times. The Casa Viola, which houses the Museum of the Memory of the City, for example, is a colonial construction from the mid-eighteenth century and the only building still standing which exemplifies strictly colonial architecture in Paraguay.

According to Colombino, it was in 1989, when Stroessner was deposed, and in the context of the fifth centennial celebration, that the project to preserve the houses emerged. The ideas for what to do with



the buildings ranged from the construction of low-cost housing to a homage to the Jesuit missions. The project that won out was called La Manzana Viola. Colombino told us that when he went to Madrid along with others to propose the project “*there was an absolute lack of knowledge about Paraguay. Except for a few people, and in particular, one isolated person who lived in Toulouse and was called Augusto Roa Bastos. It became clear at one moment that things were tough and so I thought of calling Augusto Roa Boastos and asking him to join us in presenting the project. And so it was. We obtained the financial support we needed. When a group of people who shared my perspective won the elections for the municipality of Asunción, the whole block had already been bought by the municipality and the restoration of the Casa Viola had already begun, but as an isolated house. There was no global study of the function of the nine houses.*” When Colombino took charge of the project, he said that he wanted “*each space to carry out a specific function and for all the different spaces to be connected. We baptized the place Manzana de la Rivera, with a v, because it stood alongside the headquarters from which the independence of Paraguay was launched [in 1811]. The street was called Calle de la Rivera and the port was called Puerto de la Rivera. This is a name that has been lost in the city and so we decided that it would be best to re-use this name, to rescue it.*”

### THE MUSEO DEL BARRO

Colombino’s activity as a cultural organizer had begun many years earlier, during the long years in which it seemed that there could be no foreseeable end to Stroessner’s dictatorship. When in 1991 the United Nations gave the Museo del Barro (literally, Museum of Mud) the prize for the best museum organized under non-European norms of artistic appreciation, few could imagine the solitary tenacity of a small group of intellectuals who had sustained the project for so many years.

The Center for Visual Arts/Museo del Barro emerged, Colombino told us, with the idea of “*showing what Paraguay was through the medium of visuality.*” This desire for national representativity includes an explicit articulation of Paraguay’s cultural heterogeneity since the Center for Visual Arts in fact combines three museums: the Museo de Arte Indígena, the Museo del Barro, and the Museo Paraguayo de Arte Contemporáneo. The Center for Visual Arts emerged from the desire to construct a space which presented “*a representation of the diverse faces of Paraguay*”

and in which this diversity *“could be entangled, put on equal footing.”* Colombino, the architect of the Museum, transferred this multiplicity to the building itself, composed of a *“container divided in parts that were built separately and that later were added on”* to one building. However, *“this wasn’t a project built as a totality,”* he told us. *“If at the start we had imagined it would be this big, we would never have dreamed of building it.”*

Alongside Colombino, Osvaldo Salerno and Ysanne Gayet were critical to the creation of the Museo del Barro. At the beginning, *“it was created on its own as a museum of ceramic objects that emerged from a collection of pottery from Tobatí and Itá, two towns where women work with mud. They produce a fantastic construction of all kinds of jars, figures, etc.”* The first incarnation of the Museo del Barro in 1979 took place in the city of San Lorenzo. The idea, said Colombino, was to decentralize the cultural and artistic life of Paraguay from its capital. *“This project lasted two years. But, the lack of support and the fact that the Museum was so far away, that it was hard to administer, forced us to come to Asunción. There was the rejection on the part of the city of San Lorenzo of a foreign element. One of the museum’s creators was a foreigner [Ysanne Gayet]; the inhabitants resisted it; they wrote things on the walls like ‘Go Home’ to the foreigner.”*

Over time, the Museo del Barro incorporated other forms of artistic and popular creation until it became what it is today, a fascinating display of popular creativity and professional art in contemporary Paraguay. When the Museum moved to Asunción in 1983, continued Colombino, *“we opened up the spectrum of what was initially almost exclusively pottery to many other areas of popular or rural art. We began a collection of Jesuit and Franciscan art, wood, paintings, sculptures, games, jewelry, etc. But we preserved the name Museo del Barro as a reminder that mud is the primary material of creation.”* Soon the production of professional artists also found a space in the Museum. *“During these years I had also begun to set up the Museum of Contemporary Art which is in the section occupied today by this compound called Center for Visual Arts. The Museum of Contemporary Art began in a large room that was peripheral and a bit removed, but at the time we didn’t have any other possibility.”*

From the very beginning, the Museo del Barro posed itself as a political intervention in more than one sense. Behind it was the *“terrible sensation that the dictatorship was going to be eternal and that there was no way to influence what happened in Paraguay.”* We wanted, recalled Colombino, *“to occupy a space, produce a space, have so mething, an institution, that was ours, and through which we could express ourselves.”*

Thus, the Museum became a place for production and experimentation, in addition to conservation. *“For many years we worked there in the Museum, using it as a place for teaching. At one moment an art school was formed within the Universidad Católica and they gave us a place to work. But soon the university showed an aversion to the work that we were doing. They thought we were not very Christian or that our lifestyles did not match up with the Christian life that they presupposed a human had to live and so they closed that space to us. Two of those who had taught the workshops with me had their own place to work: Livio Abramo had a workshop in the Center of Brazilian Studies and Olga Blinder also had her workshop. But I didn’t have any. And so my students decided to go to the museum which was under construction and for a year we mounted a workshop so that we could go on working, because the students didn’t want to leave the course of study unfinished. And so we worked at this site and later on they helped me build a workshop. That place is now integrated into the Museum as part of its spatial structure. With time the Museum of Contemporary Art was also incorporated and at the same time we initiated a foundation that could manage and contain all of this. And so this is how the idea of having a museum that could represent the diverse faces of Paraguay emerged.”*

Today, the Museo del Barro holds wood carvings, indigenous masks, ceramic pieces, sculptures, baskets, and feathered art. The Center for Visual Arts also includes a collections of Jesuit and Franciscan colonial art, pre-columbian art from Mexico to Argentina, photographs from the War of the Triple Alliance, engravings and drawings from different epochs from Paraguay (including original woodcut printings of the *Centinela* and *Cabichuí*, a weekly newspaper published during the War of the Triple Alliance), Spanish artists, Brazilian graphic art (including in particular 1175 works of Livio Abramo, a Brazilian artist who lived in Paraguay from 1959 to 1992), and a collection of paintings from Mercosur. Additionally, it includes the Department of Documentation and Investigation (DDI) which carries out the research and publication of texts on aspects of indigenous and popular culture in Paraguay.

### A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS

At the time of our interview with Colombino, he was deeply involved in a project to add a collection of popular altars, many of them of colonial Jesuit origins, but some from the nineteenth century, to the Museo del Barro. The urgency with which he spoke to us of this project arose from

the generalized destruction of traditional forms of peasant/rural production taking place due to the social and economic crisis brought about by neoliberalism. Impoverished peasants were selling the altars, often for little money, to foreign collectors or the agents of foreign museums.

Many of the altars that the Museo del Barro had amassed by 2003 were personal acquisitions that Colombino transferred to the Museum. These are works, he told us, that “*no one knows. They have been in houses, in the last corner of Paraguay, on a little farm, and then suddenly we were able to get a hold of them.*” In general, nothing is known about the artists who made them. For classificatory purposes, one could, at best, establish work areas as in, for example, Jesuit or Franciscan mission areas.

There is one exception, however, and Colombino recounted the story to us with particular intensity. Among all his acquisitions, he found one day a piece signed N.B. The finding caught his attention. “*I began with an error,*” he explains. “*I began to speak with all the artisans, trying to find out where this man could have come from. And so I interviewed Mr. Paez, who carves saints in Tobatí and he said that ‘it was his grandfather.’ And that he signed his pieces Felipe Neri Benjamin. So I thought the N was Neri and I began to work with this hypothesis: there was a santero who signed what he made and he was called Neri Benjamin. I contacted a great quantity of people all over Paraguay, trying to find information about this Felipe Neri Benjamin. And I filled in details on the figure of FNB, who died in 1914. He had been born in 1830. And I continued to collect pieces signed N.B., until one day, one day in the month of March, I found a piece signed Natalicio B. So my hypothesis was wrong. It wasn’t Neri. It was Natalicio. I found myself lost and so it occurred to me to write an article about this, saying that Neri or Natalicio would be laughing at me, in some fold in time, because I was incapable of finding them. And so a man calls me. ‘I read your note in the newspaper Última Hora this past Saturday and I can tell you that they were brothers. They were Jewish. Not Paraguayan. They went to Buenos Aires to work in saint-carving because that is what they did. One was a woodcarver and the other a painter. But then in Buenos Aires they were told that this business of carving saints was already passé. So they needed to find a place, a people ... more attached to their customs. This is the nineteenth century, around 1850 or 55. So they leave Buenos Aires and install themselves in a village called Caraguatay. And one of them marries a Tobateña and goes to Tobatí. The other stays in Caraguatay and marries a Paraguayan woman. He carves statues and his wife paints them. This is the one called Natalicio. So I went to the village,*

*spoke to everyone there and I have all the facts to write their story and I will put on a unique and personal exhibition with all their pieces, because I am going to collect all the pieces that I found in Tobatí, Caraguatay, Encarnación, Concepción, the ones I obtained from all the people who called me and with all this we are going to put on an exhibition of an unknown artist who came here, set up his life, searched for the elements and codes that existed here in order to create his own things, but who also brought with him another idea of what an artist was. He must have signed his work because he was an artist who understood himself as such, not as an artisan.”*

### THE COUNTRY OF ALL ILLS

In 1997, Colombino won recognition outside the world of art and museums when his novel *Lo dulce y lo turbio* (*The Sweet and the Shady*) won an important literary prize in which the most well-known Paraguayan writers served as jurors. It was a surprise, remembered the novelist Raquel Saguier later. According to Saguier, the modest dimensions of the range of writers in Paraguay made the appearance of Colombino an enigma. It was not the first time that Colombino had moved onto the literary terrain, but if the book held special meaning it was because it revolved around the foundation of Asunción.

Literature is not the most propitious of arts in Paraguay, nor the favorite of Colombino who signs his works with the pseudonym Esteban Cabañas. “Between Cabañas and Colombino there is no fusion, they are distinct channels, two expressive media. I write when I can’t paint. When I am well I paint; when I’m not I write,” he pronounced in an interview in 1992.<sup>2</sup> Augusto Roa Bastos, a personal friend of the painter, said at one time, to the great fury of fellow Paraguayans, that Paraguay was a country without literature. Bartomeu Meliá, one of the great interpreters of Paraguayan culture, preferred to put it in other terms. “Writing exists, but there are almost no readers.”<sup>3</sup> Colombino underscored the same problem. “*You have to know that my book sold 3500 copies in Buenos Aires and 100 here. Those numbers are frightening. To think that 3500 copies of your book can sell out there, where no one knows you, and here, in Paraguay, where everyone knows who you are, you sell only 100 copies [...] the same happened with Roa. Roa says that he has sold 300 copies of his books here in Paraguay, although I think that is a lie because every Paraguayan has a book by Roa. But what I think he meant was that he has 300 readers.*

*Because people don't read past page 40, because they find it hard to embrace his books."*

Faced with this panorama, Colombino reacted as he had reacted when faced with Stroessner's dictatorship, the incomprehension of the Universidad Católica, the plans to demolish the only colonial buildings in Asunción, or the accelerated disappearance of colonial Jesuit art from Paraguayan rural households. "We can't remain petrified simply because there is no way of obtaining more readers, because our work as writers can have real influence."<sup>4</sup> Faithful to these convictions, Colombino published seven books of poetry and two plays. A meditation on Paraguay as a country marked by disasters, a country that is bogged down or suspended in time, seems to recur in many of his novels. "*Only half birds, half fallen trees, half loves can emerge here,*" says one of the characters of *Juego cruzado* [Crossgame]. We told him our impressions and Colombino agreed. "*I think Paraguay is very linked to a structure of tragedy even if it is not immediately visible, even if everyone thinks this is a peaceful, happy country. I think that beneath the surface it is a long-suffering country and that its backbone is composed by submission and tragedy.*" There are, Colombino expands, three fundamental failures: The first is the conquest; the second, the dictatorship of Francia (about which Colombino does not write since, as he says, that book was "*already written by Roa Bastos: I the Supreme. Its not possible to return to that topic now*"); the third failure, almost a trauma, is the War of the Triple Alliance.

*Lo dulce y lo turbio* tells the story of the conquest of the Río de la Plata by the armada of Don Pedro de Mendoza, following in particular the character of Domingo Martínez de Irala who would later be the founder and first governor of Asunción. Asunción occupies the absent center of the novel. Colombino commented on this, saying "*I let the foundation of Asunción remain an insignificant fact because I think no one attributed any importance to it at the moment of foundation. It was a place where you arrived and stayed a bit before going elsewhere; what was important was to go somewhere else where the riches were.*" The interest of Colombino in the colonization of the River Plate region "*is connected with having fabricated and laid down the itinerary when I was curating the museum Memoria de la Ciudad, which I set up in the Casa Viola. Since I spent a lot of time collecting objects, maps, old photographs of Asunción, I discovered at the same time many things about the conquest of the River Plate region.*" The misfortunes that plagued the expedition (hunger, the attack by indigenous groups on the first Buenos Aires foundation, syphilis, and

the eventual death of Don Pedro) appear in the novel under the form of a curse that follows an unjust act: the execution of Juan Osorio by Pedro de Mendoza. If the novel is obliquely foundational, or anti-foundational, what it narrates is the story of the foundation of a curse that continues to this day, in a landscape that “has remained thus, intact, swallowing legions of men across the centuries like a cataclysm. Millennial jaws, burying lives without leaving a trace, a cemetery of dusty ashes.”<sup>5</sup> In our conversation with him, Colombino made the connection between the failures of historical foundation and the representation of failure in the political present even more explicit. Paraguay, he said, is the outcome of a “*historical mistake and a failure. They come looking for gold and silver. It is a mistake to call a place that has not one drop of silver Argentina. It is a mistake to come to Paraguay thinking that one will find gold or other riches. And there is another mistake, that I didn’t dare touch in the novel, because I think it’s terrible, and that is that on the one hand you have the Spaniards searching for riches and encountering total failure; and on the other you have the Guaraní searching for the Land without Evil and they encounter Paraguay. There are two fundamental failures: to search for the Land without Evil and find the Land of All Evils and, on the other hand, to look for gold and silver and not find anything. These two failures created Paraguay. I wrote the book [Lo dulce y lo turbio] with that in mind.*”

The third failure, that of the War of the Triple Alliance, we venture, is at the heart of *El dedo trémulo* (*The Tremulous Finger*), which recounts the story of the female companion of Francisco Solano López, an Irish woman who went to live in Paraguay and about whom several novels have been written: Elisa Lynch or Madame Lynch. The story unfolds through the eyes of Obá, an African prince who was enslaved in Brazil and then deserted from the Brazilian army. The Great War (as it is called in Paraguay), “*almost destroyed Paraguay [which] almost disappeared.*” This war has influenced “*the idiosyncrasy of this country because it is like a matrix in which some things melt down and others are forged. And it is a curse without name.*” This third failure arose, among other reasons, because of a confusion, “*a desire to become a fantastic place, as Don Carlos López and Francisco Solano López wanted. But they confused their own personal mission, their own triumph with the possibilities of a triumph and a vision of a small country. And this confusion led to the almost destruction of Paraguay. I don’t want to prove theories. In something I’m writing now I try to show, as in a kaleidoscope, all the forces that come together to create a failure, even the failure of a hero, because in all events*

*Solano López cannot not be conceived of as a hero. Instead, he is a failed hero. And this is terrible because at the last moment he accepts this [...] And he is great at this moment even if we despise him in many aspects. At the end of his life he attempts not to justify himself before history, because that was not an issue, but he believes, naively, that if he dies, Paraguay won't disappear. This is his small triumph."*

The past seems to give Colombino both the materials to imagine a future and an uncomfortable feeling of temporal eternity. We highlight the phrase uttered by a character in his novel *¿Quiere usted tomar un café en esta esquina?* [*Would You Like to Have a Coffee on this Corner?*]: in Paraguay "time does not flow."<sup>6</sup> The novel spans various centuries of Paraguayan history; yet the scarce distinctions between the various historical moments produce the sensation that time has congealed, or been immobilized. There is always a dictator who simply changes names. "What is this? ... Isn't he called Stroessner? No. No, he doesn't have that name yet, answers Doña Violante."<sup>7</sup> Colombino agrees with our reading and points out that not only time is stalled, but that in the novel "*it moves backwards, not forwards. This is the tragedy of Paraguay, I think. This is a mechanism we have incorporated, this walking backwards. Even by constantly appealing to history we are immobilizing the future, because everything is history.*" He cites a character from his novel *Juego Cruzado* who says: "*Don't look back because you'll be turned to salt.*" And he concludes that in Paraguay, "*we are always turning into salt, as in the Biblical story, because we are always looking back. We are saturated by history. Above all by the stories/histories written by historians. It is a looking backwards that turns you into salt all the time. This is what happened until 1960 or 1970 when literature was dominated by the historians. But in 1974, Roa Bastos appeared with I the Supreme and there was a shift in direction. There is a history that can be understood as a terrible contemplation that can lead us out the quagmire. I can say, for example, that when I read I the Supreme, it was the first time that I felt proud of something that existed in Paraguay. Why? Because the book recovered something. It planted you within the world. It put you in a place. For the first time I felt, in that terrible dictatorship that we were living through at the time, the force of a work that placed you in the terrible position of facing that past that, for us, had always been a ballast that we couldn't rid ourselves of, that we couldn't make disappear. This ballast burdened us, detained us. We always had to contemplate it.*"

Even if the transition to democracy created the conditions to shed that ballast, it has not displaced or destroyed it. "*The ballast continues.*



*Everything continues. Everything is petrified, as if we couldn't or didn't have the elements to cut ourselves free from this ballast. That's the issue. We don't have instruments. We have not fabricated those instruments."*

His reflections about the lack of instruments are perhaps at the heart of two visual works that appeared in 1999–2000 called *Dédalos* (*Labyrinths*) and *El Secadero* (*The Drying Room*) in which enormous etched wings are exhibited hanging from a string. "At the moment in which I began to ask myself how to exit the labyrinth, I began a reflection on wings as the figuration of an instrument that could liberate us, that could remove us from this labyrinth. Because this is a labyrinth. And so I began to work on wings. But the wings are broken. They are converted into other things. There is a metamorphosis. These wings, even when it seems that they will take you out of the labyrinth, they are Daedalus's wings. You will always encounter a failure like Icharus. That is where we are now. We want to fabricate new instruments but they emerge lost, broken, failed. We produce instruments that have no future, that lead to no exit. This is what this country makes us think and feel. This position of the wings (broken, imprisoned, violated, destroyed) which turn into something else. But the idea of the labyrinth and Daedalus remain. The possibility of fabricating an instrument that would allow us to exit. At this moment I am struggling with this problem in literature. I am searching for those instruments. I don't know what they are. I am only a creator. I am not a politician and I can't imagine how one can remove a country from a situation in which it is frozen, petrified, and rotten. All I know is that the smell contaminates us."

## NOTES

1. Victorio Suárez, "Esteban Cabañas: Falta un sistema organizado para sacar a nuestra cultura del pozo," in *Literatura Paraguaya, 1900–2000: Expresiones de los representantes contemporáneos*, (Asunción: Servilibro, 2001), 331.
2. *Ibid.*, 330.
3. Bartomeu Meliá, "Bilinguismo y escritura," in *El Paraguay Inventado*, (Asunción: Centro de Estudios Paraguayos Antonio Guasch, 1997), 97.
4. Suárez, "Esteban Cabañas," 331.
5. Esteban Cabañas, *Lo dulce y lo turbio: Crimen y castigo de Don Pedro de Mendoza*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1998), 172.
6. Esteban Cabañas, *¿Quiere usted tomar un café en esa esquina?*, (Asunción: Arandurá Editorial, 1999), 12.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.

PART III

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Flashes of Memory in Paraguay: The  
Legacies of Stronism

## Beyond Coercion: Social Legitimation and Conservative Modernization in the Stroessner Regime (1954–1989)

*Lorena Soler*

In the general context of the global crisis of capitalism in the 1950s and its effects on the social order in Latin America, the most common argument to explain the Stroessner regime or *Stronismo* has been twofold.<sup>1</sup> The first line of inquiry sustains that *Stronismo* used personalism in the exercise of power over a society disciplined by the recurrent presence of tyranny, historically expressed in the triad of Francia, the Lópezes, and Stroessner. The second strand focuses on the centrality given to the Colorado Party and the Military Forces as the political and institutional scaffolding which sustained what is generally known as the longest dictatorship in Latin America (1954–1989).<sup>2</sup>

Based on those arguments, the dominant analyses of *Stronismo* have led to the extrapolation of some conclusions, the most extended of which presents the Colorado Party as a State-Party. From the point

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of view of this conceptualization, the authoritarian regime's *modus operandi* becomes, through the use of political privileges (*prebendas*), the logical expression of an agrarian and underdeveloped society. Additionally, the Armed Forces carried out the coercive function in a context of economic growth brought on by changes in international relations, particularly in the new orientation that Stroessner took in relation to Brazil.

However, even those who accept an interpretation of the regime based on its final result would have to recognize that this achievement came much later, as its long history was marked by deep modifications and tensions that clearly exceeded the type of legitimacy rooted in political privileges or coercion. In a country where social sciences have little weight, this explanation stemmed from the interpretations undertaken during the *apertura democrática* (democratic opening) period that followed the fall of Stroessner in 1989. From then on, this tendency to project the final result back onto the characterization of a 35 years regime has prevailed, blocking reflection on the process through which such a result was constructed.

Strictly speaking, the post-stroessner years in Paraguay started the same year as the fall of the Berlin wall. The above interpretations were no the exception in a context marked by the crisis of Marxism and in which the explanatory legitimacy of political sciences treated the dictatorship as an extreme singularity. Even if the analytical perspective of political sciences had become a received interpretation, in this country more than any other, it encountered an important obstacle to explain these social and political processes in a meaningful way using its own conceptual framework: This country was considered as being "consistently agrarian" and, according to Paraguayan sociologist Domingo Rivarola, had been built through a "conservative socialization."<sup>3</sup>

From the long-term perspective, it is clear that the political conditions of Paraguay were not too favorable for the recreation of an intellectual field. Historically speaking, the self-imposed isolation of José de Gaspar Francia in the nineteenth century, the record number of political exiles, and the peculiarities in the configuration of the Paraguayan elite made it impossible to constitute a proper and autonomous intellectual field. In fact, in the lapse of 135 years between the *Comuneros* Revolution (1735) and the end of the Triple Alliance War (1870), the Paraguayan elites were annihilated three times:

First, the viceregal repression in the eighteenth century; then, the perpetual dictatorship of Dr. Francia, his executions and prisons in the midst of the 19th century; and lastly, the Triple Alliance War and the executions ordered by Solano López successively destroyed the *crème de la crème* of Paraguayan society.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the social order's political instability and the weakness of the State were also expressed in their educational institutions, i.e., universities and their authorities, as well as in the ideological persecution of their own national thinkers, which continuously pushed them toward exile. Strictly speaking, even until the Second World War, "Paraguay depended on romantic and fictional images, many of them copied from South American or European sources."<sup>5</sup>

Departing from this critique, we believe that it is necessary to draft a proposal capable of deconstructing what has often been presented as naturalized. In doing so, this proposal aims to create a place for analyzing the deployment of a determined political order whose result was fortuitous and by no means inevitable. The objective here is not to conceptualize *Stronismo* as an order that came to ensure political stabilization strictly based on the control exercised by the figure of the tyrant. More precisely, and without diminishing the importance of the coercive elements typically present in the construction of any social order, we argue that the constitution of *Stronismo* implied a profound process of transformation of economical and political structures.<sup>6</sup> This process of transformation involved both new and traditional elements, in a dialectic game of renewal and conservation, whose final result was the construction of a political regime.

In his famous work *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore utilized the concept of "revolution from above" to analyze the processes of social and political change in which both the state apparatus and the public bureaucracy were the central protagonists, in alliance with social classes or sectors that were not capable of bringing about the revolution by themselves. Conservative modernization consisted in developing the economy through the State's initiative while preserving traditional forms of life and values. Generally, the successful processes typical of this modality of social change were put into practice through authoritarian mechanisms of regulation of the political system and the cooptation of social classes and political elites. In those places where this revolution was successfully implemented, the state apparatuses had been adequately managed, in a way that can be qualified as coherent

in technical terms, and they aimed to obtain a high level of societal legitimacy. This conceptualization points to the unprecedented high rates of economic growth that accompanied this model. As Moore explains:

Certain conditions seem to have been necessary for the success of conservative modernization. First, it takes very able leadership to drag along the less perceptive reactionary elements, concentrated among, though not necessarily confined to, the landed upper classes [...]. Similarly, the leadership must have at hand or be able to construct a sufficiently powerful bureaucratic apparatus, including the agencies of repression, the military and the police [...] The government has to become separate from society, [... which in] the short run, a strong conservative government has distinct advantages. It can both encourage and control economic growth. It can see to it that the lower classes who pay the costs under all form of modernization do not make too much trouble.<sup>7</sup>

Departing from this conceptualization, we characterize *Stronismo* as the political condition for the transformation of some state and political institutions, such as parties and organs of representation. These institutions were considered central to the reproduction of the regime and the success of the conservative modernization carried out through the *revolution from above* which would bring about the constitutional reforms of 1967 and 1976 and the ensuing modifications to the educational system as well as the changes operated in the political system and the social structure. Furthermore, such revolution from above was accompanied by the ideology or values that fed and legitimated the political order. This revolution also mobilized representations utilized to create a political image capable of projecting legality and providing sources of legitimacy. The latter aspects were crucial, given the importance of exhibiting a democratic *façade* to promote “modernizing change” in the context of Cold War conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

*Stronismo* effectively constituted a successful and unprecedented means of constructing a new social order, as can even be observed in the creation of a new language, registered for instance in the *Diccionario usual del stronismo* (The Functional Dictionary on *Stronismo*).<sup>9</sup> This ritualization of the exercise of power encompassed a range of spheres, from the personal liturgy to the educational, legal, and constitutional ideological state apparatuses. They played a central role in the reproduction of a legitimate order. Finally, we observe in *Stronismo* what Raymond

Williams has called “structure of feeling” because this process of conservative modernization also disrupted existing social structures and, concomitantly, horizons of meaning and cultural practices.<sup>10</sup>

### THE FORMATION OF THE STROESSNER REGIME

When General Alfredo Stroessner Matiauda became the President of Paraguay, the political system had undergone deep modifications. The victory obtained by Paraguay in the Chaco War (1932–1935) and the ensuing crisis were expressed rather distinctly in the self-denominated *Febrerista Revolution* (1936–1937). The quick failure of this revolution and the subsequent destabilization of the social order, which expressed a crisis of political domination, placed the military in a favorable position in relation to national and anti-liberal claims. As Antonio Gramsci has noted, this type of situation constitutes a favorable terrain for authoritarian solutions represented by providential or charismatic men.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the *Guerra Chica* (Chaco War) became the undisputed provider of political legitimacy for anyone wishing to govern Paraguay in the following years. Moreover, the war had an important impact in the political arena, even if its economic consequences were lesser. The war radically changed the relation between the State and civil society. Coupled with these changes, the involvement of the Armed Forces turned nationalism into a crucial element of the political system that not even the Liberal Party—in power during the war—was able to evade. The slow but effective construction of the Stroessner regime would provide the country with the political order it longed for: the restitution of the monopoly over coercion (as Max Weber sustained) and sovereign decision (which Schmitt holds to be the specificity of the political), a result that not even the local political elites expected.

After his poor performance in the Chaco War, Stroessner was promoted as a presidential candidate shortly after his affiliation to the Colorado Party in 1951.<sup>12</sup> In the 1954 elections, he was an elected president and completed the first mandate until 1958, as was stipulated by the constitution of 1940.<sup>13</sup> During the Presidential Inauguration on August 15, 1954, the traditional day of the Virgin of Asunción, he declared:

Our democracy was legitimated on July 11, 1954, when for the first time the Paraguayan people decided in free elections who must govern the Republic according to the fundamental law of the nation. Our democratic

life is not about a declaration in the book, but a whole civil way of living together by respecting the law and the inalienable rights of man.<sup>14</sup>

As is well known, the Liberal and Colorado parties have dominated Paraguayan political life. In effect, it is not only the party system's long existence that makes it particularly distinctive, but also the contrast it created between the ongoing resistances that the presence of both traditional parties fostered within an almost nonexistent historical democracy. Part of this centrality must be explained by the presence of a weak State and also by the destruction of military institutions after the two international wars, which "consolidated civil hegemony and reinforced the parties that supported civil leadership."<sup>15</sup> In the context of this crisis of domination, the party system obstructed the constitution of the military as an autonomous political actor. In consequence, the consolidation of this relation between the parties and the Armed Forces weakened the State as well as the military institution and its tendency toward corporative behavior.

Specifically, the Colorado Party was one of the central institutions that made the recreation of this form of domination possible in a democracy. At the least, it provided Stroessner an institutional base of political legitimacy and facilitated the organization of domination through the party structure, which, in turn, enabled a political rearrangement based on the typical institutions of liberal democracy that included presidential and legislative elections. For instance, the constitutional reform of 1967 was carried out through a constitutional assembly chosen according to electoral mechanisms that involved the participation of the main political parties. Furthermore, the Colorado Party was in charge of other social functions of cooperation and control, ranging from its participation in neighborhood clubs to the identification of possible political opponents. In that way, the territorial organization also bridged politics with the world of the dominated. The parties thus provided a common base for national identity and afforded a territorial reach that the State did not have.<sup>16</sup>

Strictly speaking, the image of the Colorado Party as a State-Party can only be envisioned toward the end of the 1960s when the regime had achieved half of its long life. At least two mandates had passed by the time Stroessner constructed his leadership and his hegemony within the party. It can even be argued that his arrival to power in 1954 was a result of a deep crisis of the parties and the incapability of both the Colorado



Party and the rest of the dominant classes to solve that crisis of domination in a climate of social and political conflict.

In fact, after the civil war of 1947, vast sectors of the Colorado Party fomented the so-called unification of the party while expecting a period of internal normalization of the country. But this unification would not amount to anything else than a truce among internal movements, which resulted in a call for internal elections won by the democratic sectors. Later on, during Stroessner's first mandate, this democratic sector used its majority in Congress to demand insistently that the party and the new President bring about the institutional normalization of the government, which implied lifting of the state of siege, among other things measures.

In a strict sense, the party constituted one of the most difficult oppositional fronts that Stroessner had to confront at the beginning of his regime. He did not have any previous militancy in the party and did not belong to any of its internal factions. In that sense, it was not enough to exile the most prominent party's internal figures to the embassies of Peru and Mexico, along with the past presidents Natalicio González and Federico Chávez. The Stroessner administration therefore differs from the classical image of a "dictatorship" that always controlled every little space of social life, as its cooptation of political elites to bring about stabilization was countered by moments in which his own continuity in government was at risk.<sup>17</sup>

His inability to discipline his party also became evident in the decision to dissolve the Congress on May 30, 1959, after he secured his first reelection in 1958. He had previously excluded several disloyal civil servants from the government. In 1955, he expelled Epifanio Méndez Felitas, with whom he had built his political career since the Civil War of 1947 until he came to power in 1954. In fact, the great majority of the people tortured and imprisoned during Stroessner's first years belonged to the Colorado Party and the Armed Forces.<sup>18</sup> By 1957, Stroessner had drawn a list of the political opponents within the party, and in 1958, he publicized their names, their addresses, and their jobs within the public sector. This led to a great amount of betrayals that generated complaints from the Chief of the Department of Investigation and the Chief of the Police, Ramón Duarte Vera. This situation was also graphically expressed in the words of the Minister of Justice and Work, who stated "the militants are the majority even in prison."<sup>19</sup> In synthesis, the difficulty in creating a political order in the absence of his own loyal forces within the party, and in the disruptive presence of opponents to the regime, became evident in

the “games” that opened and closed the political system according to the impugnation of political figures, both inside and outside of it.

In an especially convoluted decade bookended by the Cuban Revolution and the French May 1968, Paraguay also witnessed transcendental political manifestations. The urban union movement, organized by the Paraguayan Confederation of Workers, led a general strike in 1958 to protest against the decision to freeze wages as part of the program of “stabilization.”<sup>20</sup> In 1959, the student movement carried out a protest against an increase in public transportation fares. Throughout the regime’s entire duration, university students were protagonists of various actions including the repudiation protest in April 1956, the strike led by students of the Medical School at the National University of Asunción (also in 1956), and the student demonstration of May 28, 1959. In this climate, the most effective mechanism to ensure the subsistence of the regime consisted in creating a limited opening to channel the opposition into a legal frame.

Under this same logic, that fomented the presence of the parties through their disarticulation, the regime allowed the participation of parties that were proscribed before during the electoral campaign that would lead to its third reelection in 1963.<sup>21</sup> According to Andrew Nickson’s interpretation, this fact marked the closing of *Stronismo*’s phase of consolidation. New electoral laws regulated these elections, and women were allowed to vote and to run for office for the first time in the country’s history, having secured that right in 1961.

In 1963, the electoral rituals of the single political party were substituted for semi-competitive elections, amounting to a system of restricted pluralism. In this context, some parties or factions were slowly legalized in order to legitimize the Constituent Assembly of 1967. Indeed, the format of liberal democracy provided the political formula capable of including social sectors and political organizations within the logic of domination. This form of organizing domination secured the participation of opposition political parties while successfully disarticulating the spaces in which they could shape themselves as political subjects capable of impugning the political order in formation.

Three years after the *coup d’état* that started the Brazilian dictatorship in 1964, the Paraguayan regime called for a Constituent Assembly that included the participation of all the parties that had been legalized for the presidential elections of 1963, specifying that they were free to present their own constitutional projects: “Twenty-seven years after the

Constitution of 1940 was approved, Paraguay is governed by a new constitution developed by the representatives of the four political parties [...] according to the democratic and republican regime that governs us.”<sup>22</sup>

This new construction of the political regime had its counterpart in the juridical framework that created the appearance of political modernity. In that way, Stroessner’s regime utilized legality as an instrument for its ideological legitimation and empowered the promise of “democracy” with a historiographical grounding that was also, in Stroessner’s terms, an act of faith for the nation. The new juridical framework justified new arguments about the functioning of democracy and provided new sources of legitimacy for the regime. The additional circulation of historical images therefore allowed for democracy to be discursively linked to order (political stabilization), to progress (economic growth), and to peace (elimination of conflict).

In that sense, to present the Constitution of 1967 (and the new order that it established) as the point of rupture in relation to the country’s political history, it was necessary to conduct a new reading of “a” past. In effect, the stronist order produced, at least, two significant meaning-making operations: It recreated national heroes by granting them strong popular roots, and it presented the regime as the custodian of political stability through a democratic format endorsed by a new juridical order. These two semantic operations sustain the assemblage of political modernity that consisted in providing “democracy” with a national heritage that integrated “native” components in the construction of a “democratic and representative” order. In consequence, this order could be portrayed as different from other possible democratic projects attached to foreign ideas, linked to “communists” or “subversives.” These old images, when read again under the light of a new era, will end up assimilating the “national being” with the “Colorado being,” until the two would become synonymous in the new fatherland.

Even though neither the authoritarian regimes’ invoking of national myths and figures nor their more or less successful reform of the State’s juridical frameworks can be considered as novel, we believe that the singularity of the Paraguayan case resides in its rescue of images of a sealed past due to the devastating results of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) and the subsequent political regimes. This allowed *Stronismo*, after the Chaco War, to encounter again “authentic” national heroes in the War of the Triple Alliance. Paradoxically, the appeal to

these war heroes enabled the construction of internal peace. More precisely, the historical evidence of the failure of the mechanisms of liberal democracy allowed for the creation of a modern order that instituted a stable political organization for Paraguay.<sup>23</sup>

Part of this interpretation is deeply rooted in the dominant vision stemming from the national historiography of the War of the Triple Alliance. The intellectual field of interpretation of the narrative about the war created by the Paraguayan elites recognizes at least two matrixes of thought: One group presented Paraguay as a country of despots in which self-imposed isolationism subsumed the people in the most profound ignorance.<sup>24</sup> In other words, under the common parameters of Latin America's insertion in the capitalist system, Paraguay had been the victim of seclusion and isolationism that amounted to the absence of civilization. In this sense, this insular condition did not permit the flow and arrival of symbolic and material goods.<sup>25</sup>

The other matrix is the one that finally became hegemonic. It vindicated the Golden Age of Francia and both Lópezes, and transformed that heroic past by, of course, exalting the war. Historical revisionism ended up becoming the State doctrine, giving rise to what Luc Capdevila called the "heroic regime of historicity."<sup>26</sup> This exercise in nationalist pedagogy went as far as to maintain until today the bust of the historian and politician O'Leary in the National Pantheon. In effect, the most influential nationalist historian of the twentieth century created a discourse that turned the defeat of Paraguay in the War of the Triple Alliance into a victory accomplished by the immortal Mariscal Francisco Solano López and the heroic people. He also was able to impose a "historical discourse that was not only informative [...] but fundamentally performative, given that his language created realities in Paraguayan collective memories that have endured until recent times."<sup>27</sup>

The nationalist ideology was also based on two educational reforms produced during this period (in 1957 and 1973) and involving higher education. However, those reforms did not simply aspire to change the curriculum, but aimed more deeply to transform the whole pedagogy. In effect, the study of history textbooks demonstrates how "in this way, the discourse achieves the maintenance and reinforcement of the prevailing social order by impeding access to oppositional discourses or discourses of resistance to the dictatorship, already existent at the time in Paraguayan history but intentionally silenced."<sup>28</sup>

The re-reading of this past had been articulated since the end of the Chaco War. This time around, the unprecedented fact was that a President became the “inheritor” of this tradition. Images that had been available since the decade of 1930 were materialized and screened for the first time as symbols of the new political regime.

“And because we are those inheritors, our people have revisited in the Chaco War the pages of the epic of the 1970s. For those who were actors of that war and survived the battles, we feel today the satisfaction of having done the work according to the expectations of our tradition.”<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, in 1950, the climate marked by military nationalism and anti-liberalism was favorable, if not ideal, to the reinvention of Stroessner as the successor of the “founding families.”<sup>30</sup> Putting social engineering to work was not a complex task. His regime was inscribed in the fabric of political meaning woven since the decade of the 1920s, as well as in the reformulation of the nationalist traditions that the new war twisted in favor of vernacular militarism, which later deepened with the historiographical construction of a national past.

This new thrust was in evidence since the first victorious election of Stroessner. The Presidential Inauguration and the lengthy commemorative act that took place on August 14, 15, and 16, condensed all the necessary symbolic elements of old and updated political representations that would support the regime in the following years. This included new holidays such as the celebration of Stroessner’s Inauguration, the anniversary of the foundation of Asunción (in honor of the day of the conception of Virgin Mary), and the date when Argentinean authorities returned the trophies of the War of the Triple Alliance.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the regime, national myths would gradually combine with religious symbols and rituals that frequently came from long traditions, as is exemplified in the coincidence of the Presidential Inauguration with the day of the Virgin on August 15.

But there is more: In 1965, one of the most significant events in which this combined imagery played a powerful role occurred when the peasants from the Mariscal López column of the guerrilla United Front of National Liberation (FULNA) were forced by the regime to undergo a religious baptism. This sanctioning amounted to a political exorcism that provided social visibility while serving as an exemplary punishment. The *guerrilleros* were forced to renounce their atheistic communism in the name of God in the temples of Santa Elena of Piribebuy and of

Sapucaí. On September 13, 1965, the cover of the newsletter *Ñande* reproduced the picture of the 103 “communists” with their hand outstretched as they yielded: “Yes, I swear.”

Through different structures of the political, military, and police apparatus, the regime perpetrated very severe violations of human rights in a visible and publicized way. The regime’s preference was to impart exemplary and public corrective punishments, thus opting for transparent and visible repressive mechanisms. This choice obviated the need to create a non-State parallel paramilitary structure to repress people. Whenever possible, the destiny suffered by prisoners was made public. It was sufficient to read some of the official graphic publications that exhibited photographs of murdered *guerrilleros* as evidence of the regime’s success. Considering that “the fear of punishment can paralyze those who contemplate evil” and the sanction’s social function of restoring the order, the regime used these actions to carry out the restitutive task of transforming these “sick social bodies” into “healthy souls,” which, in other words, meant that they would become Christian, Paraguayan, and, if possible, Colorado bodies.<sup>32</sup>

If the figure of the Mariscal successfully attained immortality, the figure of Stroessner had similar chances. This can be seen in the monuments constructed in his honor to situate himself at the same level as the great national hero Solano López, as well as in the inclusion of Stroessner’s birthday in the calendar of official holidays. Even though it has diverse intensities, such celebration continues today.

## NOTES

1. See Waldo Ansaldi and Verónica Giordano, *América Latina. La construcción del orden*, Volume II (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2012).
2. I discuss the limitations of conceptualizing *Stroonismo* from the framework of “dictatorship” in Lorena Soler, “Una vez más, cómo pensar el stroonismo. Una agenda de inconformidades,” in *El stroonismo asediado*, ed. by Rocco Carbone and Lorena Soler (Asunción: Arandurá Editorial, 2014): 17–39. For further references see also Paul H. Lewis, *Paraguay bajo Stroessner* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986). José Nicolás Morínigo, “Propuestas para la transición política en el Paraguay antes del golpe militar,” *Revista Paraguaya de Sociología*, Year 26, 75 (1989): 175–199. Carlos María Lezcano, “El régimen militar de Alfredo Stroessner: Fuerzas Armadas y política en el Paraguay (1954–1989),” *Revista Paraguaya de Sociología*, Year 26, 74 (1989): 117–146. Benjamín

- Arditi, *Adios a Stroessner. La reconstrucción de la política en el Paraguay* (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1992). Andrew Nickson, “El régimen de Stroessner (1954–1989),” in *Historia del Paraguay*, coord. by Ignacio Telesca (Asunción: Taurus, 2010), 265–294.
3. For the term *conservative socialization*, see Domingo Rivarola, *Una sociedad conservadora ante los desafíos de la modernidad* (Asunción: Ediciones y Arte Editores, 1991) pp. 108. For the categorization of Paraguay as *consistently agrarian*, see Francisco Delich, “Estructura agraria y hegemonía en el despotismo republicano paraguayo,” *Estudios Rurales*, Volume 4, 3 (1981), 239–255.
  4. Guido Rodríguez Alcalá, “Imágenes de la Guerra de la Triple Alianza,” in *Diálogos* Volume 10, 1, Revista do Departamento de História e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em História Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Paraná, Brasil (2006), 37.
  5. Thomas Whigham, “Los estudios sobre Paraguay en los Estados Unidos: un análisis histórico,” *Revista Paraguaya de Sociología*, Year 38, 111/112 (2001), 29.
  6. According to the Truth and Justice Commission Report published in 2008, 20,090 people were victims of human rights violations, including 50 extrajudicial executions, 336 disappearances, and 3470 exiles. Furthermore, a total of 19,862 arbitrary arrests were made during *Stronismo*, no less than 18,772 (94%) of which involved some type of torture. Among the country’s adult population (an average of 1,250,000 between 1950 and 1992), one in 124 people were victims of a human rights violation. The scope of the regime of terror also encompassed the basis of economic power in Paraguay until today: land. Between 1954 and 2003, 7,851,295 ha was distributed irregularly over a total of 12,229,594 ha adjudicated during the same period. The *tierras malhabidas* (lands acquired through corrupt means) represented the 19.3% of the surface of the national territory (40.675.200 ha). Truth and Justice Commission Report (Comisión de Verdad y Justicia del Paraguay), *Informe Final. Anive haguã oiko, Conclusiones y Recomendaciones* (Asunción del Paraguay: 2008).
  7. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 441–442.
  8. See the sociohistorical study of the relations between Paraguay and the USA that Andrew Nickson offers in *La Guerra Fría y el Paraguay* (Asunción: El Lector, 2014).
  9. Alfredo Boccia Paz, *Diccionario usual del stronismo* (Asunción: Servilibro, 2004).

10. Our comparative study on the enlightened elites about the effect that the “structure of feeling” had over them has demonstrated how the change initially manifested itself in an explicit quest to update the practices of symbolic production of visual arts and, later, in the field of social sciences. They were both led by the idea of “modernization,” whose legitimacy stemmed from the international ties forged by these Paraguayan elites. In particular, let us emphasize the key role played by relations with Brazilian cultural diplomacy in the creation, emergence, and consolidation of a field for Paraguayan modern art, and with the circuits constituted by international agencies and global educational centers in the social sciences. See the paper presented by Charles Quevedo and Lorena Soler “Elites ilustradas, prácticas culturales y espacios de socialización. Arte y ciencias sociales durante el stronismo,” *Revista de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales*, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales, Asunción, Vol. 2, N° 3, junio 2015 <http://icso.org.py/> pp. 31–57. Also, in my doctoral dissertation, I studied how the creation of the intellectual field of sociology was linked to the international foundations that promoted the modernization of Latin America, demonstrating how these global institutions encountered local actors predisposed to take on this task. Lorena Soler, *Modernización, cambio social y ciencias sociales. Los oficios del sociólogo en tiempos del régimen stronista en Paraguay (1954–1989)* (Doctoral Dissertation, UBA, Buenos Aires, 2012).
11. See Antonio Gramsci, *Cuadernos de la Cárcel, Volume I* (México DF: Ediciones Era, 1981).
12. Stroessner’s military career was troubled and erratic, although it evolved in a timely fashion to take advantage of a historical crisis. Although he participated in the democratic faction of the Armed Forces during the Civil War of 1947, he later followed Epifanio Méndez Fleita and became part of the opposite faction, “los guíones.” For that reason, he was involved in the failed military coup against the former President Natalicio González in 1948 and had to go into exile in Brazil. Later, he returned to Paraguay clandestinely through Argentina to participate again in the overthrow of President Raimundo Rolón in February, 1949. The next President, Felipe Molas López, was overthrown by the democratic line and Federico Chávez took the power in 1949. The latter tried to purge the “guionistas” from the Army, but found them organized under the leadership of Stroessner. This military participation in the political life was compensated: He recovered his place as commander of the regiment and was later promoted to Brigadier. In 1950, Stroessner became Commander of the Division of Artillery and was promoted to Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces in 1951, when he was only 39 years old.



13. Even though the Colorado Party was created in 1887, after Stroessner had spent some years in power, he convinced the party to issue him the party affiliation card numbered "one."
14. Marcial Antonio Riquelme, *Stronismo, golpe militar y apertura tutelada* (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1992), 38.
15. Diego Abente, "Un sistema de partidos en transición. El caso de Paraguay," *Revista Paraguaya de Sociología* 96 (May–August, 1996), 45.
16. The now reorganized Colorado Party fulfilled the double function of cooptation and political control. On the one side, it was the principal recruiting agent of the state bureaucracy while, on the other, it prohibited the organization of any protest or strike by the constitution (See Art. 55. Cap. V). Also, the legal requisite to work was to be affiliated to the state bureaucracy as well as to the police. And in addition to that, the Party provided social help to the population, from schools to health centers, funeral services, and legal advice. In any case, although the resources that defrayed such politics came from the State, it was the presence of the official party that attended to the territorial spaces. For instance, throughout the school year of 1963, the Colorado Party distributed 20,000 school smocks, 40,000 notebooks, 100,000 pencils, and 6,500 books. Alain Rouquié, *El estado militar en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1984), 206.
17. In first place, and even after the internal displacements were realized, the oppositional political parties attempted two coups d'état on November 14, 1956, and on May 9, 1957. Subsequently, the following clandestine guerrillas would emerge: the "14 de Mayo" Movement (1958) and the *United Front of National Liberation* (FULNA, 1959–1960). These organizations were led by the traditional political sectors that advocated for an opening of the democratic system (*liberales, febreristas*, dissident *colorados*, and ex military people from the Chaco War expelled from the Army or in exile). The case of the 14 de Mayo Movement is emblematic as they entered into the Paraguayan territory on December 12, 1959, with the goal of ending the dictatorship. However, this guerrilla was totally annihilated by Government troops, although its last cadres would not succumb until 1962. The repression of these movements took on a form of unprecedented cruelty. Its leader, Juan José Rotela, was executed on June 30, 1960, in the Tapyta hacienda where, under the orders of General Patricio Colmán, Juana Peralta, Antonia Perruccino, and Julia Solalinde were also murdered after suffering terrible torture.
18. See José María Blanch (coordinator), *El precio de la paz* (Asunción: Centro de Estudios Paraguayos Antonio Guasch, 1991).
19. Alfredo Boccia Paz, et al., *Es mi informe. Los archivos secretos de la Policía de Stroessner* (Asunción: Centro de Documentación y Estudios, 1994), 207.

20. After that, Enrique Volta Gaona became the leader of the union. He was the leader of the Worker's Republican Organization, a parallel association created in 1946 to fight against the influence of communism within the union movement. See Francisco Gaona, *Introducción a la Historia gremial y social del Paraguay*, Volume I (Asunción: Arandurã, 2007).
21. From 1963 on, the Liberal Party was allowed to participate in the electoral process, as would be the case for the Revolutionary *Febrerista* Party following the local elections of 1965. A good example of the manipulation of the opposition is the role played by the Liberal Party (PL) and the Radical Liberal Party (PLR), both of which were, respectively, recognized by the dictatorship in 1962 and 1967. Both parties were part of the Congress and participated in the elections. Even in 1977, when the PL and the PLR did not participate in the elections, Stroessner made a pact with an opposing faction inside the PL. Then, in order to differentiate themselves from the others, the abstainers called themselves Authentic Radical Liberal Party, a denomination that they have maintained until today.
22. Acta de Asamblea General Constituyente, 1967, 53.
23. Rossana Gómez has studied the consequences of the enduring concept of the "stronist democracy" in the practices and discourses of the popular sectors of Asunción. Rossana Gómez, "La construcción de la democracia como relato nacional. A propósito del golpe parlamentario," *El Stronismo asediado*, comp. by Rocco Carbone and Lorena Soler (Asunción: Arandurã, 2012).
24. Liliana M. Brezzo, "Estudio crítico," in *Cecilio Báez- Juan E. O'Leary. Polémica sobre la Historia del Paraguay*, edited by Ricardo Scavone Yegros and Sebastián Scavone Yegros (Asunción: Tiempo de Historia, 2008), 11–63.
25. For a characterization of the dominant matrix in Paraguayan thought, see Lorena Soler, "El mito de la isla. Acerca de la construcción del desconocimiento y la excepcionalidad de la historia política del Paraguay," *Papeles de trabajo, Dossier: Paraguay: reflexiones mediterráneas*, Year 3, 6, Buenos Aires (August 2010): 1–19, ISSN: 1851–2577. [http://www.idaes.edu.ar/papelesdetrabajo/paginas/n\\_anteriores/dossier06.html](http://www.idaes.edu.ar/papelesdetrabajo/paginas/n_anteriores/dossier06.html).
26. Luc Capdevila, "Para una historia del tiempo presente paraguayo. Del pasado/presente entre dictadura y democracia: los historiadores bajo la dictadura," *RES GESTA* (2008), 37–58.
27. Liliana M. Brezzo, "El historiador y el general: imposiciones y disensos en torno a la interpretación pública de la historia en Paraguay," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (2014). Accessed on February 10, 2015. DOI: [10.4000/nuevomundo.67479](https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.67479).
28. Sandra D' Alessandro de Valdez, "Una mirada crítica al discurso de los textos escolares sobre el stronismo." *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*

- (2014). Accessed on February 15, 2015. DOI: [10.4000/nuevo-mundo.66824.2014](https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevo-mundo.66824.2014).
29. Alfredo Stroessner, “Mensajes y Discursos del Excelentísimo Señor Presidente del Paraguay” (Presidencia de la Nación, Congreso Nacional, Cámara de Senadores: Asunción, 1979): 84.
  30. See Lorena Soler, “La familia paraguaya. Transformaciones del Estado y la Nación de López a Stroessner,” *La democracia en América Latina, un barco a la deriva*, dir. by Waldo Ansaldi (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007), 435–465.
  31. This return was mandated by Law 14.299 voted in Argentina in 1954. If the law was questioned by Argentina’s Radical Party, which demanded that the same policy apply to Brazil, it is relevant to note that the law was approved before Stroessner took power in Paraguay. In any case, the political event fell within the framework of the reconfiguration of diplomatic relations that Juan Perón attempted to establish in the region. Its most immediate precedent was the *Decálogo de confraternidad argentino-paraguayo* proclaimed by Perón in Plaza de Mayo on October 17, 1950.
  32. Émile Durkheim. *Escritos selectos* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1993), 126.

## *108/Cuchillo de Palo* (2010): Limits and Political Potentialities of Queer Countermemory

*Eva Karene Romero*

Paraguayan films that emerged in the mid-2000s, such as *Hamaca paraguaya* (2006), were highly dedicated to representing *paraguayidad*, through the *campesino* figure. Most short, narrative and documentary film followed *Hamaca's* lead into the rural space until 2010, when for the first time a documentary film set in the urban space had an impact on festivals and on Paraguayan theaters alike: *108/Cuchillo de palo*, a Spanish production directed by the Paraguayan Renate Costa.<sup>1</sup> This film queers the proceeding trends in Paraguayan film in the sense that it (a) features queer protagonists, which was the first for Paraguayan film; (b) is set in the urban space, featuring urban protagonists of the middle and upper classes; and (c) represents a political turn for Paraguayan film. No film preceding *Cuchillo* was as overtly political.

Although one could argue that most Paraguayan films preceding *Cuchillo* can be read as political allegories, *Cuchillo* was the first film to take on the Stroessner dictatorship in an overt, literal way, by shedding

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Tucson, USA

light on the regime's persecution of homosexuals (and in the process, shedding light on contemporary homophobia). *Cuchillo* follows Costa as she returns to Paraguay, after living in Spain, to solve the mystery behind her queer uncle's death and to expose the secrets surrounding his life. In the process, she tells the story of homosexual persecution under the Stroessner regime, specifically, the torture and interrogations that were part of the Palmieri case, the resulting list of "known" homosexuals (*la lista de los 108*) produced by the dictatorship, the Aranda case, and its ensuing list as well.

In this chapter, I explore the question of how are we to interpret the work of queer representation in *Cuchillo*, a documentary that offers the first filmic opportunity for direct political criticism of a historical dictatorship contextualized by a filmic backdrop obsessed with national identity and the return to the origin narratives. Here, I explore how queer theory can further an analysis of these representations "by considering interrelations of sexuality, race, and gender in a transnational context, attempting to bring the projects of queer, postcolonial and critical race theories together with each other and with a feminist analytic that itself has been a key factor in the critique of social identity," to quote Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen in their introduction to a special issue of *Social Text*, "Queer Transections of Race, Nation and Gender."<sup>2</sup> *Cuchillo* represents a break with unified, nationalist representations conveying purity in Paraguayan origins, by highlighting queer, Paraguayan, clandestine countermemories and histories that official state and religious discourse has placed under erasure.

For these reasons, among others, *Cuchillo* does important work that Carmelo Esterrich describes in "Filming Remembering Forgetting: The spectacle of erasure in *Cuchillo de palo/108*," by constituting "a plethora of moving pictures that document and complicate the contemporary questions around nation, citizenship and the mediated image" dealing specifically with what Esterrich refers to as "postmemorial recuperation," that is, a kind of historic revisionism that disrupts traditional discourses of power.<sup>3</sup> That said, *Cuchillo*'s limits involve its form as a type of the spectacle that sets out to revisit history in such a way that new power dynamics return and are also present in the film. As Guy Debord so succinctly puts it in *Society of the Spectacle*, "reasoning about history is inseparably reasoning about power."<sup>4</sup> In *Cuchillo*, there are two temporalities

with two different power structures that enter into its reason: the power structure of the military dictatorship and the power structure of the new democratic order.

As Kregg Hetherington describes in *Guerrilla Auditors: The Politics of Transparency in Neoliberal Paraguay*, a primary concern in international development involves how nations should transition from authoritarian or corrupt regimes to more democratic ones, a fear being that, if the people do not fill the power vacuum left by the exiting regime, undesirable totalitarian or fundamentalist elements will. Implicit is the assumption that democracy is unquestionably the most superior model of political organization available for fighting totalitarianism. Questions of how to support democratic transition became inseparable from questions of how to “free” national markets as the postdictatorship economic growth spurt of the early 1990s in Latin America, for example, was touted as evidence that free market reforms were working. The road to democratic politics was seen as going hand in hand with a strong economy, and both were tied to the prioritization of information—especially the conditions of the poor and marginalized: gathering, organizing, and distributing this information. In the case of Paraguay, young directors constitute an important segment of the group that Hetherington refers to as the “new democrats:” a small, educated counter elite from Asunción with an increasingly influential role in media, social analysis, public criticism, and international relations. With this in mind, *Cuchillo* is a documentary that documents in two specific ways: (1) It documents an effort to democratize Paraguay by visually providing information regarding a subaltern subject position in Paraguay—specifically gay men and trans women—as part of a visual turn that promises to open access to symbols of memory and national identity beyond hegemonic use, through the introduction of symbols that circulate among non-hegemonic groups; and (2) it documents this sincere desire to move a nation in the direction of the universal ideals of greater freedom and economic equality, juxtaposed with profound anxieties regarding the populist threat to democracy. While Paraguayan underclasses need helping and empowering, they are also seen as voting masses whose illiteracy, irrationality, and weakness for totalitarian, populist leaders (such as Alfredo Stroessner and Lino Oviedo) make them a threat to democracy.<sup>5</sup> This underclass is most profoundly embodied by the figure of Renate Costa’s father, Pedro Costa.

## CUCHILLO'S CHIAROSCURO

*Cuchillo* begins with shots of Asunción taken from the Paraguay River at dawn, in which Costa's voice-over states that the city is known for having its back to the river. She describes how hard it is to look backward ("Cuánto nos cuesta mirar hacia atrás.") The dark, mysterious waters of the river connote linear time flowing and floating away, carrying the violent histories of the Stroessner regime farther and farther away from the immediate temporal landscape, producing a past at which backward glances are difficult to cast. Esterrich sees this opening of the documentary—with a shot of the city from "behind"—as a way for *Cuchillo* "as a documentary (and as a document) [to] locate itself away from the center to decisively record the city from a vantage point that Asunción itself would not recognize."<sup>6</sup> Part of what *Cuchillo* does, is to show a view of the past that would be unrecognizable to many, but also to ask the public to recognize a specific view of contemporary Paraguay. The *vai vén* between these two views is symbolized by the interplay between dark and light, and between the scenes that take on the subject of the two brothers. As Esterrich so poetically puts it, "the raw material of cinema, what makes cinema what it is—light and absence of light—are used literally and figuratively as the methodological bearings of *Cuchillo de palo*. In fact, most of the film has a penumbral quality."<sup>7</sup> He also points out how:

Looking at the film's structure, *Cuchillo de palo/108* sways between the director traveling the city in search of information about her uncle and an extended conversation with her father about his gay brother. These two sections are strikingly different, both stylistically and narratively... Even though in those scenes the topic of conversation is almost always his brother, the audience gets to know much more about the father than about Rodolfo.<sup>8</sup>

Just as *Cuchillo* plays with dark/light, the invisible, dead brother (Rodolfo) and the visible, living one (Pedro), the unknown and the discovered, it also works in the service of two different projects: a recovering of a specific, queer history, and a condemnation of a certain segment of the Paraguayan population who have historically contributed to bringing populist strongmen to power. To diminish them is also to advocate for a new openness that would hopefully lead to a transfer of power to the new counterelite, new democrats like Renate Costa. As Guy Dubord

explains in regard to the spectacle, “The end of cultural history manifests itself on two opposite sides: the project of its supersession in total history, and the organization of its preservation as a dead object in specular contemplation. One of these moments has linked its fate to social critique, the other to the defense of class power.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, by virtue of its essence as a documentary/document meant to read a specific cultural history, *Cuchillo de palo*, while claiming to have no sharp edge, actually has two: one that whittles a much-needed historical revisionism and one that carves out the image of populist homophobic thought as it “really is”—a project that can play into social critique but must also be about transferring class power to the new democrats.

Before throwing the baby out with the bathwater, however, it is productive to outline how *Cuchillo* is a valuable intervention and a much-needed site of historical revisionism when it comes to Paraguayan nationalistic narratives. As Gayatri Gopinath describes in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, mainstream diasporic discourse is frequently dominated by a return to the origins. I have already argued that the main preoccupation observed in Paraguayan film was once how to represent a unique essence of *paraguayidad* through a visual turn.<sup>10</sup> A *queer* diaspora, as Gopinath describes it, may also dive into questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia, but not to produce a pure nationalism. Rather, a queer diasporic project is often mounted in order to revisit “the contradictions and violences of multiple uprootings, displacements and exiles.”<sup>11</sup> Uprooting, displacement, and exile are present in *Cuchillo* in two primary ways: firstly, in the figure of the director herself, who, like most Paraguayan directors, necessarily had to emigrate in order to study film and produce the documentary, given the lack of resources available for filmmaking in Paraguay at the time of her training. This extra-national positionality helps Costa to challenge the way memory works (or fails to work) and is elemental to the film’s mission. Costa operates as a foreign national in Spain most of the time that this Spanish co-production is in process, making herself, the film as a cultural product, and its object—her queer uncle, Rodolfo Costa—a story of otherness. Secondly, the film explores the 108 list and the Aranda list, the two most infamous lists of “known homosexuals,” that were compiled by the Stroessner regime specifically to control, terrify, humiliate, weaken, and exile queer individuals, a fact directly acknowledged by Costa and many of those she interviews.



The documentary is rife with what Joseph Roach and Gayatri Gopinath call “clandestine counter-memories,” that is, memories that are “deliberately forgotten within conventional nationalist or diasporic scripts” and memories that challenge “the relentless search for the purity of origins, [which] is a voyage not of discovery, but of erasure.”<sup>12</sup> This deliberate forgetting can also be thought of as a whitewashing or a purging. A continual symbolic reminder that *Cuchillo* traffics in clandestine counter-memories comes in the form of repeated lingering shots of the corner where Rodolfo Costa had lived. At the time of filming, the corner structure houses a small laundry business displaying its sign: “CLEAN LAVANDERIA.” The sign is a reminder of how Rodolfo’s story and the stories of state violence against so many other Paraguayan gay men had been conveniently forgotten, placed under erasure, whitewashed, and purged from national discourse.

The counter-memories that *Cuchillo* attempts to rescue involve Renate’s personal childhood recollections involving her uncle as well as victims’ testimonies around the *caso Aranda* and the *caso Palmieri*, two stories that constitute the most brutal moments of state-sponsored queer oppression in Paraguay. *Caso Aranda* occurred in 1959, when Bernardo Aranda, a radio personality, was murdered and his body incinerated with the fuel from his own motorcycle. It is widely rumored that the dictator’s own son, Gustavo Stroessner (“La Coronela”), was in a romantic relationship with Aranda and was responsible for this crime of passion. To cover up the crime while showing the results required from a *mano dura* regime, Stroessner initiated a witch hunt in which anyone suspected of being a homosexual male was arrested and tortured. At this time, *la lista de los 108* was produced and circulated by the regime so that “society could be aware of the amoral and sick individuals in their mist.”<sup>13</sup>

*Caso Palmieri* was the second major homophobic roundup executed by the dictatorship. In 1982, fourteen-year-old Mario Luis Palmieri was kidnapped from his school. His body turned up 6 days later. It is unclear why the police deducted that this was also a crime of passion involving a gay romantic relationship. Over six hundred gay and/or gender-bending men were arrested, interrogated, and tortured. Their names were circulated in another list. *Cuchillo*’s work of recovering these histories and retelling them from the perspective of the victims and their confidants sets an unprecedented example of placing clandestine counter-memories into circulation at a key moment, when their presence has the potential to affect new forms of visual culture informing the national imaginary at

a time of (re)establishing the return to the origins narratives. These histories disrupt any project of pure nationalism with the contradictions and violences of the past, including the uprootings, displacements, and exiles that gay men who found their names on these lists had to endure. Many found their lives, reputations, and businesses ruined, facing no choice but to leave their home country.

### PEDRO COSTA

Another dominant force in *Cuchillo* involves Renate's conversations with her father, Pedro Costa. In these conversations, Pedro displays his own homophobia and the extreme homophobia with which he and Rodolfo were raised. The conversations included in the documentary highlight this homophobia most effectively through the religious rhetoric Pedro offers in response to Renate's challenges. These exchanges also help create a fuller picture of how the Aranda and Palmieri persecutions were justified by religious and populist thought and assist in producing a documentary in which the nationalist narrative of relationality between men is upset by making female subjectivity central to its project through Renate's questioning.

A scene that illustrates this feminist and queer challenge to heteronormative discipline begins with Pedro painting a window at his shop, shot from the outside. Pedro's face on the other side of the glass becomes less and less visible until he blacks out the panes completely. Visually, he creates a barrier between himself and the outside world. The blacked-out window represents the ideological barrier between Pedro and Renate, as evidenced by the conversation that follows.

This conversation is held in the office of the blacksmith shop, the documentary's most privileged space of patrilineage. Pedro sits behind his desk and Renate sits across from him, the bulky piece of furniture materially reinforcing the insurmountable ideological differences between them. They go back and forth, Renate bringing up the homophobic way in which the rest of the family treated Rodolfo—particularly by demonstrating distrust around him being with the children of the family. Pedro explains away this treatment by insisting that Rodolfo had a dangerous condition from which the children needed to be shielded, and tells the story of how he tried to “defend” Rodolfo by telling him not to be gay and beating his homosexual friends. When Renate tries to argue that homophobia is the problem, and not homosexuality, Pedro

can only resort to summoning “the Holy Spirit” and religious discourse he believes in upholding his position.

Immediately after this scene, the next series of shots take the spectator to the street. The tone of Renate’s voice-over sounds rather defeated: “Sometimes I think it would be easier to stay silent. Be quiet and forget.” She goes on to recall other details about her uncle: his flamboyancy, how he dressed, how he danced, how he loved Elvis, and how the seat next to him was often empty. This narration is juxtaposed with images of street graffiti that recall the Stroessner dictatorship: “Torture—never again,” “Stroessner Torturer: no more wealthy people in power,” and “Lista 9”—a reference to the Colorado Party of which Stroessner was a member. These transition images link Pedro’s heteronormative, homophobic, religious rhetoric to the nation and to the nation’s political history. In their exchange, Renate clearly outlines the hurtful behavior that other adults in her family displayed toward Rodolfo due to their ignorance and fear. Instead of recognizing this homophobia for what it is, a position of discrimination against an individual’s identity, Pedro unapologetically uses the word *temor* (fear) to defend his stance and the stance of others. Similarly, the Stroessner dictatorship linked homosexuality and criminality to justify and normalize gay persecution. Pedro’s justification for violently attacking Rodolfo’s friends comes on the heels of his speech about love and the Holy Spirit. In the context of the dictatorship, violence directed toward the queer population does not require explanation: It is the only responsible and moral response.

Elsewhere, Renate describes Rodolfo’s unwillingness to embrace the patrilineage of the family through his rejection of his father’s trade—blacksmithing: “Rodolfo was the only one who didn’t want to be a blacksmith; he was the most disobedient of the family.” In contrast, Pedro is presented as the son who has followed the patrilineage so closely that he now resides at the workshop that used to belong to his father; literally and physically, the son now occupies the father’s space, and the conversation takes place in this space. The conversation between Pedro and Renate begins with Renate bringing up her clandestine countermemories from childhood, introducing in this way what she experienced as homophobia and what Pedro experienced as natural ways to react to someone who refuses to receive spiritual treatment for his “contagious disease.”

Coupled with Pedro’s exemplary maintenance of the patrilineage is the sacredness of conservative, homophobic, and sexist thought epitomized in Pedro’s statements about why he beat Rodolfo’s friends in an

effort to “defend” Rodolfo, to keep him from being “corrupted” by them. As Gopinath asserts, “dominant nationalism institutes heterosexuality as a key disciplinary regime.”<sup>14</sup> While elsewhere Pedro reveals that the order to “protect” Rodolfo comes directly from the paternal heterosexual chain of command (a nationally instituted heteronormativity embodied by Pedro’s father, and by extension, Paraguay’s dictator), and Pedro does everything to honor this supreme rule—even resorting to the use of violence—Rodolfo and his friends still subvert this disciplinary regime. The spectator knows this is the case, as he/she comes to find that Rodolfo went on to acquire and/or mentor transsexual clients (there is some implication that he did this for money), guiding them through hormone therapy and providing performance coaching.

Another key element of this heteronormative discourse involves Pedro’s “evidence” of Rodolfo’s failed life: “They destroyed him, Renate. I’m telling you, the homosexual is not a male, he is undefined. He didn’t have children, he didn’t marry! There’s a mission in this life.” When Renate retorts that not everyone needs to have children, Pedro replies that priests are an exception, but if “God concedes” (if one is fertile), one should reproduce. In Pedro’s equation, a fertile man (who is not a priest) who does not reproduce cannot claim the male gender. Rodolfo’s failure to perform his gender properly and follow the heteronormative timeline disqualifies him from full homosocial participation—he is relegated to gender limbo (“undefined”). As Berlant and Warner so succinctly put it, “people feel the price they must pay for social membership and a relation to the future is identification with the heterosexual life narrative.”<sup>15</sup>

When Renate brings up the fact that not everyone needs to have children, she introduces an element that helps queer and disrupt Pedro’s rhetoric by what Gopinath might call “unmasking and undercutting its dependence on a genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic.”<sup>16</sup> It is helpful to think about the undercutting represented in this exchange between Renate and Pedro in light of Lee Edelman’s problematization of the heteronormative life timeline in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman describes political rhetorical devices to which queerness presents a threat, in that it names an outside to these “discourses of the common good” that present themselves as self-evident. For example, Edelman describes the child who is summoned in political rhetoric as the hope for the future. Any argument that undermines this child is unthinkable, being that under the logic of reproductive futurism, any such alternative equals a movement against

hope and the future. Edelman describes reproductive futurism as that which would “impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the public domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.”<sup>17</sup>

Edelman presents queerness as a refusal of this order and investigates its potential to make visible the tyranny of reproductive timelines as social structures. The heteronormative life narrative represents one acceptable series of events, including heterosexual coupling, marriage under the law, and procreation. When Renate challenges Pedro’s version of the heteronormative life narrative, and he immediately responds that priests could be an exception, this unmasks Pedro’s complete inability to think outside of a tyrannically rigid set of practices for communal relations. Indeed, when Renate insists that the social exclusion her family put Rodolfo through was a much worse pathology than homosexuality (“it seems to me that you are sicker than him”), Pedro cannot deny that he is unwell, yet he sees his own illness simply as a condition of being a member of society like any other. Similarly, when Renate challenges Pedro’s ridiculous conversion project by simply protesting “there are some points that I cannot explain. What’s natural, is natural.” This unmasks and undercuts Pedro’s rhetorical dependence on a fragile genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic that presents itself as a self-evident “discourse of the common good,” but that does not hold up under scrutiny. This neat condemnation of Pedro Costa’s homophobia allows spectators to feel better about themselves now that the world can see their national documentary’s subaltern turn: the uplifting of queer, subaltern voices. But thinking of *Cuchillo*’s success in light of Avelar’s statement about the rise of *testimonio* raises important questions:

It is imperative, however, to interrogate the triumphant rhetoric with which the phenomenon was surrounded during the 1980s, especially in the United States and largely, I believe, as an imaginary compensation for the succession of defeats undergone by the Left in recent decades. In circumstances of political isolation it is all too comforting to imagine that redemption is just around the corner, being announced by a subaltern voice transparently coincident with its experience and supplying the critical-oppositional intellectual with the golden opportunity to satisfy good conscience.<sup>18</sup>

Making Pedro Costa the “villain” and Rodolfo Costa the absent “hero” of *Cuchillo* is convenient. Rodolfo cannot talk back; he has no voice of his own. Rodolfo is a ghost; the documentary can only reconstitute him through a photograph, a few seconds of home video, and interviews with people who knew him. There are no opportunities for Rodolfo’s voice to not coincide with the experience and positionality the documentary expects. Likewise, all Paraguayan homophobia is neatly contained by the figure of Pedro Costa, who immediately satisfies the intellectual’s good conscious in that his homophobia is contained, placed on display and condemned within 93 min. The viewer is perhaps so comforted by this, in fact, that Pedro Costa has publically appeared at multiple screenings with Renate and even posts on the documentary’s Facebook page “Cuchillo de Palo-Estreno en Paraguay!” In just one screening, the intellectual can be outraged and put that outrage to rest.

#### MACHO MILITARISM SEASONED WITH PIOUS CATHOLICISM

Pedro’s use of religious rhetoric, immediately followed by shots of graffiti recalling the dictatorship, reminds the spectator of the link between military doctrine and religious traditionalism. In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, Idelber Avelar illustrates how “market ideology, military doctrine, and religious traditionalism—the three components of the ‘authoritarian conception of the world’—are demonstrated to form a coherent, unified ideology.”<sup>19</sup> Under Stroessner, Paraguay had years of experience with military dictatorship, its authoritarianism, and its forms of indoctrination (religion, propaganda, torture, kidnapping, etc.). Avelar’s work helps explain how *Cuchillo* arrives at this linking of religious discourse and patriarchal authoritarianism in the following way:

As the comforting language of Christianity fitfully complimented the heroic and militaristic rhetoric of “the armed vanguard,” the dictatorship achieved a fundamental victory, for the language in which its atrocities were narrated was, in its essence, the very same language that it cultivated and promoted: macho militarism seasoned with pious Catholicism.<sup>20</sup>

Postdictatorship morality among Asunción’s traditional ruling class is rigidly wrapped up with Roman Catholic ideals of what constitutes socially acceptable sexual behavior. The accompanying machismo to which

Avelar refers is also still dominant in political discourses in Paraguay, and as *Cuchillo*'s story illustrates, public gender bending alone has been (and can still be) met with acts of violence.<sup>21</sup> Homophobia is perhaps even more strongly justified by Catholicism in *Cuchillo*'s case because of the nation's history with the military dictatorship's language and practices of discipline and control.

It is productive to consider the link between machismo and Catholicism that Avelar establishes alongside an essential connection between the nation and heterosexuality as framed by Berlant and Warner: "National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship."<sup>22</sup> Given the time at which *Cuchillo* was produced—a time at which much filmic production was dedicated to representing some sort of unique essence of *paraguayidad* on screen—the disruption that *Cuchillo* represents is remarkable. Considering that the ideologies of machismo, Catholicism, nationalism, and others constitute a general heteropatriarchal belief system that can be rejected at any time on the grounds that "I don't believe that," from a certain vantage point, their dominance seems very temporary and frail. Similarly, the nation's borders were determined with a degree of arbitrariness. In the case of Paraguay, after the Triple Alliance War, the country could have easily been absorbed by Brazil and Argentina, but the two countries decided instead to leave a buffer zone in between each other, as it would mean investing much fewer resources if a future border war were to occur. Due to this history, Paraguay is sometimes referred to as a country that should not exist (one of two landlocked countries in South America). Heterosexual monogamy is also a concept that disappears into thin air in the Paraguayan context when even lightly scrutinized: Many women are so expectant of male cheating that they will address the topic preemptively with new partners: "I know that you will eventually cheat on me—just make sure I never find out." Even with the aggressive ideological structures to prop them up, critical thinking quickly pokes holes in the machismo, monogamy, Catholicism, and even the nationalism that constitute interrelated, mainstream ways of thinking and being in contemporary Paraguay.

Perhaps, one of the greatest vulnerabilities that *Cuchillo* unmask has to do with the dictatorship itself. As Skidmore, Smith, and Green discuss in the introduction to their book, *Modern Latin America*, historically, the military dictatorships of Latin America, like heterosexual culture,

have had no more than provisional unity: “Once thought to be dominant and monolithic, authoritarian regimes came to display a good deal of incoherence and fragility.”<sup>23</sup> *Cuchillo* works to reveal just how frail and contradictory the strategies of religion, nationalism, heteronormativity, and sexism are, and how precarious their modes of self-maintenance and reproduction.

### TRANSGENDER WOMEN, GAY MEN, AND FEMINISM

*Cuchillo* visibilizes connections between feminism, gay men, and transgender women in a way that shows what each group owes each other in the national struggle against patriarchal Roman Catholic heteronormativity as a disciplinary regime. The first queer group to present themselves publically in Asunción was the transvestites, as these trans-M/F individuals called themselves. Some of these biological males would dress as women at night; others lived full-time transgender lives. There were varying degrees of surgical transitions taking place in the eighties, with breast implants being among the most popular. As Liz Paola describes in her exchange with Renate, being a transgender woman was difficult and the only type of work she could get was sex work:

Living here was like playing the Russian roulette. It wasn't easy. No one wanted to stand on the corner. So we couldn't take it anymore and had to fight with the police to get them to leave us in peace. Because they would come around all the time, and if they saw you, they would get out and beat you with a nightstick. They could beat you to death—it was dangerous, sad. If they sent us home we would arrive totally bloodied... My mother cried when I went out, but, what was I supposed to do?, I've gotta survive somehow. I can't rely on others... I also don't have an alternative being trans. No office around here is going to give me a job.

In the eighties, pre-Internet age, the most effective way for transgender sex workers to locate clients was to claim a public space (one such space was Plaza Uruguaya in Asunción), in the early hours of the morning. While this was a way to engage with clients, this open secret of where and when trans women could be found also made them targets for harassment and abuse (teenage boys would drive by and hurl things, yell obscenities, etc.). That said, somehow these trans individuals were able to carve out a public space for themselves, even during the Stroessner dictatorship. As Liz Paola describes, they were not included in the



persecutory “list of homosexuals” because this could not “burn” them (sully their reputation), as they were already out. While Liz Paola was arrested during the Palmieri case investigation, her name did not appear on this list, as she explains: “Transvestites were not on the list, only gays... I think that the list was made to burn people, because the gays who went to jail were supposedly high society people. And since we are more liberated and are here for all to see on the corner... How are they going to burn us?”

The way in which Paraguay’s trans women were visible made them immune to the dictatorship’s coercion technique reified by the list. While gay men were outed into silence and exile, the *travestis* remained. This made them pioneers of queer visibility and representation in Asunción, something that no doubt helped start to condition society so that the gay pride parades of the 2000s could take place. Whereas the police would beat Liz Paola and her friends as they attempted to earn a living in the eighties, *Cuchillo* shows police officers safely escorting a small gay pride parade in the documentary in 2010. While transgender women paved the way for gay rights activists, *Cuchillo* also illustrates how gay men may have allied with transgender women in other ways. Liz Paola explains that her business with Rodolfo involved buying hormones from him, and in a given interview, Carlos, an old friend of Rodolfo’s, states that Rodolfo’s job was one of “coaching.” Perhaps, Rodolfo assisted many in their male-to-female journeys and performance.

While some feminists perhaps do not think they owe anything to the transgender prostitutes they see as sleazy, Berlant and Warner might reframe their attitude with a similar challenge to “respectable gays” who might look down on certain sexual subcultures: “their success, their way of living, their political rights, and their very identities would have never been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise. Extinguish it, and almost all out gay or queer culture will wither on the vine.”<sup>24</sup> Thanks to the transgender women who risked their personal safety, even when gay people were forced under erasure, the *travestis* were still able to maintain a space of queer presence and visibility.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, what the queerness of both groups does to subvert patriarchal Catholic rhetoric is essential for advances in feminist arenas, including acceptance and celebration of female sexuality and female pleasure.

A moment that connects feminism with Rodolfo is narrated by Renate, a story about her own mother, Mirta. Renate explains that her mother had fallen in love with someone else—not Pedro, her husband.

She became pregnant with his child and appeared publically at her mother-in-law's (Renate's *abuela*) funeral. Renate narrates the story this way: "Mom found another partner, a dancer, and got pregnant... I remember that she came to the wake with a huge belly. No one sat next to her. I will never be able to describe what I felt when Rodolfo approached her, took her hand, and prayed with her." The rhetoric of the dictatorship, "macho militarism seasoned with pious Catholicism," is queered, subverted, and resignified by Rodolfo in this show of solidarity. Rodolfo and Mirta are both shunned by their family for the sexual transgressions of which there is public evidence on display (Mirta's pregnancy, Rodolfo's flamboyancy). Rodolfo understands how hard it can be for the seat next to her to remain empty, so he responds by accompanying Mirta. When he holds her hand to pray with her, he re-appropriates Catholicism in a way that demonstrates how he rejects the dogma that would justify her shunning—and his own shunning. It is also noteworthy that this narration comes immediately following a scene taken from a family video where the whole family is happily singing "Happy Birthday" to *abuela* on her eightieth birthday. Renate deviates from the official family history as it is documented: happy and unified. Instead, she rescues the sexually marginalized community in her own family and reimagines their relationship to official family memories. By narrating a different history, *Cuchillo* memorializes the injustices of the past while representing alternative modes of being that extend beyond those traditionally accepted by the limited scope of Catholicism, heterosexuality, and nationalism.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a film that broke from the rural, heteronormative trend, *Cuchillo de palo* marks a turn for Paraguayan film in 2010; a turn away from unified, nationalist representations conveying purity in Paraguayan origins; and a turn toward the inclusion of Paraguayan narratives that challenge conventional, nationalist scripts by visibilizing the queer, clandestine counter-memories and histories that official state and religious discourse has placed under erasure. *Cuchillo* offers unprecedented moments of queer and feminist resistance while linking heteronormative, homophobic, and religious rhetoric to the nation's political history and traditional disciplinary regimes. *Cuchillo* works to visibilize the incoherence and frailty of the strategies of religion, nationalism, heteronormativity, and sexism

while revealing how precarious their modes of self-maintenance and reproduction really are. *Cuchillo* deals with the horrors of state-sponsored homophobic persecution in a way that encapsulates contemporary homophobia in the individual of Pedro Costa, neatly laying the issue to rest. While its gestures toward resistance are laudable, the figure of Pedro Costa represents the counterelite's anxiety about the voting masses whose illiteracy, irrationality, and historic weakness for totalitarian, populist leaders make them a threat to democracy—as a system of government would favor a new openness leading to a transfer of power to the new counterelite. *Cuchillo de palo*'s projects involve much-needed historical revisionism but also involve transferring class power to the new democrats, while working against the figure of Pedro Costa as a representation of the populist threat to democracy by connecting his homophobia and irrationality to the military dictatorship.

## NOTES

1. The film's original title is *Cuchillo de palo*; the film's official USA complete title is *108 Cuchillo de palo* and the film's world-wide title is *108*. Also, all translations throughout this text are my own.
2. Phillip B. Harper, Anne McClintock, José E. Muñoz, and Trish Rosen, "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender: an Introduction," *Social Text* (1997), 1–4.
3. Carmelo Esterrich, "Filming Remembering Forgetting: The Spectacle of Erasure in *Cuchillo de palo/108*," XXXI International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (Washington D.C. May 2013), Unpublished conference paper.
4. Guy Debord and Ken Knabb, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 134.
5. The events known as "Marzo Paraguayo" occurred in 1999. Vice President Luís María Argaña was assassinated on March 23 of said year. It was widely believed that the president Raúl Cubas Grau and his puppeteer, Lino César Oviedo, were responsible for this assassination. (Oviedo had previously been incarcerated for attempting a failed coup d'état and was freed by Cubas Grau once the latter won the presidency.) Crowds protested in the streets over the course of several days, demanding the end of the Cubas Grau/Oviedo government immediately. Protesters were fired at by snipers located on downtown rooftops, causing deaths and injuries. The end result, however, was the creation of enough pressure to result in Cubas Grau's resignation. It is important to note that the violence of this event was not limited to exchanges between protesters

and sharpshooters. At the same time, Federación Nacional Campesina del Paraguay had organized a manifestation with the purpose of lobbying for its own interests not related to the political assassination. This group of *campesinos* was purportedly mobilized by Cubas Grau and Oviedo, and instructed to attack the protestors.

In light of the events of Marzo Paraguayo, many ask whether Federación Nacional Campesina del Paraguay was manipulated as much as some accounts would have us believe, or whether their actions were completely congruous with the defense of a political model (authoritarian military dictatorship) under which the rural and working-class standard of living was better. One must also ask how a democratic Paraguayan national project can go on if the chasm between the urban elite and the campesino poor is not bridged somehow, at least rhetorically.

6. Esterrich, "Filming Remembering," 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 4.
8. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
9. Debord, *The Society*, 184.
10. Eva Karene Romero, *Film and Democracy in Paraguay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
11. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.
12. *Ibid.*, 4. See also Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
13. "Por qué se llama 108 a los homosexuales." *Ultima Hora*. September 1, 2014. Accessed on December 2, 2016. <http://www.ultimahora.com/por-que-se-llama-108-los-homosexuales-n825821.html>.
14. Gopinath, *Impossible*, 9.
15. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998), 557.
16. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 10.
17. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
18. Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Durham N.C., London: Duke University Press, 1999), 67.
19. *Ibid.*, 55.
20. *Ibid.*, 67.
21. The President of Paraguay at the time of this writing, Horacio Cartes, was famously cited publically saying "Si yo tuviera un hijo gay me pegaría un tiro en las bolas/If I had a gay son I would shoot myself in the balls," while he was running for election. After the election, he was also famously quoted for equating Paraguay to an "easy woman" in an effort

- to describe how the country should become more attractive to foreign investors. “Horacio Cartes y la frase de la polémica: ‘Paraguay tiene que ser esa mujer linda, tiene que ser fácil’”; “Cartes: ‘Me pego un tiro en las bolas si mi hijo quiere casarse con otro hombre,’” *Hoy*, 11 April 2013, accessed on August 19, 2014. <http://www.hoy.com.py/politica/me-pego-un-tiro-en-las-bolas-si-mi-hijo-quiere-casarse-con-otro-hombre>.
22. Berlant and Warner, “Sex,” 549.
  23. Thomas Skidmore and Peter Smith, *Modern Latin America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 10.
  24. Berlant and Warner, “Sex,” 563.
  25. Trans individuals in Paraguay still pay the price for their greater visibility, as their appearances in Paraguayan mass media become favorite clips for online meme-making, autotune mash-ups and other types of creative mockeries. See viral YouTube videos such as *Travestis delicadas y finolis. malubobadillaacosta1*. YouTube, 15 Dec. 2010. Accessed on January 2, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C-uTk968oU> and *Travesti vs. Borracho Duelo Autotune! Soyansutil*. YouTube, 21 Dec. 2013. Accessed on January 2, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K12cOevoDcw>.

## De-Parting Paraguay: The Interruption of the Aesthetic Gaze in *Siete Cajas* (2012)

*Federico Pous*

Released in August 2012, *Seven Boxes* quickly became the most watched film in the history of Paraguayan cinema.<sup>1</sup> Co-directed by Juan Carlos Maneglia and Tana Schémbori, the thriller tells the story of the unresolved crime of a woman kidnapped by her husband in *Mercado 4*, a street market in Asunción.<sup>2</sup> Although the film's popularity can be explained by its brilliant narrative as well as by its technical quality, its success can be also thought of in relation to the political events that had a profound impact on the country at the time: the so-called Massacre of Curuguaty and the subsequent destitution of President Fernando Lugo.

In effect, on June 15, 2012, eleven *campesinos* and six policemen were killed in the midst of a dispute over a land occupation in rural Paraguay,

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Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. A preliminary version of this paper, titled “Des-cartismo y 7 cajas,” was published in Spanish in *Des- Cartes. Estampas de la derecha en Paraguay*, ed. by Rocco Carbone and Lorena Soler (Buenos Aires: Punto de Encuentro, 2015) 129–140.

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near the city of Curuguaty.<sup>3</sup> This massacre was the political trigger that toppled Lugo in a parliamentary coup d'état 7 days later.<sup>4</sup> The speed of the impeachment process against Lugo (which took place in less than 48 hours) and the lack of transparency of the legal investigation of the massacre, in which only peasants were prosecuted and sentenced to time in prison, demonstrate the perversity of the Paraguayan political and judicial system which continues to be defined by the legacy of Stroessner's dictatorship (1954–1989).<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I put forward a close reading of *Seven Boxes* to reflect upon this return to authoritarianism proper of the Paraguayan (and by extension, of Latin American) political culture. My analysis does not seek to compare the movie with the massacre, nor does it intend to sustain some sort of political correspondence between the two. In fact, *Seven Boxes* does not refer to the historical struggle for the land or the *Campesino* Movement, nor offer a critique of the police as an institution (even the directors were accused of “vindicating Stronism”).<sup>6</sup> However, as it premiered in Paraguayan movie theaters only two months after the historical events spurred at Curuguaty, I explore here the resonance that the massacre had upon the film's unexpected success.

My analysis of *Seven Boxes* focuses on the ongoing interruption of the categories that define Paraguay as an isolated country whose national development diverged from the rest of Latin America. Instead, I argue that the film presents an image of neoliberal Paraguay that results from the deployment of capitalism across the continent while reflecting upon the country's historical specificity, namely the simultaneous coexistence of the Spanish and Guaraní cultural components of Paraguayan identity. This coexistence involves the linguistic and historical tension between the oral and the written, the national and the global, etc. that functions as a source of explanation for many historical events, including this return to authoritarianism.<sup>7</sup>

Departing from those constitutive scissions of Paraguayan political culture, I propose to interpret the film along the lines of Jacques Rancière's concept of the “partition of the sensible,” which is “the system of sense perception facts” that precede and determine “what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done.”<sup>8</sup> By focusing on this previously existing system, Rancière is concerned with the dividing lines between the aesthetic and the political. From that perspective, he uses the term “police” to name “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved: the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the

systems for legitimizing this distribution.”<sup>9</sup> Fundamentally, by distributing parts among the parts of society, the “police” also assigns a place and a role for each of those parts. However, as this distribution is unequal, it always leaves out “a part that has no part,” which, for Rancière, is capable of carrying out the interruption that disrupts and reorganizes this distributive regime.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the work of interruption is to dislocate the dividing line between the aesthetic and the political in order to challenge the unequal distribution of the parts that ensues from a “regime of representation.”<sup>11</sup>

Within this framework, I call “aesthetic gaze” the ongoing interruption of the Spanish/Guaraní divide as it is portrayed in *Seven Boxes*. This interruption, which is constitutive of the gaze itself (as an interrupted or broken gaze), ultimately questions the categories that determine the unequal distribution of parts in contemporary neoliberal Paraguayan. My interpretation hinges on two characters in the film who are porters (*carretilleros*) and carry goods from one place to another in the market, as they unwittingly become involved in the distribution of the ransom money for the kidnapped woman among the captors. By considering the porters (along with other marginal characters) as the part that has no part in such distribution, I will examine how the interruption of the aesthetic gaze takes place in the movie. While the part that has no part reconstructs itself as a broken gaze, at the same time, it interrupts and reconfigures the partition of the sensible. Following this analysis, I suggest that the *Campesino* Movement’s struggle and the process of collective memory emerging from the Massacre of Curuguaty could be considered as the part that has no part in neoliberal Paraguay.

Grounded in this theoretical approach, my analysis of the film unfolds in three sections that underpin the formation of the aesthetic gaze that takes shape in the film. In the first section, I examine how the effects of the confusion between the women’s cadaver and the money shape the perception of neoliberal Paraguay. By highlighting how the porters embody the driving force of men in their search for money, I argue that the structure of *Seven Boxes*, based on the attempts to “solve” the crime of the kidnapped woman, evokes the unsolved massacre in Curuguaty. I, therefore, understand this massacre (and the consecutive coup, as well as the trial and imprisonment of the *campesinos*) as part of the ongoing primitive accumulation of capital that can be traced retrospectively to other historical moments such as the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), the Chaco War (1932–1935), and the Stroessner dictatorship. Significantly, the latest link in this historical sequence coincides with



the expansion of the right-wing neoliberal wave in Latin America during the second decade of the millennium. Lugo's destitution is part of a series of events that includes the anti-democratic overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (2009), and the parliamentary coup d'état against Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2016). In this context, my argument is that both the film and the massacre reveal the erasure of history and the reproduction of violence as the fundamental *modus operandi* of Paraguayan neoliberalism.

In the second section, I show how two female secondary characters end up playing a crucial role in the film around the resolution of the crime of the kidnapped woman. In contrast with the driving force of men, the underground driving force of women interrupts the distribution of the ransom money by restituting the collective power of emancipation held by the part that has no part. My reading does not seek to leave behind the categories by which this country was defined (the Spanish/Guaraní divide), but rather to identify the parts that hold that collective power to unravel how they impede or facilitate the re-assemblage of their fragmentary struggle. In that sense, both the film and the massacre can be connected as an expression of the tension of de-parting from a Paraguay that was already broken but yet continued to struggle, even before the events in Curuguaty took place in 2012.

Finally, in the third section, I analyze how the aesthetic gaze operates in *Seven Boxes* as a broken gaze through a retrospective take that interrupts neoliberal Paraguay by reassembling the part that has no part. By focusing on the killing of one of the porters at the hands of a policeman in the movie's final scene (recorded by a marginal character on a cell-phone camera), I argue that this act of recording the crime scene in the film confronts Paraguayan spectators with the same lack of justice that also characterizes the massacre and its aftermath. In other words, when screened in Paraguayan cinemas, this scene unconsciously evoked the missing part of the crime scene in Curuguaty.

With this interpretation, I recall Fredric Jameson's principle when he states that "[e]verything, in the last analysis, is political."<sup>12</sup> For Jameson, "the assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" that take place at a specific historical configuration.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, my hypothesis is that although the film was not made to reflect upon these events, it somehow

touched the tender fibers of the Paraguayan political unconscious recently shaken by the massacre, contributing to its unexpected success in the country. And ultimately, I sustain that the collective power of the part that has no part cannot emerge as an interruption if it is not connected to a fundamental tremor in the political unconscious.

#### THE PARTITION IN MERCADO 4: THE CADAVER AND THE MONEY

*Seven Boxes* begins with a radio announcement of the high price of the US dollar against the *Guaraní* (Paraguayan currency), while we see images of fruits, clothes, and their price labels, as typically displayed in the street market. This initial sequence already “produces a discrepancy, a dissemblance” between what is heard and what is seen, evocative of the discordance between the fluidity of money in neoliberalism and the singular price of commodities in the space of the market.<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of these contradictions embedded in the valorization of money, Víctor, the porter, takes seven boxes from a butcher’s shop and carries them in his cart through Mercado 4 with the promise that he will receive a hundred-dollar bill in exchange upon their delivery. Throughout the movie, it is suggested that those boxes contain two hundred thousand dollars, which triggers attempts to obtain them on the part of another porter named Nelson. However, half-way through the film, Víctor finds out that, instead of money, the boxes contain a cadaver split in seven parts. This cutup corpse belongs to an unnamed woman who was kidnapped by her husband (in collusion with the butchers), who asked her family for a ransom money (the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars), as they had recently received an inheritance. However, the woman accidentally dies while trying to escape from her captors, and one of the butchers cuts the cadaver up in seven parts, having misunderstood a coded message in which the main captor has asked that the money be distributed in seven parts (*re-partir el dinero*).

This confusion between the money and the cadaver has a linguistic root in the verb *partir* in Spanish. While *repartir* in Spanish can be translated as *partager* in French and as “distribute” in English, *partir* also implies two other meanings. First, it recalls the violence implied in an act of breaking something; and second, it also means to exit a place, to leave it behind, *to depart*. This is precisely what happens in the film. The confusion between *partir* and *repartir* makes the butcher cut the cadaver instead of distributing the money.

And, in consequence, the broken body departs on a journey within the boxes in which it will wander through Mercado 4 without any direction.

In that regard, Davide Panagia states that the concept of the “*partage du sensible*” in Rancière’s work is controversial, as in French “a *partage* is at once a sharing and a division.”<sup>15</sup> For Rancière, the fundamental problem consists in figuring out how “this dividing line” between partition and distribution draws the relation between the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable, etc., which ultimately refers to the relation between aesthetics and politics.<sup>16</sup> By combining these two elements proper of the verb *partir*, I intend to reconfigure the meanings contained in the *partage du sensible* that prefigures the unequal distribution of the parts in society. In doing so, I sustain that the partition of the sensible in *Seven Boxes* implies an original act of violence that occurs before the film begins (the kidnapping of the woman) as well as an act of departure from the Spanish/Guaraní divide. Therefore, de-parting Paraguay posits the question of how the part that has no part emerges as a political interruption of the police (in Rancière’s terms) from the point of view of this act of leaving that divides and distributes the parts while acknowledging the simultaneous act of violence that implies a rupture with an already broken society.

From that perspective, the porters function in first place as the part that has no part in the distribution of the ransom. Even though Víctor has the boxes in his cart, he is not supposed to have a part in the “sharing” of the money. This reconfiguration activates a certain desire for money shared by all the main masculine characters: the kidnapers, who have to divide the two hundred and fifty dollars among them, and the porters who also go after a part of that “same” money. While Víctor wants to buy a cellphone camera from his sister, as his deepest wish is to be on TV, Nelson needs to get some very expensive medicine for his sick son (later in the film, he will nevertheless try to steal the boxes to obtain all the money). At first glance, both “desires” could reflect a common popular tension: the aspiration to overcome poverty by appearing on the big screen or by acquiring a lot of money all at once, in contrast with the basic need to survive. Nonetheless, this underlying driving force (the desire for money) reconfigures the role of the porters. As the part that has no part in the distribution of the ransom money, they do not interrupt this distribution. Instead, they reclaim a part of the money without challenging the partition/distribution divide.

Moreover, the confusion between the money and the cadaver has its basis in the original crime: the kidnapping of the unnamed women that

ended up in her accidental death. Actually, the whole narrative of *Seven Boxes* operates through different attempts to eliminate the cadaver in order to have access to the ransom money and cancel out the confusion between cadaver and money. Although this task becomes impossible, its structural function in the film reflects, as we will see, the logic of primitive accumulation at work during the Massacre of Curuguaty.

For this analysis, I rely on Karl Marx's concept of "ongoing primitive accumulation" of capital, which is "the historical process of divorcing the producer from his means of production" (primarily, the tenancy of land) through violent means in order to set up proper capitalist accumulation between capitalists and wage laborers.<sup>17</sup> For Marx, primitive accumulation is not only the precondition for launching capitalism, but a process that returns with all its violence to restart a new cycle of capital in order to continue the ongoing separation of the producer from the means of production through different methods (which, in neoliberalism, is attached to the role of debts in the financial market).<sup>18</sup>

From that perspective, what is at stake in the Massacre of Curuguaty is the historical fight for the land, for the distribution of the land among the parts of society, at the heart of the return of primitive accumulation of capital. In fact, the land in dispute in Marina Cué, near the city of Curuguaty, "legally" belongs to the state even if it was given to the *latifundista* (landowner) Blas N. Riquelme by the Stroessner dictatorship in 1969.<sup>19</sup> As the part that does not have a part, the *campesinos sin tierra*, "who had already demanded that Lugo's government distribute it," occupied the land.<sup>20</sup> Their actions were prompted (and justified) by the way in which the transaction of these "*tierras malhabidas*" (illegitimately acquired lands) where part of a land reform that benefitted the *latifundistas* instead of the people.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the return of the historical violence in the Massacre of Curuguaty connected capital accumulation and political authoritarianism in Paraguay. It was the violent act that once again separated the *campesinos* from the land functioning also as a trigger to restructure the political system in ways that facilitated the expansion of neoliberalism in the country.

Furthermore, Marx sustains that the historical account of primitive accumulation "is supposed to be explained [by the defenders of capitalism] when it is told as an anecdote of the past" that underestimates and ultimately erases the fundamental role of violence in the historical reproduction of capitalist economy.<sup>22</sup> This is precisely how the Paraguayan state blamed the victims of the massacre and rewrote history while erasing the traces of violence produced by the police in coalition with the

*latifundistas* and the judicial power. Indeed, the peasants were the only ones persecuted in the trial: neither the police nor civil servants nor the “irregular groups” (who probably were the real authors of the massacre) were investigated.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the analysis of *Seven Boxes*, I do not seek to establish equivalences between the massacre and the film. I am not arguing that the partition of the woman’s body in the film “represents” the people killed in Curuguaty. The proposition here is to think how they both operate under the same logic of primitive accumulation, according to which the fundamental crime that organizes the distribution of the parts (land, money, bodies) by the police (in Rancière’s terms), has to be distorted and eventually eliminated from history.

Through the interpretative lens of the massacre, *Seven Boxes* shows how, despite all the attempts at restoring the cadaver and the money, those parts cannot be reconstituted as a whole. For instance, one of the boxes that contain the cadaver is stolen and ends up in the middle of the river floating without direction. Likewise, when Víctor receives the boxes in the shop, the butcher Gus takes a hundred-dollar bill: “¿Sabés qué este es? Cien dólar. Siete mil Guaraní si cambiás hoy (“Do you know what it is? A hundred-dollar bill, almost seven thousand Guaraníes [the Paraguayan currency] if you change it today”).” Then, Gus cuts the bill in half (perhaps his hands were the same that cut the cadaver) and gives one half to Víctor with the promise of giving him the other half when the boxes are delivered.

The image of the cut up bill juxtaposes several violent acts embedded in the partition of the sensible, as, while cutting the bill, Gus expresses himself in a broken Spanish intercalated linguistically by the oral structure of Guaraní. Moreover, the butcher had stolen that bill from the pile of the two hundred fifty thousand dollars that the woman’s family had already paid, taking a part from the whole. In addition, Víctor is going to cut his half of the hundred-dollar bill in a half to share it with his sister, Tamara. This partition of the bill as well as the partition of the cadaver constitutes the dead materiality that circulates throughout Mercado 4 and cannot be restored. In fact, when Víctor is finally going to deliver the boxes, another butcher tells him that the broken bill has lost its value: As any broken dollar, it cannot be exchanged for Guaraníes. And ultimately, that particular bill symbolizes the death of money: the cadaver bill that had lost his value from the beginning, from its first partition in half in the butcher shop.

In synthesis, from the perspective of primitive accumulation, both distributions of the parts steam from an original crime (the kidnapped woman in the film and the massacre in the political arena) that the perpetrators try to erase. In consequence, the efforts to reconstruct the whole become impossible within the same regime of distribution (whether it refers to the ransom money in the movie or the judicial system in Paraguay). But more importantly yet, the dead materiality of that broken bill resonates throughout the other instances of this violent partition: a broken cadaver, a broken language, and a broken gaze that, as Horacio Legrás puts it, points “to deeper fractures in the experience of the social” in the country.<sup>24</sup>

### RECONFIGURING THE STRUGGLE: THE DRIVING FORCE OF WOMEN

It is worth recalling that the struggle for knowing the truth of the massacre as well as for the cancellation of the trial is a fundamental democratic practice: not only as a militant goal in itself, but also as part of the collective elaboration of memory of the events in Curuguaty in connection with Paraguayan history.<sup>25</sup> Based on that struggle, the proposal of the aesthetic gaze as the interruption of the police (in Rancière’s terms) aims to reframe the political problem of the reconfiguration of the parts when the task of recomposing the whole becomes impossible (whether in the film or in the massacre). Therefore, by expanding our understanding of the concept of “the part that has no part” beyond the role of the porters and their attachment to the driving force of money, I take into account those other parts that were cast aside in that first account: specifically, the role of women in the film.

From a feminist point of view, *Seven Boxes* revolves around the broken body of the kidnapped women who does not even have a name. In that sense, it is not only the elimination of one “part” what is at stake, but also the elimination of an already unknown part as a result of a masculine dispute for money. This crime points to the persistence of patriarchal violence against women, a fundamental feature of Paraguayan (and Latin American) culture that the film reproduces to a certain extent. Still, there are two women who play crucial roles in the film: Namely, the co-protagonist Liz, who is “in love” with Víctor, and Tamara, Víctor’s sister. Taking into account that they are both motivated by the desire to help

others (a classical stereotype of female characters) in the shadow of the masculine dispute among the porters, I argue that both women work as the underground driving force that aims to interrupt the distribution of the parts by rearranging the lost parts in Víctor's journey with the boxes.

On the one hand, Liz helps Víctor escape from Nelson more than once, and she specifically rescues the boxes from a fire. Instead of running away, as Víctor does when he discovers the dead body, Liz is capable of understanding that delivering the boxes is a matter of life or death for Víctor. By saving these "parts" (of the cadaver), she underpins and intervenes in Víctor's decisions to decipher his (and her) role(s) in the distribution of the parts. On the other hand, when Tamara tries to sell her brother the cellphone camera in the second scene of the movie, she is doing it for her friend Leticia who is 9 months pregnant. Tamara and Leticia both work in the kitchen at a Korean restaurant in Mercado 4. At some point, the owner scolds them in Korean (a language that is not translated in the film) while his son Jim (who is "in love" with Tamara) intervenes to calm the owner down while supporting the women.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, almost in parallel with Víctor and Liz but in reversed gender roles, Jim is going to help Tamara in her informal investigation to reassemble the parts of the money/cadaver dilemma.

In that sense, there are two scenes that contribute to thinking through the problem of the reconfiguration of the part that has no part. First, once the police captures Gus and searches him in the police station, Tamara puts together her part of the broken bill with the part of the butcher that aims to reconstruct the entire bill (what is missing here is Víctor's part). In the second scene, the camera shows Tamara entering into an empty apartment where the kidnapped woman was held captive, while a voiceover conversation among the captors describes how she died by accident trying to escape through a small window.

Both scenes recompose Rancière's idea of "the part that has no part." Indeed, the failed restitution of the bill reflects the material impossibility of reassembling the parts into a whole. But more importantly, it triggers Tamara to pursue an informal investigation to understand what is behind the bill/cadaver confusion. From that perspective, the inquiry about how women characters function as driving forces carries on the analysis beyond an exclusive identification of the part that has no part with the porters.

Furthermore, in the second scene, Jim talks to Tamara in Korean before she enters into the apartment, in what could be perceived as a

declaration of love (there is no translation in the film).<sup>27</sup> And at the end of that same scene, the police captured both of them. As a whole, this sequence underpins the formation of the aesthetic gaze as that which interrupts the film's narrative: Like the hundred-dollar bill, it cuts the narrative in half. It is the first time that the spectators understand what happened with the kidnapped woman. However, each part of "the part that has no part" (including the spectators) can only have access to one restituted part of the whole story. If, for the spectator, this is a moment of revelation, Tamara still does not know what Jim was saying in Korean. Conversely, Tamara encounters a new problem while trying to resolve another. And for Jim, when the police interrogates him, Tamara protects him stating that "he does not speak Spanish," only Korean.

In synthesis, the aesthetic gaze in the film wagers that the part that has no part redistributes the roles among the restituted parts to prepare them, so to speak, for an interruption that none of those parts can predict. Commenting on Rancière's work, Federico Galende states that "men and women demonstrate to themselves the collective power of their condition of emancipation," their capability to act together without depending on an external force.<sup>28</sup> In the film, those parts come together as a spontaneously self-organized group underpinned by the driving force of women to solve the parts of the crime by utilizing their knowledge of the underground world of the market.

From that perspective, the dilemma of the part that has no part is displaced from the restitution of the bill to the reassembling of the broken parts that were marginalized before the kidnapping of the unnamed woman took place: the porters, the kitchen workers, the Koreans, who all sustain the daily reproduction of Mercado 4. Even the butchers and the police officers are also part of the market's economic and social reproduction. For instance, Tamara sells the cellphone camera to a policeman and goes to the hospital to give the money she earned to Leticia who just had her baby. Still, the policeman does not know how to take pictures with the cellphone camera and gives it to Jim who eventually will make it work. Therefore, de-parting from their role within patriarchal society, they constitute themselves as the part that has no part by reassembling the lost parts in Victor's journey with the boxes, but now, as a force of interruption of the distribution of the ransom money.

This analysis resonates with the struggle to know the truth about the Massacre of Curuguaty and the ongoing formation of the *Campesino* Movement in Paraguay. This is not to suggest that, as in the film,



the underlying forces of women sustain this movement, although it will be interesting to explore that venue with the reemergence of the *Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas* (CONAMURI *National Coordination of Rural and Indigenous Women*).<sup>29</sup> Instead, I want to signal how the historical account of specific struggles can get lost in a single narrative of the massacre that only pinpoints to the modus operandi of capital. Examples of these struggles can be found in the hunger strikes at Tacumbú prison carried out by the *campesinos* imprisoned and persecuted as the supposed authors of the crime, and who were released as a result of that political action to house arrest before the trial.<sup>30</sup> Even though they were finally found guilty in the trial, the hunger strike they carried out in prison (as part of the daily struggle of the *Campesino* Movement) is part of the reassembling of that “part that has no part” in history. They were able to demonstrate to themselves, as Galende sustained, the collective power of their condition of emancipation.

#### DE-PARTING PARAGUAY: THE PARTITION OF THE AESTHETIC GAZE

The linguistic quandary of this broken Paraguay flows through *Seven Boxes* as its characters speak a combination of Spanish and Guaraní or *Yopará* (mixture in Guaraní) throughout the movie. However, as we have already noted, there are a few communications in Korean that are not subtitled. Therefore, if the partition of a woman’s dead body is the original crime that organizes the film’s narrative (thus reproducing the logics of patriarchy and primitive accumulation), and if that same narrative recognizes the underground driving force of women who search for restitution, then the question for the aesthetic gaze is how to look at a fractured social reality from the point of view of a gaze that originates in that same reality. We are referring here to a “*realidad que deliraba* [delirious reality] that thrust enormous bursts of its history at the faces of the survivors” as Augusto Roa Bastos puts it.<sup>31</sup> It is in this terrain of the *realidad que delira* that the screening of *Seven Boxes* two months after the coup echoes the search for justice in the sequence of the Massacre of Curuguaty: The search for an aesthetic gaze capable of interrupting the injustice while unraveling its fundamental roots in the political and economic system.

This search starts at the beginning, right after the radio announcement of the rate exchange of the dollar against the Guaraní, when the

initial still image of *Seven Boxes*, showing old faded tarps that work as “permanent improvised” roofs, situates the film in space and time as it appears written in the screen—“Mercado 4, Asunción, April 2005, 3 pm”—defining the spectators’ point of entry to the market. Immediately afterwards, the camera switches to fast speed and descends vertiginously to the underworld of Mercado 4 until it stops in a close-up of Víctor’s eye while he is standing in front of a TV in a random street of the market. In this scene, the aesthetic gaze is defining its own search, which is to record the gaze of the part that has no part while reflecting upon two different elements: the recording devices and the multiple languages that constitute and operate in the Paraguayan underworld of *la realidad que delira*.

First, by posing the camera on Víctor’s eye, the film seems to expose the spectator to a singular transaction that merges both of their “gazes” to embrace the point of view of the part that has no part. However, Víctor’s gaze does not represent that part directly; instead, it functions as a point of de-parture from which to think through the dilemmas of the part that has not part (as we have seen in the analysis of the driving forces of men and women). Additionally, the film inside the television captivates Víctor, as if the eye of the TV was “looking” at him. In that sense, Víctor’s eye functions as one angle in a multiple encounter of gazes that also includes the main camera, the TV, and the spectator. Finally, in the following scene, Tamara films Víctor with the cellphone camera that she is trying to sell to him. The convergence of all these “devices,” where everyone is “recording” each other, depicts the first partition of the gaze. Like the parts of the bill or the cadaver, this partition unfolds a broken gaze that does not belong to anyone or to any particular recording device, and in consequence, it cannot constitute a unified gaze of the film or of the part that has no part.

Second, the prototypical Hollywood scene that Víctor is watching on TV shows a man standing and aiming a gun at another man lying on the ground. They are both wearing sunglasses and have a similar physical composure, as if they were “the same” person. The gunman asks the other in English about the word *Nemesis*, which colloquially means “my worst enemy.” And as the victim does not know the meaning, the assassin kills him, while Víctor repeats the dialogue in Guaraní and the film translates it in Spanish subtitles. Significantly, the word *Nemesis* also recalls the personified spirit of divine “retribution” in Greek mythology: the goddess who has the ability “to deal or distribute.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, a

hidden meaning lurks behind the colloquial use of the “English” word as “enemies” and refers to a certain call for retribution, if not for justice, that cannot be comprehended, neither inside the TV by the victim, nor by its simultaneous oral repetition in Guaraní and the written Spanish in the subtitles.

In doing so, the film uses the original English-language mention of the word “Nemesis” (and its hidden mythological meaning) to portray the partition of the sensible that operates along the Spanish/Guaraní axis throughout the movie (interrupted by the untranslated Korean). From that perspective, the impossibility of expressing the aesthetic gaze through one single device or one single language exposes the main tension in *Seven Boxes* between the call for retribution carried out by women in the film (in the mythological meaning of the word) and the struggle between both porters as enemies (in the English sense). Ominously, the scene concludes when Nelson, the other porter, “steals” a job from Víctor who was distracted by the TV: The former literally takes a random customer’s package from Víctor’s cart and puts it in his own, in an attempt to jolt him out of his daydream and bring him back to the everyday struggle to survive in Mercado 4.

Throughout this entire scene, the aesthetic gaze disrupts the devices and the languages, to question the Spanish/Guaraní divide as the only source of explanation for the patterns of Paraguayan political culture. In that sense, the aesthetic gaze does not identify itself with the gaze of the part that has no part, but on the contrary, it de-identifies itself from any singular gaze to finally rely on this call for retribution implied in the word Nemesis—a call that is hidden even for the spectator.

Although Nemesis is not mentioned again in *Seven Boxes*, its double meaning regains importance in the film’s last scene that takes place at midnight in an empty Mercado 4. Indeed, after a labyrinthine persecution, Nelson grabs Víctor by the neck while pointing a gun to his head. Three policemen, Liz, Tamara, and Jim surround them both. They got there thanks to the persistence and help of the two women. The tension arises as Nelson opens up one of the boxes with his foot and discovers a part of the body (he still believed that there was money inside them). Taking advantage of Nelson’s deception, a policeman shoots him dead in the head. Similar to the victim in the film about Nemesis, Nelson was unaware of the meaning of the cadaver in the boxes. And at the end, the main captor (the husband) escapes with the rest of the spoils through the river, leaving the part that has no part without a part of the ransom money.

For the partition of the sensible, this scene repeats and at the same time overflows the original scene of the crime that in itself cannot be reconstructed: the “accidental” death of the kidnapped woman not seen in the film, although described by the captors while the camera followed Tamara into the empty apartment. Likewise, following our reading of the film, it also recalls the Massacre of Curuguaty that was not recorded in real time and was “partially restituted” throughout the trial during the judicial investigation, allegedly, full of irregularities in the search for evidence. My interpretative hypothesis here is that the recording of Nelson’s murder shoots through the film itself as a “bursts of history,” to speak directly to the Paraguayan political unconscious recently disturbed by the sequence of the massacre and the coup. By explicitly showing the evidence of who committed the assassination in the film, this scene filled out the missing piece in the historical sequence: the non-existent visual demonstration of the killing of the eleven *campesinos* and the six policemen in Curuguaty.

Even though there is no material evidence to prove this hypothesis, I recall Rancière’s idea about the emancipated spectator who emerges when “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who see” takes place, when the spectator and the artist recognize themselves as part of the same community.<sup>33</sup> In that regard, Galende sustains that “the work of art can manifest to the spectator contemplating it a *pensamiento impensado* (an unthought thought) for the artist, just as the spectator can find their own *impensado* in this thought that he perceives in the work of art.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, following my interpretation, this encounter among the *impensados* of the artists and the spectators “takes place” in the unconscious terrain of *la realidad que delira* in which the recording of the last crime scene in the film converges with the Massacre of Curuguaty.

This connection between *impensados* unfolds in the last sequence of *Seven Boxes* when, on the following day, the killing of Nelson becomes national news and both porters appear in the foreground of Paraguayan TV in a sequence recorded at the time of the shooting. As is the case with all news stories, this one disappears as soon as the next one comes to occupy its place on the screen, transferring the neoliberal devalorization of money to the mass media. By exposing the crime on screen, the life of the porters becomes a video sequence to be rapidly consumed and dissolved after those minutes of fame. Therefore, the irruption of the Mercado 4 on Paraguayan TV networks does not question the uneven distribution of images in the media.

Nevertheless, while the journalist's voiceover recounts on TV the previous night's crime, the main camera recovers the autonomous fast speed of the beginning and travels again through Mercado 4. But this time, it stops briefly on several televisions that are showing the crime scene in different parts of the market. Searching for the filmed sequence of the killing of Nelson, the camera gets inside one television going backward in time and space, to film "again" the shooting scene from the perspective of the "victims." But the camera does not stop there, as if repeating the initial image of Víctor's eye looking at the TV, now overlapping with his "nemesis" (enemy) Nelson. Instead, it continues on bypassing the policeman aiming his gun at the porters, to finally stop in front of Jim who is firmly holding the cellphone camera to record the crime scene.

This retrospective trick of having the camera go backward encompasses the movement of the movie itself. It not only confronts the "looks" of two devices (the main camera and the cellphone), evoking the first partition of the gaze (the filming of Víctor's eye) in the context of neoliberalism. It also anchors the aesthetic gaze into the untranslated Korean language incarnated in Jim as the part that has no part in Paraguayan culture. Because no one expects anything from him (even Tamara told the policeman that he does not speak Spanish), he is able to produce the singular sequence that brings Mercado 4 to the national news. As the part that was left apart from the part that has no part, he "holds" the broken gaze that disrupts the partition of the sensible. And in consequence, "his video" operates as the interruption of the erasure of the crimes that function on the basis of the unjust distribution of the parts in neoliberal Paraguay.

In sum, the constitution of the aesthetic gaze in *Seven Boxes* encompasses the acknowledgment of the ongoing nature of the primitive accumulation of capital as well as the role of the driving force of women. And fundamentally, by demarcating a retrospective dividing line from the point of view of the part that has no part, the aesthetic gaze takes part in the political interruption of the police while questioning the preeminence of the Spanish-Guaraní divide. The image of Jim holding the cellphone camera ultimately denounces the unjust distribution of the parts: the land, the money, the gender, and the images. This is the profound impact of this film in Paraguay: The impossibility of translating the hidden meaning of Nemesis (retribution) now evokes, in the Paraguayan political unconscious, the call for justice for the Massacre of Curuguaty that cannot be suppressed.

## A FINAL SMILE

In the very last scene of the film, Víctor smiles briefly after seeing himself on TV before the final credits begin to roll. For Víctor, this signified the fulfillment of his most profound desire: being on the other side of the screen. For allegedly discomforted spectators, a crucial question emerges of whether to empathize with Víctor (logically, his victor-y should coincide with the satisfaction of the spectators) or, on the contrary, to reject the smile, as it constitutes a moment of enjoyment extracted from the crime scene itself: the triumph of the neoliberal logic that is able to satisfy popular desire while maintaining the uneven distribution of the parts in society.

This tension between enjoyment and political consciousness connects to the very question of the aesthetic gaze. Nonetheless, the problem is not to “choose” between consciousness and enjoyment, but to find what holds together the collective power of the condition of emancipation of the part that has no part. Víctor’s smile ultimately becomes the line of demarcation for the emancipated spectator to look retrospectively into their own assumptions. If everything is political, as Jameson sustains, why would that emancipated spectator question the satisfaction of Víctor’s desire as the desire of the other, leaving (again) that part without a part? It seems that within these parameters of political consciousness, the emancipated spectator underpins and reproduces the uneven distribution of parts. From that perspective, the approach to the terrain of the political *impensado* for the artist and the spectator requires embracing the retrospective move suggested by the film that calls upon the spectator to retrieve the most fundamental condition for its emancipation. The final smile, then, speaks to the process of collective memory regarding the restitution of the crimes scene (in the film and in the massacre). Therefore, de-parting Paraguay means also to leave behind the presumed image of an unique and fixed part that has no part, which also resides in the Paraguayan political unconscious.

## NOTES

1. In less than a month, *Seven Boxes* surpassed *Titanic* that had held the record until then. “7 Cajas supera a Titanic,” *ABC*, September 14, 2012, accessed on July 21, 2016, <http://www.abc.com.py/espectaculos/7-cajas-supera-a-titanic-en-taquilla-nacional-449107.html>. The film was also well received globally, becoming the “first Paraguayan film distributed commercially on an international scale.” By 2015, it had been

- presented “at more than ninety festivals throughout the world” and was “sold to HBO.” Accessed on July 21, 2016, <http://micsur.org/7-cajas-se-estrenara-en-estados-unidos-y-canada-de-manera-simultanea/>.
2. Moved to its current location in 1956, *Mercado 4* is the informal street market in which all types of goods are sold, from foodstuffs to technological devices. The market has around “2800 registered business and 2000 street vendors and workers, [...] 5000 daily customers” and mobilizes around “three million dollars” every day. “Los mercados símbolos de Asunción,” ABC, August 13, 2013, accessed on July 21, 2016, <http://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/los-mercados-simbolos-de-asuncion-606352.html>. Also, in the national imaginary’s perception, several shady transactions/dealings occur in *Mercado 4* on a daily basis, from avoiding taxes to any illegal transactions, and so forth.
  3. Although there was no evidence to demonstrate their individual responsibility, on July 11, 2016, eleven *campesinos* were condemned to prison: “Rubén Villalba was sentenced to 35 years, Luis Olmedo to 20, Néstor Castro and Arnaldo Quintana to 18, Lucía Agüero to 6, and the rest to 4 years each.” In “La sentencia de la vergüenza,” *E’A*, accessed on July 12, 2016, <http://ea.com.py/v2/editorial-la-sentencia-de-la-verguenza/>. For a very detailed account of the massacre, see Julio Banegas Vidallet, *La massacre de Curuguaty* (Asunción: Author Edition, 2013).
  4. Lugo was the first President elected in the last 60 years who did not belong to the *Colorado* Party and came to power through a very broad alliance of parties and political sectors. In this context, the massacre occurred in the midst of an adverse climate (“clima destituyente”) in which the possibility of a Political Trial was already formulated in advance.” Mariana Fassi, *Paraguay en su laberinto* (Buenos Aires: Capital intelectual, 2010), 71. For a detailed account of the coup, see Rocco Carbone Rocco and Lorena Soler, *Franquismo en Paraguay. El golpe* (Buenos Aires: El 8vo Loco Ediciones, 2013).
  5. For an analysis of the configuration of *Stronismo* see “Beyond Coercion: Social Legitimation and Conservative Modernization in the Stroessner Regime (1954–1989)” by Lorena Soler in this volume.
  6. Cristina Arrom presented a legal complaint against Maneglia and Schémbori to the *Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Paraguay* (Codehupy) on September 2012. The complaint refers to the vindication of the “figure of the Chief Policeman [Comisario] Blas Schémbori, father of the director ... who worked as a guard of the dictator [Stroessner].” As his name appears in the film in the Police Station, it can be interpreted as “a derision to the memory of the several disappeared during the dictatorship.” *Paraguay.com*, accessed on September 20, 2016.

<http://www.paraguay.com/nacionales/denuncian-a-realizadores-de-7-cajas-por-reivindicar-el-stroonismo-86868>.

7. Horacio Legrás recalls Augusto Roa Bastos stating that this double determination has become a “linguistic pathology” that repeats itself throughout Paraguayan history. Horacio Legrás, *Literature and Subjection: The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, c2008), 162.
8. Gabriel Rockhill, “Appendix,” *The Politics of Aesthetics* by Jacques Rancière (New York/London: Continuum: 2004), 89.
9. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c1999), 28.
10. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 99.
11. According to Rockhill, “the aesthetical regime destroys the system of genres [...] the privilege of speech over visibility as well as the hierarchies of the arts [...] and isolates the art in the singular.” Rockhill, “Appendix,” 81. For Rancière, this “aesthetic regime of art” emerges in German philosophy and French literature throughout the nineteenth century and expands in the following centuries. Therefore, as we are dealing with a different historical terrain (although still concerned with the tensions between representation and interruption), our argument links the aesthetical problem to the primitive accumulation of capital in the region as well as to the cultural roots of interruption in Paraguay.
12. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20.
13. *Ibid.*, 20.
14. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (New York/London: Verso, 2009), 7.
15. Davide Panagia, “*Partage du sensible: the Distribution of the Sensible*,” in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. by Jean-Phillipe Deranty (New Jersey: Routledge, 2010), 98.
16. *Ibid.*, 98.
17. Karl Marx, *Capital* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, USSR First English edition of 1887), 508.
18. Marx points out different forms or stages of primitive accumulation for the case of England in the seventeenth century, highlighting the “systematical combination [...] of] the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, i.e., the colonial system.” *Ibid.*, 534.
19. “Blas N. Riquelme [who died after the massacre, was] one of the richest men in the country, a former senator for the Colorado Party, *latifundista*, and owner of supermarket chains [...] In 1969, during Stroessner’s dictatorship, [he] got 50,000 hectares of land that were intended for the



- agrarian reform, [...] as it was denounced in the Report of the Truth and Justice Commission in 2008. [Among them] there was this plot of 2000 hectares called Marina Cué where the *campesinos* were organized.” Javiera Rulli, “Semana trágica en Paraguay,” in *Paraguay mafia. Soja, narco, terror y golpe de estado parlamentario*, comp. by Marcos Maiz Montaro (Asunción: Editorial Yerba Mate, 2013), 42–43.
20. Idilio Méndez Grimaldi, “Monsanto golpea en Paraguay: los muertos de Curuguaty y el juicio político a Lugo,” in Maiz Montaro, *Paraguay mafia*, 26.
  21. The plot of Marina Cué “was donated by the company *Industrial Paraguaya* to the state in 1967.” Benegas Vidallet, *La masacre*, 113. Paradoxically, this company had benefited from the very cheap selling of public lands in 1885 and 1887 in the aftermath of the Triple Alliance War. This is another moment of primitive accumulation that, along with the “abolition of the 21 indigenous tribes in 1848 [...], the occupation of the indigenous territories after the Chaco War (1932–1935), the distribution of *tierras malhabidas* during the stronist dictatorship (1954–1989), and the extractivist push for re-concentration propelled by the agribusiness during the democratic transition until now,” connects the massacre to a historical sequence involving the distribution of the land in Paraguay. “Manifiesto de la Red Paraguaya de Antropología,” accessed on July 21, 2016 <https://ethosantropologico.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/manifiesto-de-la-red-paraguaya-de-antropologc3ada-sobre-curuguaty.pdf>.
  22. “In actual history, it is notorious that conquest, slavery, robbery, murder, briefly force [violence], play the great part.” Marx, *Capital*, 507.
  23. As some evidence was not collected or even corrupted, it is unclear who these “irregular groups” were. For the irregularities, that included corrupted footage, the erasure of evidence, and signs of executions of some of the *campesinos*, see the *Report of Vía Campesina*, accessed on July 2016 <http://quepasoencuruguaty.org/>. According to an editorial published by the Paraguayan newspaper *E’A*, no “eviction order” was given and a “search warrant” was the only document on which the police operated. Also, the occupation didn’t amount to an “invasion of private property [legally, the plot didn’t belong to Riquelme], neither illicit association [the *campesinos sin tierra* didn’t belong to any organization] and the persecutor [...] It was impossible to demonstrate the individual responsibility of any of the accused.” In “La sentencia de la vergüenza,” *E’A*, accessed on July 12, 2016 <http://ea.com.py/v2/editorial-la-sentencia-de-la-verguenza/>.
  24. Legrás, *Literature*, 163.

25. For instance, the struggle for the #*NulidadYa* carried out by several organization still continues after the trial. See the facebook page of Movimiento 138. Accessed on July 21, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/Movimiento138/>.
26. In this scene, the Korean father yelled something like “I have a business. Stop talking.”
27. Indeed, Jim said something like “I have liked you for a while. I like your smile, and I want to hug you” (thanks to Binnan Gao for this translation).
28. Federico Galende, *Rancière, una introducción* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Quadrata, 2012), 63.
29. See for instance, the role of CONAMURI in organizing *campesinxs* around food sovereignty issues. “Se inicia campaña por Soberanía Alimentaria en Paraguay,” *Kóa Oinko*, accessed on August 30, 2016. <https://carligonca.wordpress.com/tag/movimiento-campesino-paraguayo/>.
30. After 59 days of hunger strike the *campesinos* were conceded house arrest on April 13, 2014. All except Rubén Villalba who had to return to prison due to another case that was expired at the time. “Otorgan prisión domiciliaria a presos de Curuguaty,” *Paraguay.com*, accessed on July 21, 2016. <http://www.paraguay.com/nacionales/otorgan-prision-domiciliaria-a-presos-de-curuguaty-106329>.
31. For an analysis of the *realidad que delira* see “Introduction: Exposing Paraguay” as well as “Rafael Barrett’s Haunted Letter” by Marcelino Viera and “Paraguayan Realism as Cruelty” by Gabriel Horowitz, all in this same volume.
32. According to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Nemesis means “both goddess and abstract concept from [the Greek] *vémely* (to deal or distribute); often a personified moral agent (Retribution).” Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1034.
33. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009).
34. Galende, *Rancière*, 89.

PART IV

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Tracing *la realidad que delira*

## Paraguayan Counterlives

*Adriana Johnson*

PAZ ENCINA

Paz Encina's *La hamaca paraguaya* (2006) begins in semi-darkness, with two characters situated at some distance from the camera. We hear rather than see them: They note a barking dog and discuss where to string up the hammock. The movie will retain this differential weight between sound and image, where the visual images will seem merely the background, or prop, to the thicket of sounds that occupy the film's center: birds, crickets, thunder, a dog barking, voices talking. Its architecture is given by a series of dialogues: three main dialogues between a husband and wife (Ramón and Jacinta) sitting in the hammock cited in the title act as the beginning, middle, and end of the film. Wedged between each of these are two other sets of dialogues: first, each character's memory of their parting dialogue with their son going off to war; second, an exchange each of them has with an outside person about the war's end.

Yet just as the movie seems to deliberately side step a structure of visual events, its dialogues scarcely deserve the term "dialogue." Words are

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exchanged between the two main characters but often little else. There is a ritual, repetitive quality to their laconic voices. Often they utter sentences which are simply the negation of the previous sentence, words strung out in time: Will it rain or not? Is their son alive or not? Why is the dog barking? What is there to talk about? "Happening" takes place mostly offscreen; its effects registered only indirectly in language, much as the couple materializes the son's absence through the dog's barking. The time of the movie is suspended, like the hammock. It lingers in a long and slow waiting for news of their son (beneath the seemingly immobile surface one senses a quickening, an imminent threshold which is given form in comments about the hammock about to break, the unbearable heat, and imminence, or not, of rain). On the one hand then, a waiting for a future, and, on the other hand, the nostalgia for a past which has not yet fully departed.

Neither visual means nor language seem sure conduits for something we may call information or expression. The relationship between the visual and the sonic is also tenuous without being clearly disjunctive. Sometimes, sight and sound seem to match up, as when the husband comments that it looks like rain and we see a shot of rumbling clouds. Sometimes, they do not, as when there is only one person sitting on the hammock although we hear an exchange between two people that could have taken place before or later. This tenuousness will bear on perhaps the most important scene in which we will hear an exchange between Jacinta and a soldier/postman bearing news that a soldier who has a name that is similar to her son's name (and who may or may not be her son) has died in battle but what we see onscreen is only Jacinta slowly tending a fire. (The match between this name and her son is complicated by the fact that we have previously heard the son tell his father that he would change his name upon going off to war so that they could not receive word of his death). One can imagine that this dialogue has not taken place, is hallucinated, or took place a long time ago. The images and sounds lie in contiguity to each other. The movie has, in this sense, a metaphorical structure in which everything which takes place does so through something else beside it, just as Jacinta's grief over her son's absence, and likely death, is more often than not voiced through the barking dog and her preoccupation with the dog. Indeed, there are two instances in which Jacinta is explicitly metaphorical. When her son takes his leave of her, she says, "I don't want to see you leave. If this heart were a stone it would already be broken, if it were made of cowhide it

would have already split open.”<sup>1</sup> Just as she does not want to see or presence his leaving, she re-routes her grief through images of the breaking of external objects (like the hammock that is about to rupture). When asked in the last dialogue whether she has heard news, Jacinta will not tell her husband that she has received word that likely indicates their son’s death but says instead, “I saw a dead butterfly, Ramón. But I grabbed it and threw it far away.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet movement happens through such deferral, such throwing away and re-routing. We cannot locate its happening and we cannot pinpoint a language event, but something has taken place by the time we return to the third dialogue between husband and wife. Even though Jacinta never tells her husband about the visitor onscreen, it is as if he has somehow received bad tidings. The hopefulness he exuded before has withered. He passes a threshold into the absence of waiting, or a waiting after the waiting, where what lies ahead is simply night. Whereas previously their exchanges were largely made up of disagreements, where each simply negated what the other said, in the last conversation each of them will say something the other said before (but which they had previously denied). It is as if they have now traded places and are speaking the other one’s lines. Accompanying this switch is a fragile sense of sharing, a minimal agreement wrought from an exchange of sadness, an awareness of impending night, and the need for blanket and shelter. A dislocation in time and space is given through two phrases which are now voiced by both of them: “I don’t find myself here” and “There is nothing to do.”

The movie works to give form to what we might provisionally call an after-death or a counterlife: “Death comes quickly, Ramón, it is what comes after that is unbearable.”<sup>3</sup> It hangs on the threshold between two deaths, in which one is unmoored from one kind of story, a story of filiation and futurity, into a place and time where there is nothing to wait “toward” any longer, only a waiting against another more definitive kind of death. This place is neither death, properly speaking, nor life, but athwart the two, ex-centric and interruptive.

This suspension outside narratives of filiation and futurity is claimed by the movie’s title to be *Paraguayan*; it is also positioned in relationship to a war happening offscreen. Or perhaps, if we turn things around a little, we may say that the movie explores the relationship between an event that is elsewhere, brought about by others, and the way it is re-routed into non-eventness. War gives off not only death (or life) but also counterlives. But to the extent that such counterlives lie outside structures of

narrative and meaning it is hard, precisely, to tell a story about them. The movie suggests that this non-story is what may be conveyed about Paraguay.

Let us run with this and say that Paraguay sits askance dominant narratives about Latin American history and culture, its invisibility a product of the way it looms as a counterstory shaped by repeated disasters from which there is no teleological overcoming or exit. It sits outside stories of defeat and disaggregation that are joined to a hydra-headed resistance, stories of overcoming or of compensations wrought through the lettered city (or cinematic traditions). We find in Paraguay the counterhistory of a scar at the heart of Latinamericanism; it is what remains of a territory and several overlapping populations cut down by its neighbors through war. Iterations of war, hot and cold, track across the territory we call Latin America: civil war, revolutionary wars, dirty wars, drug trafficking wars, water wars, wars of independence. Yet in no other country will war—war without a qualifier—loom so centrally to its history that the situation of a couple whose child has gone off to an indirectly named war be deemed so recognizable. The war of the movie is the Chaco War (1932–1935) fought between Paraguay and Bolivia over the Chaco region, thought to be rich in oil. But behind the Chaco War lies The War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), known as *la Guerra Grande* in Paraguay, perhaps the most destructive of wars that have taken place within Latin America. There are different figures on total Paraguayan losses in the Great War ranging from 10 to 70%. Calculations on the resulting relation of men to women also vary, ranging from ten to three women for every man left. In total, Argentina and Brazil annexed about 140,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Paraguayan territory. Both also demanded a large indemnity, which Paraguay paid for in the next century.<sup>4</sup> Paraguay, we might then say, is one example of the “repressed topographies” (Achille Mbembe calls them) of the death-worlds in our contemporary world, “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.”<sup>5</sup>

### AUGUSTO ROA BASTOS

“The meditation on power,” the Paraguayan novelist Augusto Roa Bastos once declared in an interview, “is the unifying thread and theme of all my work.”<sup>6</sup> Roa Bastos’s self-declared preoccupation with power is perhaps most obvious in the set of books he called his trilogy on the

“monotheism of power,” although the relationship between the books is, at best, enigmatic. The first two novels of the trilogy, written during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, are *Hijo de hombre* (1960) and *Yo El Supremo* (1974). Both *El fiscal* (1993) and *Contravida* (1994) were offered by Roa Bastos at different times as the last novel of the trilogy. Critics agree that the last two novels are minor works. As attempts to extend Roa Bastos’s reflection on power and the vicissitudes of Paraguayan history, they do not seem particularly convincing. Yet each of them, in different ways, offer a cipher to the functioning of power in Paraguay and each in their own way can also be said to complete the trilogy, illuminating in the process the secret ties binding *Hijo de hombre* and *Yo El Supremo*. One key is provided in the use of the term *contravida* as a title. This term provides a word for a figure that permeates almost all of Roa Bastos’s work: the threshold between death and life, or a space beyond the opposition death/life.

One of the signatures of Roa Bastos’s meditations on power is that he approaches it in terms of what it is not. *Yo El Supremo*, one could argue therefore, is about how power is not absolute (or supreme). The figure of the nineteenth-century Paraguayan dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia stands in for the more contemporary Stroessner as the locus of power. The voice of the dying dictator occupies the center of the novel as he recounts his projects for Paraguay and justifies his actions through personal notes, a dictated “circular perpetua,” interior monologues and speeches to his assistant and scribe. Yet the failings of absolute power are probed through the non-coincidence between the dictator’s dreams and the reality of Paraguay and the circulation of other discourses that contradict these “statements of the state.” *Hijo de hombre*, on the other hand, approaches power not from its source but from its effects, from its underbelly, from its relationship with the people. It is organized by a series of reflections on an axis of conflict between a popular, mostly peasant, stratum and the ruling order and the possibilities for what we could call resistance and change within the structures of domination. The problem, however, is that the novel is a reflection on something for which words such as resistance and conflict are inadequate. Indeed, it revolves around what does not happen (a rebellion). One of the epicenters of the novel is the empty crater left by the explosion which cuts short a peasant insurrection in 1912, produced when the government—alerted by an informer—sends a train filled with explosives to meet the rebels, also on a train on their way to Asunción. But power is not absolute



either, and the novel does not stop there but pursues something we could call a line of flight, a withdrawal, or a passivity that eludes power rather than insurgency.

One example is the story of a couple who participate in the failed insurrection; they escape the repression that follows by going off to work in the yerba-mate plantations, only to find that they have virtually been made slaves. They then escape again and spend the rest of their days living and traveling in what is described as an unreal and almost spectral journey in an abandoned railway coach torn from its tracks in the explosion that ended the first failed insurrection. Another example is the figure of leprosy in the novel. The members of the leper colony seem to live in a tangent to the events and people surrounding them—not really participating, but not really absent from them either. We catch glimpses of them, for example, when soldiers searching for the rebels of a failed insurrection become fascinated with the image of a blond woman in the community of lepers (a community they are too fearful to enter). At other times, they interrupt unexpectedly into the center of the narrative, as when they lend the impunity offered by their rotting bodies to one of these fugitive rebels as a shield, surrounding him at a party so that he can escape under the noses of the soldiers and townspeople.

If I think the fleeing couple and the lepers are antecedents of what is named by the term “counterlife” in the later novel *Contravida*, it is because of their tendency to be described as something approaching the living dead. As an example, Gaspar Mora, the one leper that is individualized in *Hijo de hombre* (and leprosy, one should point out, is “Saint Lazarus’s illness,” associated in this way with a zombie in Biblical tradition) is described as neither dead nor alive. When Gaspar discovers his illness, he leaves his town and hides himself in the heart of the hills. For the townspeople, it is as if he had stepped into a parallel universe or a fissure in time. He is not gone absolutely so much as far away. He refuses to return to his hometown, identifying himself to those who come looking for him as already dead, saying: “The dead do not mingle with the living.”<sup>7</sup> He is near enough to death to be dead, but not quite because when he in fact dies, the townspeople comment that while death had fallen in love with Gaspar, it had wanted him there alive, “as if in a cage.”<sup>8</sup>

*Contravida* is centered more explicitly on this indeterminate frontier in-between life and death. It tells the story of another flight from power that begins with yet another explosion, this time at a prison. The novel

unfolds as the sole survivor of this prison break-out flees on a train heading in the direction of his childhood village, a physical journey which presents itself as an excuse for the narrative itself to venture upstream back into his childhood memories. At the same time it is a journey not only toward a beginning but toward his end since the novel deposits us at the moment when he physically reaches the tree where he used to spy on his schoolmaster, sets it on fire, and crawls in. The final punctuation is produced by the bullets of the guards or soldiers, who have been searching for him and who fire, minutes later, upon the tree. If the journey of a counterlife takes us against the grain back to an origin which also conceals its own end, there is also a way in which the novel takes place between two deaths since the narrator is already becoming dead with the explosion that initiates the book. He is, in other words, not only living and on his way to dying but, like Gaspar Mora, living dead throughout the novel: "I have always lived at the border," he says, "[t]here is an excess of both life and death in my life."<sup>9</sup>

This phenomenon of a doubled death recurs in different forms in Roa Bastos's work. The popular hero Cristobal Jara, for example, dies one way in *Hijo de hombre* and reappears as a character in *Contravida* with another death. *Yo El Supremo* opens with an apparently apocryphal pamphlet claiming to be the dictator's orders on how to depose of his body once dead and ends with the dictator's death and accounts of his burial rites. As in *Yo El Supremo*, the motor of the narrative in *Contravida* is the fulfillment of a death which is announced and which begins to take place from the start. "It is better that my final moment take place in Manorá," says the narrator on his journey home, "[t]hat border with that name is calling me to the place of my death."<sup>10</sup>

In Guaraní, Manorá means "the place for death." It is the very materialization of counterlife within the novel, a pocket or fold analogous to the leper colony in *Hijo de hombre* or the penal colony of Tevegó in *Yo El Supremo*. Founded by his schoolmaster—a man described as unborn—Manorá is a city ensconced like a seed within the narrator's childhood village Iturbe. The schoolmaster insists to his students that it is a real and not figurative place. As such it can disappear, as it does when the schoolmaster dies. While he lives, however, despite its name (the place toward death), it banishes death from Iturbe. As the mirror image and opposite of Iturbe, Manorá is defined in terms of its minuscule but precise differences with Iturbe. It has neither sugar plant, nor workers, nor authorities, nor priests—elements that are the cause for pride in Iturbe

but also the cause of its problems. Despite the fact that they are thus different, Manorá–Iturbe cannot be distinguished one from the other. All that makes it Manorá (and not Iturbe) cannot be detected and cannot be registered, and those who come looking for it from the outside can never find it.<sup>11</sup>

So much of Roa Bastos's writing tracks back and forth, hollowing out the space for what we might call, borrowing from Ackbar Abbas, the "politics of the indiscernible."<sup>12</sup> It is a writing that seeks to make a form out of a crater, out of something that has been extinguished but whose absence takes place in permutation with that which exists. *Contravida* might refer both to the counterlife of the living dead narrator-writer and to the many forms of counterwriting that he has tried out: "That which I had crossed out ended up invading the smallest interstices of what I'd written, so that the stories that should have been told were told only in permutation with others that were not written."<sup>13</sup>

In writing several essays in the 1980s about the "incógnita" that is Paraguayan literature (a literature without a past and a past without literature), Roa Bastos's intervention turns precisely on pointing to an absence. The challenge facing every Paraguayan writer, he writes, is the presence of an absent text.<sup>14</sup> Here, he is referring specifically to a cultural formation marked by the relationship between written language and the oral hemisphere subtending it. Against a dominant narrative of Paraguay as a relatively homogenous country, a felicitous synthesis of both Guaraní and Spanish elements, Roa Bastos draws attention to the conflicts, fissures, and scars that traverse its social body. In this scenario, writing (which has largely taken place in Spanish) is indelibly marked by its fated or contingent collusions with the story of conquest and colonization. Beneath it is an "underlying Guaraní hemisphere" which is largely absent from the historical archive but which nevertheless "speaks" and "thinks" Paraguayans, pressuring them not only "in spite of" but also "through" its very absence.<sup>15</sup>

Although the coordinates of this absent text are marked by orality and the Guaraní language, we would be misled in understanding it as constituted by an unbroken indigenous identity. The only continuity is the non-continuity of negativity or the presence of a scar, "an indelible scar in the substance of language through the phenomenon of transculturation."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the social base of Paraguayan popular culture, those repositories of an oral culture in Guaraní, is not defined so much as the descendants of the Guaraní-speaking indigenous groups

but as constituted by their subjugation (“those marginalized, plundered, and alienated sectors”).<sup>17</sup> Paraguay, therefore, is an island, its language Creole, its peasants neoguaraní.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the Caribbean, its island condition is masked by the land surrounding it. Unlike the Caribbean, its island condition is not a result of natural consequences but historical ones: cut off from the world surrounding it through war, turned into something like Manorá, the route to what was once a terrestrial paradise (like the ones the Guaraní are said to have searched for) forever lost, erased from (and through) history.<sup>19</sup> If *El fiscal* also contains a clue to Roa Bastos’s ruminations on power, it is because *El fiscal*, along with the short story, “El sonámbulo,” are the only works that directly address the War of the Triple Alliance, the moment that turns Paraguay into a crater inhabited by zombies so that, as Roa Bastos writes in “El sonámbulo:” “We Paraguayans are still immersed in that interminable nightmare, as if enveloped in the dust of a great catastrophe of memories...we are sick with a profound illness in which the living differ little from the dead: if the latter do not know they are dead, the living do not know they are alive.”<sup>20</sup>

But Manorá is indiscernible. Within Paraguay, the destruction of a reality, the torn net of meaning, led to a tradition we might want to call historiographical, the effort to wrest meaning from catastrophe and enchain it within a series of significations, fixing a geography that conceals the crater and banishes the ghosts. In an interview in 1986, Roa Bastos commented the lack of a habit of reading fiction: “In Paraguay there are around 400,000 monographic pamphlets about historical topics, but until the time I just mentioned, there were no written stories, fictional stories, imaginary stories.”<sup>21</sup> This accounts for the profound commotion when Roa Bastos deconstructs reality in his first book of short stories, *El trueno ante las hojas* (1953) “by making the only railroad in Paraguay pass through towns that were not on its route in real life.”<sup>22</sup> When asked by an interviewer what he thought of the accusations of falsehood leveled at him, Roa Bastos responded: “I said to myself, ‘Finally, they understand me.’”<sup>23</sup> There is more to this affirmation than the simple prerogative of a storyteller to write fiction. To some extent, his “lies” share the positive power that Gilles Deleuze associates with the false in his work on cinema and the time-image. Just as the simulacrum is not for Deleuze a degraded copy but contains a positive power that calls into question both original and copy, likewise the false is not simply untruth but a multiple, differential, other point of view: “What is

opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonizers; it is the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster."<sup>24</sup> Roa Bastos's claims to tell lies need thus to be read alongside his critique of historiography as an effort to dismantle a certain truth-effect captive in the service of power:

For a long time, Paraguay's History was written by the conquerors, and we all know what History written by the conquerors looks like. So that [in *Yo el Supremo*]...there is an ethical drive of refusal toward that History they fed us in schools, in academies. We really felt it was an adulterated, and I would even say adulterous, History. We had to go against that, we had to demystify that bastardized History. For this reason, I have always maintained that *Yo el Supremo* was not a historical novel but in any case an anti-historical novel, precisely because it interrupted and rebelled against the accepted canons of History, of writing History as the establishment of structures of meaning in relation to events, in relation to the enchainment of events of the general history of a country.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, in "Una cultural oral," Roa Bastos critiques what he calls an "excessive fictionalization" present in certain currents of the then contemporary Latin American narrative. As he comments in his prologue to Rafael Barrett's *El dolor paraguayo*, "[i]n attempting to escape 'mythology' as history's alibi, some [writers] have taken an even worse shortcut: wanting to explain an anomalous reality by way of the absurd."<sup>26</sup> The task he sets out is instead to bear witness to this "anomalous reality," a reality in which "what is true is unbelievable, in which the fantasmagorical is real," a reality that is not "mythical" or "mystical" but which "burns the memory of men."<sup>27</sup> Against the term "realismo mágico" or "real maravilloso," Roa Bastos uses Rafael Barrett's formulation of the "delirious reality of a death trance" [realidad que delira como un moribundo].<sup>28</sup> If mimesis has no place here, then neither does the autonomy of writers. Roa Bastos's counterwriting advances instead a painful pact with radically reduced claims to truth.

This poetics of witnessing is staged at the end of *Contravida* in a scene in which a picture is taken of the narrator's parents against a wooden gate. When the pictures are revealed, it is discovered that they bear a stain, the spectral image of the protagonist lashed to the gate in punishment by his father for writing stories which distorted the Bible.

No amount of washing can erase the image. It is, the photographer will say, imprinted on the gate itself.<sup>29</sup> We may compare this photograph to a reference made by Homi Bhabha in his discussion of the transparency effect of colonial discourse. In Bhabha's discussion, transparency is understood as prescriptive rather than mimetic; it is like a photograph: a "negative, processed into visibility through technologies of reversal, enlargement, lighting, editing, projection, not a source but a re-source of light. Such bringing to light is a question of the provision of visibility as a capacity, a strategy, an agency."<sup>30</sup> Such processed visibility, the effect of transparency, is wrought in the service of buttressing the authority of the colonial gaze which produces it. Roa Bastos's fable presents the inverse of this situation: The photographer, and narrator's mother and father, want to produce an image of the family (celebrating a wedding anniversary, a birthday), but a wound or tear bleeds through, staining and ruining the authorized image. This is not a fairytale, the conjuring up of a baroque or marvelous reality which holds out a promise that has been sidelined under a normative modernization. What bleeds or burns its way through is, instead, the repressed topography, the ectoplasmic reality of a counterlife. This branching off or re-routing from life is the consequence of a violence which is not the primitive accumulation that founds family, nation, history, or literary traditions, but a violence in which filiation founders unmoored from past and future:

The Paraguayan man of today—and consequently his cultural expression—lives immersed in a false and ruthless reality, in that unreality in which his own history has coagulated. His main alienation is to live torn between what reality should be and what it is; between the plenitude of life robbed by his own history and the monstrosity of vegetative life, of non-life, that has imposed on him causes that are alien to his nature and that have distorted the course of his historical necessity.<sup>31</sup>

This coagulated counterlife shows the ruination of both the state and the people. There is no hegemony in Paraguay. Neither, however, is there something we might call a radical alterity, insurgency, popular rebellion.

*La hamaca paraguaya* adopts this double suspension. Ramón and Jacinta live off a grid; they do not know quite what day it is and their village is not clearly marked on any map. They scoff at the official reasons for the Chaco War (oil). There is nothing of worth in the Chaco, they

say, nothing there but animals and snakes. Yet their son goes off to war just the same. What blooms is counterlife. What takes the place of filiation is the iteration of disaster, an island shipwrecked, near but different.

### RAFAEL BARRETT

The Spanish anarchist Rafael Barrett (1876–1910) arrived in Paraguay in 1904, thirty-four years after the end of the Great War. Thirty-four years may seem like a long time, long enough at least for certain forms of recovery, or for the semblance of such recovery, to take root (thirty-four years after World War II brings us to 1979 in Europe, for example). Yet in the short pieces, Barrett wrote for *El Diario, Los Sucesos, Rojo y Azul, El Paraguay, Germinal* (his own ephemeral newspaper), and other newspapers, he repeatedly described Paraguay as a country that is marked by a wound that has yet to heal: “the edges of the wound, as high as a precipice, never mended.”<sup>32</sup> Its vital forces detained, or suspended, Paraguay resembles a “vast hospital.” Across the pages written by Barrett wander diseased bodies, skeletons, specters, “dazed and... melancholic.”<sup>33</sup> Exemplary of this sickscape is a piece entitled “En la estancia” (1907), in which Barrett addresses a newly discovered rural countryside and its taciturn inhabitants. Here, and elsewhere, their almost inhuman impassivity is tied to the ongoing imprint of the war.

The memory of an unspeakable disaster weighs on you. You have been conceived in wombs shaken by horror, and you wander astonished in the ancient theater of the most ruthless war in history, the parricidal war of extermination that cut down the males of a race and dragged the bare-footed females along the paths opened by the horses, ignorant of your orphanhood and mourning; you live faded and fading under the shadow of trauma. You are the survivors of the catastrophe, the errant specters of the night after the battle.<sup>34</sup>

It has been thirty-four years since the war ended, but, as this passage suggests, Barrett registers the transmission of the war’s rupture at the point of social reproduction. This is twofold. First an absence. If in *La hamaca paraguaya* the family has lost a son through war, Barrett gives us a country that has lost its fathers and grandfathers: “the Paraguayan home is a bleeding ruin: it is a home with no father.”<sup>35</sup> The loss of these fathers on such a massive scale implies a fundamental discontinuity, a blank space where there should, for example, be memories: “A nation

without old people, almost without memories.”<sup>36</sup> Cut off from this other past, re-rooted into the crater scored onto Paraguay, the orphaned generations inhabiting the country “are carved from a different type of wood.”<sup>37</sup> Uprooted from the past, they are described as wandering or errant, without compass or direction. They are also, finally, sad. “We can measure the dejection of the peasant masses, the immemorial burden of tears and blood that weighs on their souls, by this tremendous fact: the children are sad.”<sup>38</sup>

In addition, alongside the transmission of what is not there, Barrett figures a positive transmission of the horror and pain of the war through mothers’ wombs: “The pressure of national misfortune has destroyed the mysterious mechanism that renews beings. It has tarnished and falsified love. The specters of the disaster of war and the disaster of peace, tyranny, have trailed behind the solitary lovers and dulled their kisses with its mournful shadow.”<sup>39</sup> The contiguity of trembling in passion and trembling in horror (“they have not only trembled in passion”), of the burning of desire with the funeral pyre (“the torch of immortal desire conserves reflections of the funeral pyre”), means that the “mysterious mechanism that renovates beings” has been broken in Paraguay and will continue to produce thereafter errant beings. The depth of this unwelded wound, the cellular breakdown at that “vital” and “intimate” level at which society reproduces and renovates itself (and Barrett’s writing is everywhere stamped by organicist metaphors), is generated not only by the disaster of war but also by what Barrett calls the “disaster of peace” in the passage cited above. In so doing, Barrett locates a down-scaling of war whose deconstruction is carried forward on the level of everyday life underneath the cover of peace, much as he locates ongoing pain in lowly intimate registers.

There is, therefore, a reason that the Paraguayan wound has not yet healed. It is not gratuitous, accidental, or metaphysical, but a symptom of a war that has merely shifted gears. Despite the catastrophe of the Great War, Barrett displays a certain optimism when he first comes to Paraguay on the wings of the liberal revolution of 1904. Many of his writings, particularly his earlier ones, are full of suggestions that Paraguay can be rebuilt and renewed, that it is young or can arise from the dead like Lazarus. Such optimism becomes increasingly untenable; the more Barrett explores his surroundings and becomes absorbed in Paraguay, the more his focus shifts from the first disaster (open war or external war) to another fault line of conflicts that he called tyranny (the disaster of



peace), or alternately, as below, a “calm domestic war:” “When external war does not satisfy collective ferocity and the thirst for despotic glory, it is useful to have a tranquil domestic war between the police and those jailed for having no regular income, the homeless, the poor, the unarmed and hungry.”<sup>40</sup> Barrett unwrites the conceptual opposition between war and peace, positing continuities where a modern political and spatial architecture presumes an opposition. Peace is not exactly peace, and if something of the project of war carries forward under the name of peace, then war cannot be understood in terms of a national defense of territory, hostilities between two (or more) spatially bounded political entities. Both kinds of war—domestic and external—are also in this way linked: The class war undertaken by the police against a surplus population hinged to an imperialist drive to open up Paraguay and extract its resources.

What Barrett witnessed was not only the aftermath of the war but also the depredations of what has been denominated the Liberal Era (1870–1940), a period which coincides roughly with the years in between the two great Paraguayan wars. The label refers not to the actual hegemony of the Liberal Party (only dominant for half that time) but to the fact that both the Colorado and Liberal parties (both founded in 1887) generally held liberal ideals in this era and supported laissez-faire policies.<sup>41</sup> The Liberal Era witnessed the penetration of Paraguay by foreign capital after nearly a century of policies of autonomy and isolation. Under the dictatorship of Francia, who had broken the back of the colonial political elite and destroyed the latifundio system, the land had been government-owned and leased to peasants and the economy oriented toward self-sufficiency. This changed with Brazilian and Argentine demands of reparations after the Great War. International credit dried up after a series of English loans in 1872 ended up in private hands and were never paid back. The state’s only wealth lay in the lands it owned (state lands comprised about 95% of the country’s surface area) which it promptly sold off to foreign investors. The local elite was rebuilt around the intermediaries of this process; by 1900, 79 individuals owned 50% of the land and many of the peasants were reduced to the status of wage workers, sharecroppers, or indeed slaves as Barrett increasingly took to denouncing. The liberalism which set the tone across the end of the nineteenth century in Latin America took thus the form of a looting of spoils in a land where any protection against the whims of the market had been devastated by war. Power depended on the appropriation and distribution of

newly valued economic resources and the result were the bloody coups and intra- as well as inter-party fighting that marked the Liberal Era.<sup>42</sup>

Whether because of his origins in the anarchist milieu in *fin-de-siècle* Spain, or because he was a newcomer to Paraguay with less stake in the construction of a national identity, or because he was living in the shadows of his own personal disaster, the tuberculosis that would take his life at thirty-four years of age (thirty-four years which are, finally, not that long), Barrett turned a critical eye to the reigning liberal and nationalist ideologies in Paraguay. In this, he parted ways with the generation of 1900, a group that is officially considered the belated origin of Paraguayan literature and which cohered as a group in their attempt to dialogue with the devastating defeat of the Great War, writing mostly sociology and history rather than fiction. By reinterpreting the historical past (declaring Mariscal López the great hero of Paraguay, for instance) and stridently reaffirming national values, they attempted the spiritual reconstruction of Paraguay.<sup>43</sup> Barrett, in contrast, took it upon himself to tear down the liberal fictions he saw around him. In one piece in which he openly declared his anarchism, Barrett wrote: “The laws and constitutions that govern the people by violence are false. They are not sons of the study and the common growth of men. They are the daughters of a barbarian minority that took control through brute force to satisfy their own greed and cruelty.”<sup>44</sup> Barrett’s assertion of a division between the false appearances of the political register and the reality of economic processes and class conflicts may be located within what Jacques Rancière identifies as a poetic revolution in the nineteenth century which took “upon itself the task of making society conscious of its own secrets, by leaving the noisy stage of political claims and doctrines and delving to the depths of the social, to disclose the enigmas and fantasies hidden in the intimate realities of everyday life.”<sup>45</sup> This poetic revolution is made up of a hermeneutic of signs in which the most ordinary of objects or scenes can, when seen up close, be revealed as a cipher behind which lie a network of relations and sedimented histories. To this revolution belong the Marxist analysis of the commodity, the naturalism of Georges Cuvier who reconstructed forests from petrified traces of woods, and the realist novelist who “unfolds the poeticality, the historicity written on the body of ordinary things.”<sup>46</sup> It is Barrett’s version of this poetics of phantasmagoria that prompts Roa Bastos’s claim that Barrett was invested in the revelation of an invisible reality rather than the transcription of a visible reality.<sup>47</sup>

But Barrett's writings also bear witness to an incongruous reality, a reality in delirium, something that is more strained, more painful, and more present than "invisibility" might convey. In post-war Paraguay, the surface appearance is tenuous at best, the two disasters of war and peace standing just too near to each other for their relationship to be hidden, just as trembling in love cannot shake off its contiguity to the trembling of fear. Thus, in "Las autoridades" (1907) Barrett writes: "The roots of the nation are, like those of the tree, underground. They are the dead. The dead are alive... Terror reigns, as it has reigned before... Those aboveground are practically deprived of any instrument of direction and order except the whip."<sup>48</sup> Barrett suggests a reality in which there is no need to disclose a hidden secret, in which ideologies are as seemingly superfluous as the misplaced ideas that according to Roberto Schwarz reigned in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> Or if the pronouncement of these ideas has a function, it is not simply to govern "those below" since that relation takes the form of open war. The moment in which Barrett registers the summary dismissal of such organizing fictions with greatest intensity is "Bajo el terror," which closes the published collection of his articles titled *El dolor paraguayo* and where Barrett writes: "What? You don't even keep up the formulas? Please, bring the false witnesses, the legal lies, the swindles on official stamped paper, any resource to discuss this reality, to free us from this nightmare."<sup>50</sup> The secrets that should be coming out only in dreams, nightmares, or slips of the tongue instead parade about in broad daylight, collapsing thus the borders between night and day, reality and irreality. "Bajo el terror" was published on a leaflet, since by then Barrett was no longer given space to write in Paraguayan newspapers. He was imprisoned and later deported from Paraguay for his critique of the 1908 coup in July as well as for the talks he delivered to Paraguayan workers between May and August of 1908 ("La Tierra," "La huelga," and "El problema sexual") and for his denunciations of the exploitation of workers at the yerba-mate plantations in six articles published in June of 1908 under the title *Lo que son los yerbales*. He was later permitted to return to Paraguay in 1909 where he remained until his final voyage in which he went to Europe to seek treatment for his tuberculosis.

While the sickscape that I have tried to describe above traverses all of Barrett's writings and is generalized across his descriptions of a Paraguayan popular stratum, it reaches particular intensity in these late writings on the some 30,000 Paraguayan workers who are enslaved,

tortured, and killed in the yerba-mate plantations. They are not just exploited workers and not just slaves (although he calls them that too) but specters or cadavers: forms of death in life. They are marked above all by forms of disaggregation. The first of these is what Marx called primitive accumulation.<sup>51</sup> The war is responsible for more than one cut; the reorganization in land tenure and the privatization that follows on the heel of the war tears apart a set of relations between man and land: “it broke the vital thread of agricultural and artisanal traditions and abandoned the few survivors to the cruel orphanhood of those who are banished in their own land.”<sup>52</sup> A landscape is produced of isolated laboring bodies, the entire country “converted into an English or German factory.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the factory metaphor used here, what dominates Barrett’s account is an extractive rather than productive logic. Forced into slavery through debt by rich companies, the workers are described as the victims of a “political caste allied with exporter-usurers who have been sucking their blood from 1870 until today.”<sup>54</sup> The yerba-mate plantation—likened to a “mine”—is also the occasion for the mining of the workers themselves, “flesh that sweats gold.”<sup>55</sup>

Nothing is built, in other words; things are only taken away. Marx follows the trace of cooperative labor and its increased productivity so that, despite the torment and suffering of the workers in England, a being-in-common is created in wage-laborers whose projection leads to Marx’s call for resistance and revolution. Yet although they labor for wages in factory plantations, the yerba-mate workers do not cohere as a collective. They are and are not peasants, we might say, borrowing from Marx. It is only to register the magnitude of this devastation that the worker becomes part of an aggregate: “Since the war, thirty or forty thousand Paraguayans have been... slaughtered in the yerba-mate plantations of the three nations.”<sup>56</sup> Otherwise, Barrett leaves behind images of defeated and solitary men, the absence of open rebellion that Roa Bastos will later elaborate. Their only protest takes the shape of an exodus. The speech Barrett puts into the mouth of a lone spokesman is organized exclusively around a series of negations:

I don’t care about money because as soon as I have it they take it away from me. I don’t plant any trees, nor do I sow my garden because as soon as the value of my land increases, they will strip it away from me. I am not worried about the prosperity of the country because if the country prospers, it will be at my expense, and the walls of my prison will become even thicker. I don’t work because there is no hope. Nothing seduces me more

than escaping from this world through any door whatsoever: alcohol, gambling, luxury, contemplation, dreaming, death.<sup>57</sup>

There is no form of attachment possible: no money, no trees, no land, no country, no labor. There is no futurity. And the disaggregation that marks these forms of death in life mean that they scarcely have the power to haunt. Counterlives have no afterlives.

#### CODA: SOLITUDE

In “Lo viejo y lo nuevo,” published in 1908, Barrett decried phrases like “we inherit,” “we reproduce,” or “we are like those that came before,” which assumed a certain repetition and which for him amounted to a “blasphemy that turns humanity into specters rather than men.”<sup>58</sup> Against the horror of being condemned to becoming a specter in meaningless repetition, in “El problema sexual,” the third of his conferences to workers in 1908, Barrett exhorted the workers to think of their children as part of a struggle projected forward in time: Instead of the reproduction of social order, children were to be seen as ships pointed toward to a more just and human future, bridges toward an opening. The fleeting nature of each individual life, a second of bitter sea, would be subsumed in an ever-evolving human species.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps, one might want to say, as did Mario Benedetti, that Barrett’s granddaughter Soledad Barrett carried forward this struggle in time: “but grandfather Rafael the old anarchist/tugged forcefully at your blood/and silently you felt that yanking/Soledad you did not live in solitude.”<sup>60</sup> Born in Paraguay, exiled in Uruguay and then later to Cuba, she too adopted the struggle of another country and with her lover went to Brazil to begin a socialist revolution only to be tortured and killed in 1973 by forces of the Brazilian military government. Perhaps, one might even want to carry it forward with the daughter she left behind, Nasaindy, raised by another family in Cuba and Brazil, in ignorance of her true parents, but who would then later be one of the first people to give blood for the registry to establish the identity of the disappeared under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner: “Soledad, you did not live in solitude.”

But within such pan-Latin American narratives of solidarity, Paraguay remains subaltern, an appendix to someone else’s story, an island. “In one of my distant travels,” wrote Barrett in a little fable related by Roa Bastos, “I discovered an island. On my return I visited a famed

geographer. He heard me out, patiently consulted maps and books and told me: “The island you have discovered does not exist. It is not on the map.”<sup>61</sup> Filiations do not work; what we have at best are adoptions. When Roa Bastos named Barrett a precursor, it was as a man who had landed on “the island of suffering men and decided at once to adopt their pain.”<sup>62</sup> Such adoptions stitch islands together in formations as thin as spiderwebs, and it is these slight formations, these repeated adoptions, that I have tried to trace here. If Encina’s movie takes up the counterlife that saturates Roa Bastos’s writing, if Roa Bastos adopts a precursor who had in turn adopted a painful post-war reality, this is not to say that the counterlives they conjure up are the same. Barrett assigns causes, builds plots, and traces connections. He produces photographs, even when it is ectoplasmatic reality that adheres to the surface. Encina’s *La hamaca paraguaya*, on the other hand, avoids direct representation. The images that adhere to the surface of the film tell us little. Time and space have shrunk down to the minimal, our scope limited to rumors, crickets, and words with little past and little future. There is little historicity in Encina’s rural landscape, nothing to indicate that the father who tills his field alone in one scene and with fellow farmers in another has a past that is anything other than an immemorial peasant connection to the land, nothing that remains to indicate that in vast portions of Paraguay’s rural landscape, such a connection had been severed, the peasant “freed” to work as a slave in yerba-mate plantations. There are absences other than the felt absence of the missing son, the structure of haunting that one can find in Roa Bastos and Barrett. What I am calling the counterlife posed to us under the name Paraguay speaks of a lack of relation, of, more precisely, a lack of relation with futurity, that which remains a disorganized heap rather than an aggregate or assemblage. This death in life is not quite spectrality because the specter is the figure of something that remains and haunts and is therefore precisely of a relation of some kind. In contrast, counterlives are marked by that which simply drops out, a country turned into an island, loose ends that become lost. For this reason, Barrett’s solitude is not quite the solitude of the Roa Bastos corpus, is not quite the solitude that shimmers in the heat of *La hamaca paraguaya*, and is not, finally, the solitude of Soledad.

## NOTES

1. Encina, *La hamaca paraguaya*. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. A study by Thomas Whigham argues that some 60–70% of the population was killed, mostly adult males. Based on a census carried out after the war ended, in 1870–1871, Whigham concluded that 150,000–160,000 Paraguayan people had survived, of whom only 28,000 were adult males. This left a woman/man ratio of 4 to 1, while in the most devastated areas of the nation, the ratio was as high as 20 to 1. To establish the population before the war, Whigham used an 1846 census and calculated, based on a population growth rate of 1.7–2.5% annually (which was the standard rate at that time), that the pre-war Paraguayan population in 1864 had been approximately 420,000–450,000. Thomas Whigham, “The Paraguayan Rosetta Stone: New Evidence on the Demographics of the Paraguayan War, 1864–1870.” *Latin American Research Review* 34.1 (1999), 174–186.
5. Achille Mbembe. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), 40.
6. Bartomeu Meliá. “Entrevista con Augusto Roa Bastos.” *El Paraguay Inventado*. (Asunción: Centro de Estudios Paraguayos Antonio Guasch, 1997), 130.
7. Augusto Roa Bastos, *Hijo de hombre* (Madrid: Ediciones Alfaguara, 1985), 20.
8. Ibid., 22.
9. Augusto Roa Bastos, *Contravida* (Madrid: Ediciones Alfaguara, 1995), 267.
10. Ibid., 233.
11. Ibid., 201–204.
12. Ackbar Abbas. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 146.
13. Roa Bastos, *Contravida*, 98.
14. Augusto Roa Bastos, “Una cultura oral.” *Hispanamérica* 16 (April–August 1987), 110.
15. I am referring here to Roa Bastos’s essays “La narrativa paraguaya en el contexto de la narrativa hispanoamericana actual” (1984) and “Una cultura oral” (1987).
16. Augusto Roa Bastos, “La narrativa paraguaya.” *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 10.19 (1984), 16.
17. Roa Bastos, “Una cultura oral,” 87.
18. Martin Lienhard. “Del padre Montoya a Roa Bastos.” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 493–494 (1991), 53.

19. Roa Bastos cites the following note by Georges Bernanos "Some weeks ago, I left for Paraguay, that Paraguay which the Larousse dictionary, in agreement with Le Bottin, calls "earthly paradise"; but I know well that I have not finished searching for that which I have always sought and will always seek—that lost route, erased from the memory of men." Augusto Roa Bastos, "Rafael Barrett: Descubridor de la Realidad Social del Paraguay (prólogo)." *El dolor paraguayo*. By Rafael Barrett (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1987), XIV.
20. Augusto Roa Bastos. "El sonámbulo," in *Cándido López: Imágenes de la guerra de Paraguay* (Paris: Franco Maria Ricci, 1984), 32–33. A photocopy of this short story was generously provided to me by John Kraniuskas.
21. Augusto Roa Bastos. *Semana de Autor: Augusto Roa Bastos* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispana/Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, 1986), 95.
22. *Ibid.*, 95.
23. Augusto Roa Bastos. "Con Roa Bastos (entrevista)." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 493–494 (July–August 1991), 27.
24. Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema II: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 150.
25. Roa Bastos, *Semana de Autor*, 98.
26. Roa Bastos. "Rafael Barrett," XIX.
27. *Ibid.*, XV.
28. *Ibid.*, XIX.
29. Roa Bastos, *Contravida*, 289.
30. Homi Bhabba. *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 109.
31. Roa Bastos, "Rafael Barrett," XXXI.
32. Rafael Barrett, "En torno al libro del Doctor Báez," in *Textos inéditos y olvidados. Obras completas IV* (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1998), 186.
33. Rafael Barrett, "Hogares heridos," in *El dolor paraguayo* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1987), 88.
34. Barrett, "En la estancia," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 43–44.
35. *Ibid.*, 89.
36. Barrett, "En torno al libro del Doctor Báez," 186.
37. Barrett, "Verdades amargas," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 88.
38. Barrett, "Los niños tristes," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 85.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Barrett, "El tormento," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 117.
41. Although the mythology surrounding the parties paints the Colorado Party as the political heir of López, made up of nationalists who fought for Paraguay in the Great War (reactionaries according to the Liberals) and the Liberal party as the progressive, liberal party founded by the



legionnaires who fought alongside the Argentines to defeat the tyrant López (traitors according to the Colorados), many historians are quick to point out that in fact at their inception (1887) both parties contained large numbers of both *lopiztas* and *legionnarios*. Historians such as Riordan Roett, Richard Scott Sacks, and Paul Lewis have argued that party differences were due less to ideological reasons and stemmed instead largely from family and personal loyalties and generational issues, the Liberals representing the “new” or “younger” generation of political aspirants, at least up until the Chaco War. The first half of the inter-war period was dominated by the Colorado Party (after it toppled in 1874 the provisional government set up by the Triple Alliance—a government largely staffed by Paraguayan legionnaires and headed by the pro-Argentine Benigno Ferreira). This pro-Brazilian Colorado government was in turn overthrown by a liberal coup in 1904, the year Barrett arrived in Paraguay, with an invasion launched from Argentine territory. This coup inaugurated thirty-five years of Liberal Party rule. The matter did not rest there, however, as the internal divisions in the Liberal Party, between *cívicos* and *radicales*, came to a fore, and in 1908, a military revolt displaced the Cívico Liberal president and brought the Radical Liberals to power for around a quarter of a century. According to historian Paul Lewis, it took another coup and civil war in 1911–1912 (bringing yet another faction of Radicals to power) to establish the definitive end of the Cívico-Colorado coalition. See Lewis, *Political Parties and Generations in Paraguay's Liberal Era 1869–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 187. This turbulent beginning to the rule of the Liberal Party proved to be an embryo of what was to come: In all, there were twenty-one administrations in the thirty-five years the Liberal party held power from 1904–1940.

42. Juan Carlos Herken writes that “The inter- and intra-party struggles of the era can easily be conceptualized as a struggle around the appropriation and benefits of this sudden revaluation of Paraguay’s economic resources.” *Ferrocarriles, conspiraciones y negocios en el Paraguay 1910–1914* (Asunción: Arte Nuevo Editores, 1984), 114.
43. In *La poesía y la narrativa en el Paraguay* (Asunción: El Lector, 1996), the Paraguayan critic Francisco Pérez-Maricevich argues that it was this generation that founded two attitudes that have been repeated ever since in the history of Paraguayan literature: “the melancholic attitude and the narcissistic attitude” (20). The first one is the “‘morbid curiosity about the irreversible past,’ where one ventures not to draw rational explanations that are applicable to the present but, on the contrary, to relive past disgraces ‘as if they were existentially present.’” The other attitude is the opposite face of this one: “a sort of reverse utopia in which the

- Golden Age is projected onto the past so that the mythical incarnation will exchange its name for historical ones" (ibid.). Whether melancholic or triumphalist, both attitudes are nostalgic and ultra-nationalistic.
44. Barrett, *Moralidades actuales* (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1998), 133.
  45. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus* (London: Continuum Books, 2010), 127.
  46. Barrett, *Moralidades actuales*, 163.
  47. "He did not propose the simple transcription of visible reality but rather the demonstration and Revelation of invisible reality." Roa Bastos, "Rafael Barrett," XXIX.
  48. Barrett, "Las autoridades," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 111.
  49. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas. Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992), 28.
  50. Barrett, "Bajo el terror," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 118.
  51. Although Barrett was an anarchist, he did not position himself against Marxism. Indeed, he denounced the split between anarchism and Marxism in the First International and insisted on the continued importance of Marx's analysis in "La cuestión social."
  52. Barrett, "En torno al libro del Doctor Báez," 186.
  53. Barrett, "Horas de angustia," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 167.
  54. Barrett, "En defensa del Paraguay," in *Textos inéditos y olvidados. Obras completas IV*, 245.
  55. Rafael Barrett, "El yugo en la selva," in *Lo que son los yerbales* (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1998), 128; 10.
  56. Ibid., 17.
  57. Barrett, "El obrero," in *El dolor paraguayo*, 101.
  58. Barrett, *Moralidades Actuales*, 65.
  59. Rafael Barrett, *Ensayos y conferencias. Obras completas II* (RP Ediciones, Asunción, 1998), 306.
  60. Mario Benedetti, "Muerte de Soledad Barrett," in *El amor, las mujeres y la vida* (México City: Punto de Lectura, 2006), 32. The poem was originally published as part of the collection *Letras de emergencia (1969–73)*. The Uruguayan folk singer Daniel Viglietti also composed a song for her called "Soledad." A joint performance by Benedetti and Viglietti can be found on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkVV20Sbva8>.
  61. Rafael Barrett, narrated by Roa Bastos in the prologue to *El dolor paraguayo*, XIII.
  62. Roa Bastos, "Rafael Barrett," XXI.

## Paraguayan Realism as Cruelty in Gabriel Casaccia's *El Guajbú*

*Gabriel Horowitz*

In the 1982 re-edition of his first novel *Hijo de hombre* (1960), Augusto Roa Bastos described Paraguayan reality as “una realidad que delira” or “delirious reality.”<sup>1</sup> This concept can be taken as the evil twin of a similar sounding “magical realism,” a decentered, theoretical alternative to the well-known “genre” for the description of Paraguay and Latin America in general. In order to understand, develop, and critique a concept of Latin American “delirious reality” so as to build it into a useful theoretical tool, I propose investigating the work of one of Roa Bastos’s predecessors, Gabriel Casaccia. While Roa Bastos explicitly cites the work of another author, Rafael Barrett, as a source of inspiration for this concept, Casaccia’s influence should not be overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Here, I argue that Casaccia’s collection of stories *El guajbú* (1938), or *The Scream*, is particularly useful for thinking about Paraguayan “delirious reality” and that

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this text can be taken as its prefiguration. The work sets forth a view of said delirium not as one produced by a supernatural counterontology, or a “backward,” ideology-blinded, rural culture, as suggested by some magical realist works, but rather, as an implacable, disorienting, and agentless cruelty. As a thinker of cruelty within Latin American modernity—a cruelty that defines the Latin American Real—Casaccia’s work is crucial, especially in light of a contemporary debate about a similar topic that Jean Franco describes in her book *Cruel Modernity*—the intensification of implacable cruelty, visible most clearly in narco-violence.<sup>3</sup>

The title of the collection (*El guajbú*) implicitly manifests a key tension between mythical and modern history that has been repeatedly used to characterize the difference between Latin American and European/US realities. The Guaraní word for scream invokes two seemingly opposed historical frameworks at once—the world of myth and folklore associated with the indigenous language, on the one hand, along with the pejorative connotations that colonial Western discourses have attributed to it; and Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* (1893), on the other, a definitively modern, European lament. Read as a literary Guaraní invocation of the Norwegian painter’s work, *El guajbú* proposes itself as a book that interrogates the relation between a largely rural, Guaraní-speaking, Paraguayan culture, and modernity defined through occidental “civilization.”

Filling in lines that have been sketched by Josefina Plá, I read *El guajbú* as a collection of stories whose true thematic thread is cruelty, placing it in dialogue with Jean Franco’s recent project, which maintains that although “neither cruelty nor the exploitation of cruelty is new, [...] the lifting of the taboo, the acceptance and justification of cruelty and the rationale for cruel acts, have become a feature of modernity” (Franco 2).<sup>4</sup> Taken as a sustained interrogation into cruelty understood as the intentional and unnecessary dispensation of suffering, and its function in defining Paraguayan/Latin American “reality,” *El guajbú* can be seen as a precursor to the investigation Franco has recently initiated. In addition to framing its longstanding importance, Casaccia’s text helps to clarify and address the central questions raised by cruelty: specifically those arising with the insufficiency of materialist explanations of the mysterious persistence and exacerbation of cruelty in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Casaccia elaborates an idea of cruelty in a way that confounds a positivist view of history defined as a trajectory of progress and secularization. Ultimately, this persistence

of the incommensurable bridging mythical and secular history must be understood through its relation to the concept of the sacred.

Furthermore, in exploring Casaccia's work, it becomes clear that the question about the origin or cause of a cruelty with which his work grapples is directly related to a question about the relation between the metropolitan center and the margin. It is a question that also applies to the very framework of this chapter: the basis for comparison between a seemingly folkloric or traditional Paraguayan space of the 1930s and ostensibly "modern" instantiations of cruelty being taken to the extreme, such as the torture and disappearance of political prisoners throughout Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, or more recently, narco-beheadings, the Juarez feminicides, or the disappearance of the Mexican students in Iguala (the Ayotzinapa tragedy).

The bewilderment and illness (delirium) that Casaccia expresses with *El guajbí*, as an ethical positioning toward a reality defined by cruelty is remarkable. But in order to recognize that this is the case, it is necessary to contextualize the book within a larger framework of the thinking that has sought to define Latin American reality. His position must be situated in relation to a scientific rationalism expressed by his predecessor Horacio Quiroga and the magical realism later canonized by writers of the Boom, which broadly represent two poles of a spectrum by which Latin American reality has been explained, and whose legitimacy Casaccia's work calls into doubt. Ultimately, in the irreconcilable dissonance of the worldviews reflected by different stories in the text—an undecidability between mythical view supported by "La amberé" and modern, secularized, scientific position maintained in "El pora"—*El guajbí* challenges the categorical opposition that has defined interpretation of the region and its culture, that is, a literate, rational, Western worldview and an oral, mythical, indigenous one.<sup>6</sup> Insofar as cruelty is the strongest thread or point of consistency throughout Casaccia's various stories, in *El guajbí* it represents the only means by which to understand Paraguayan (and more generally, Latin American) reality. As the basis of Latin America's delirious reality in *El guajbí*, cruelty is revealed as a means of conceptualizing the Real. Consequently, beyond *El guajbí*, it becomes possible to imagine a historically reified form of this awareness, an informal theology or pseudo-religious practice in which cruelty—much in the way that sacrifice also acts as a form of sanctification—would be utilized (futilely or not) as a tool in an attempt to access the Real.

## DEFINING A LATIN AMERICAN REALITY: SCIENCE VERSUS MAGIC

Since Independence, the imperative of defining Latin America's reality has been one of the central preoccupations of its thinkers. It is a matter of debate whether the constant definition and redefinition of Latin American difference reflects a difficulty in articulating precisely what is different about it, or a desire to conceal a lack of difference. In any case, after Independence, Latin American difference (referred to at the time as "cultural autonomy") was consistently understood as a function of its status as a wilderness space. This romantic imagination of Latin America as a state of nature soon became enmeshed in a debate sparked by the rise of positivism that in turn defined it as being afflicted by underdevelopment.<sup>7</sup> Later, during the mid-twentieth century, magical realist literature (emblemized by García Márquez in particular) transformed and radicalized a view of Latin America's wilderness status, portraying its reality as one in which scientifically derived laws of nature do not hold, as a space at odds with positive knowledge, defined by disorder, myth, and ideology.

The popularization of magical realism has helped to reinforce stereotypes maintained by a global north interested in imagining the south as a barbarous, and consequently inferior place, despite the fact that such an interpretation does not do justice to the subtleties of a book like *Cien años de soledad*, which actually seeks to explore the tension between perceptions of science and magic in rural Colombia. Furthermore, insofar as non-scientific "magic" has been linked to indigeneity within anthropological discourse (in Claude Levi-Strauss's *Savage Mind* [1962], for example), the idea of a magical reality can all too easily reinforce racist perspectives that view indigenous cultures and their offshoots as inherently primitive, and consequently, doomed to obsolescence and eventual extinction. If a Latin American magical reality can be seen as stemming from the indigeneity of its culture, it becomes possible to view it as an euphemism for indigenous irrationalism, and thus, a reiteration of the view canonized in Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845) that seeks to promote national development through the violent eradication of the original inhabitants of the land.

Today, when one reads the first few stories in *El guajibú*, a question arises about whether Casaccia is articulating an incipient magical realism that sees Paraguayan reality in counterdistinction to Western modernity. The fundamental question is whether the mythical worldview

characterizing this difference reflects indigeneity within Paraguayan culture; and if so, whether such a view is well founded, or whether it is problematic or racist.<sup>8</sup> The second story of the reprinted edition of the collection, “La amberé” (amberé being the Guaraní word for small lizard), in particular raises these questions. The tale recounts a series of misfortunes precipitated by a seemingly insignificant act of killing a lizard, which affirm a folkloric belief that killing such lizards is bad luck. It is significant that the title of the story, which describes a mythical or magical belief, is in Jopará a hybrid of Spanish and Guaraní. In Paraguay, Guaraní is widely spoken even among non-indigenous individuals, and thus, its national culture is ineluctably bound up with the memory of indigenous practices. There can be no doubt that on some level, an indigenous cultural outlook is maintained within the language itself, even as that language has been increasingly influenced by Western culture.<sup>9</sup> One has little choice but to wonder if, with “La amberé,” through the affirmation of a belief that might otherwise be taken as superstition, Casaccia casts Paraguayan reality both as strongly indigenous and as fundamentally distinct from Western modernity, thus reiterating the claim of Latin American difference. Following this line of thinking, one must ask whether he perhaps inadvertently reinforces a stereotype that it would therefore also be primitive.

In “La amberé” Serafin Romero, an illiterate, Guaraní-speaking *campesino* despairs when his employer Manuel Rojas absentmindedly kills a lizard with his walking stick on their way to the field. Serafin worries that some misfortune will befall Manuel’s mother Romualda (with whom he often spends the afternoon drinking *mate*) in accordance with the above-mentioned popular belief, which has already been confirmed in his experience by a previous incident in which the parent of a lizard-killer died. For the reader who does not believe in such lore, it is surprising that Serafin’s fears are almost immediately confirmed within the narrative: the next day Rojas’s house collapses and kills Romualda. Later, the bizarre misfortune becomes grotesquely horrible. Despite the fact that Rojas “was rightly careful to put the two enormous pigs he was raising back in their pen,” these pigs mysteriously escape their enclosure and devour the face and hands of Romualda’s dead body.<sup>10</sup>

Besides narrating horrible and tragic events, the story appears to directly affirm the validity of the myth in question and lend credence to the worldview of the *campesino* which might otherwise be taken as superstitious. The affirmation of myth is reinforced by the key narrative development of the story, a shift in Rojas’s position away from

enlightened rationalism with his eventual admission that he should not have killed the lizard after all.

At first, Rojas maintains that the lizard myth is nonsense. When Serafín warns immediately after the incident “this brings bad luck” (he actually states in Guaraní “*Upéva co ogúerú despinte*”), Rojas is dismissive, responding in Spanish “*Qué va a traer mala suerte*” (“What’s going to bring bad luck?”).<sup>11</sup> Even when the house collapses and Serafín’s fears are confirmed, Rojas maintains a position that reflects the teachings of scientific reason, and with which the contemporary Western reader is most likely to relate: “Rojas attributed the collapse to the copious rains of the preceding days and the weakness of the cement. Although Serafín wouldn’t agree, to blame the *amberé* for it was nothing but fantasy and legend.”<sup>12</sup> It is only at his mother’s funeral, after the added misfortune of the pigs, and facing Serafín, who had begun wildly accusing him of murder, that Rojas finally admits that he was wrong to kill the lizard. Significantly, it is in this moment that he begins to speak in Guaraní for the first time within the narrative.

Taken on its own, “La amberé” acts as a validation of a view that takes Paraguayan reality as one in which rural myth holds true. Furthermore, this reality must be seen as an extension of Paraguay’s status as an indigenous space, insofar as the story makes it clear (through Rojas’s simultaneous acceptance of mythical thought and the indigenous language at the conclusion) that it is in and through Guaraní that one gains access to the secret law of the land. By taking a magical ontology seriously, the story can also be read as affirming an indigenous worldview—one imagines that these rules pertaining to lizards were originally maintained by the indigenous people of the region and were transmitted as an oral tradition through the generations, much like the Guaraní language itself. As such, in light of its depiction of Rojas’s transformation, it would cast indigeneity as a true counterontology within a world that is ordered by the hegemony of Western modernity.

As the second story in the collection depicting a Guaraní worldview, “La amberé” establishes a certain expectation that *El guajbú* as a whole will elaborate an incipient *indigenista* magical realism. In the following three stories, however, magic and myth play no part in the events described. An abrupt shift to sober realism is consolidated in the fifth story, called “La pora” (the Guaraní word for “ghost”), in which the narrator confronts a magical view of reality similar to that depicted in “La amberé,” and subsequently debunks it.



Just as “La amberé” vindicates a magical conceptualization of reality, the structurally similar “La pora” critiques it and casts the *campesino* belief in mythical creatures as superstition that exacerbates their misery and misfortune. The story centers on Fernando, a youth whose mysterious past has become an object of intrigue for the other workers on the *Estancia* (or Ranch) *La Tuuyúú*, where he lives. It is probable that he was brought to the ranch after being orphaned because it is where his mother Brígida had lived before running off with a disreputable worker. But because the details of this episode in Fernando’s past—including the circumstances surrounding Brígida’s death—are not fully known, his comrades turn it into a fantastic story of the macabre, “a legend full of ferocities, blood and mystery.”<sup>13</sup> It is precisely this exaggeration of the truth and flight into fantasy that initiates Fernando’s own descent into a world of false consciousness: “In this way, the shadowy adventure of his mother and her tragic death had taken hold of Fernando’s imagination.”<sup>14</sup> By the end of the story, what began as fantasy turns into psychosis, or madness, and produces dire consequences.

At the age of 16, Fernando begins to imagine that his mother’s ghost is haunting him, and his ravings stimulate the imaginations of the other *campesinos*, leading Darío the hacienda overseer to treat him first with skepticism and then with cruelty. Although at first Darío does not want to believe in the ghost (just as Rojas did not want to believe in the special status of the lizard in “La amberé”) after a run of bad luck, a nagging fear that the phantom really might exist and the need to find some explanation for the misfortune lead him to take Fernando’s visions seriously. Darío forces the boy sleep outside exposed to the elements in order to make sure the ghost is not tempted to enter the *Estancia*, and due to a combination of illness brought about by exposure and Fernando’s powerful fear, he is permanently traumatized, becoming a sickly “*imbécil*” [idiot].<sup>15</sup> For a year, Fernando is delirious; he is unable to respond to questions about what terrified him, and his gaze is lifeless and empty. At the end of the story, Fernando regains the capacity for goal-oriented thinking just long enough to murder Darío after someone jokingly tells him a false story that the overseer is going to make him sleep outside again.

Fernando’s psychosis and Darío’s untimely demise are each catalyzed by a series of fantastic tales. If, in “La amberé,” myth is the secret rule that can explain and prevent misfortune, here, repeatedly—in the original whisperings about Fernando’s mother, his imagination of her ghost, and the lie that he is going to have to sleep outside again—false stories are its direct cause.

Although the narrator tends to simply relay information in an impersonal manner, there is one point at which he provides an opinion about why these stories come into being. When describing the rumors that circulate about Fernando's mother, the narrator states: "now, years later, the peasants, anxious to dress up what is vulgar and quotidian in the sparkle of the marvelous and the extraordinary, had transformed Brigida's crime into a legend."<sup>16</sup> It is possible to read this statement not just as a description of the informal, oral tradition of the *campesinos*, but also as a prophetic critique of the literary genre of magical realism, read as a kind of "marvelous real" (*lo real maravilloso*) as Alejo Carpentier described it in 1948. It is not difficult to see how magical realist texts (or even all of literature) could be understood as stemming from a desire to spruce up an otherwise dreary and vulgar existence. If in "La pora," "the marvelous" ultimately precipitates the downfall of the principle characters, one might also hold up *El guajbú*'s own representations against it. A profound conceptual dissonance obtains in the tension between the critique of fantasy in "La pora" and the apparent magical realism of "La amberé;" not to mention between "La pora" and all of *El guajbú*, which generally proliferates bloody, horrifying, and fantastic tales at least in part for the sake of entertainment.

The nature of the inconsistency that Casaccia presents in the opposing views of "La amberé" and "La pora" is deeper still. In order to productively discern it here, it is helpful to observe similarities between the stories of *El guajbú* and those of Horacio Quiroga. While many of their tales are similar insofar as they recount some grotesque misfortune transpiring in a rural area (which is not uncommon in works of social realism, in stories by Ecuadorian writer Enrique Gil Gilbert, for example), the disenchanting gesture of "La pora" is particularly reminiscent of some of Quiroga's most significant works.<sup>17</sup> In "El almohadón de plumas" ("The Feather Pillow"), for example, it turns out that the slow decline and death of Alicia—along with her inexplicable anemia—were not caused by a vampire after all, as the reader imagines the narrator means to suggest at first, but rather a giant bloodsucking bug that had been hiding in her pillow. The sudden insight into this gruesome reality arrives in the final paragraph, with the intercession of an objective, scientific language: "These avian parasites, minute in their normal habitat, in certain conditions grow to enormous proportions. Human blood appears to be particularly favorable to them, and it is not uncommon to find them in feather pillows."<sup>18</sup> Another story, "La

miel silvestre” (“Wild Honey”) ends with a structurally almost-identical scientific expository paragraph, leading the reader to sense that the disenchanting function of Quiroga’s stories looks toward the fulfillment of a specifically positivist developmentalism, by which objective, Enlightened truth will dispel barbarous myth.<sup>19</sup> The similarity between “La pora” and these stories—especially in the narrator’s aside—leads the reader to entertain the possibility that here, like Quiroga’s narrator, Casaccia’s narrator has aligned himself firmly with Western science against what it would define as an “irrational,” perhaps indigenous worldview. Thus read, “La amberé” and “La pora” can be taken as representations of diametrically opposed Latin American ontologies: one that is mythical and the other modern.

The questions Casaccia raises through the opposition between magical realism in “La amberé” and Western positivist developmentalism in “La pora” encode a debate about the nature of Latin American reality and its relation to the West that has remained unresolved since Independence. Latin American discourse had repeatedly asked: Is Latin American reality fundamentally different from a European or United Statesian reality? Can underdevelopment be attributed to this difference? Must Latin American nation-states imitate foreign modernities, or must they instead observe and comprehend the peculiarity of its own reality, and reject foreign models? Does devising local models entail the rejection of universal reason itself? My reading of the tension between “La amberé” and “La pora” recasts these questions of how to address Latin American difference specifically in terms of how to understand the misfortune that besets its characters: Is this misfortune an effect of underdevelopment, backwardness, and superstition, or a Eurocentric failure to recognize the unique, non-Western set of laws that governs the space?

When commenting on Casaccia’s work, critics have often pondered this question about how to explain the misfortune he depicts. A typical response to such unfortunate situations (especially literary ones) is to hope that some meaning or lesson might be derived from them. Readers have found, however, that Casaccia offers no clear answers and that, instead, his work verges on meaninglessness. Josefina Plá writes in regard to the “unjust suffering” he depicts: “Overall, anything that might resemble catharsis is not present.”<sup>20</sup> Almada Roche comments along similar lines how this Casaccia’s pessimism affected his reception in Paraguay:

In the pages of his work, salvation never appears, and so, there are no saviors. Due to his pessimism and lack of heroism Casaccia brought upon himself a certain condemnation, during a time, from the Paraguayan press. But Casaccia himself has responded to his critics with the best possible defense: if reality were different, I would happily write stories that were more upbeat.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the clearest difference between Casaccia and Quiroga (and the most useful insight provided by a comparison of their thinking) lies in the total absence not only of catharsis and salvation but also redemption in the work of the former. In Quiroga at least, the objective, scientific feeling of the final paragraphs provides a certain reassurance and consolation: The shift in tone expresses hope for a future in which it will be possible avoid similar outcomes, or a power to transcend the event. The ironic distance of these paragraphs perhaps even allows the reader to identify with a scientific omniscience. On some level, science redeems the tragedy and represents a means of overcoming the languishing misery of the equatorial backwater. In Casaccia's *El guajbú*, this kind of revelation never occurs. Indeed, even as "La pora" critiques fantasy and superstition, its act of disenchantment itself seems to hold no power to alter the situation.

In response to this void of meaning, Plá suggests that Casaccia's writing fulfills the function of testimony and that the primary meaning to be derived from the work is the simple horror that it evokes. Indeed, there can be little question that *El guajbú* is a kind of denunciation. Still, by defining his work through its "testimonial function, which characterizes all literature, even the most conventional and artificial," her interpretation does little to explain writing that is not particularly conventional and that clearly seeks to do more than just testify.<sup>22</sup> Plá does not explain a feeling produced by the explicitly literary nature of the work, its self-assertion as a puzzle that might be solved by the thoughtful reader.

### CRUELTY AND LATIN AMERICAN REALITY

For the reader searching for a literary message, wanton cruelty is the only coherent pattern, or consistent narrative trope that is discernable within the whole of *El guajbú*. A priest is murdered and his ritual implements are stolen when returning home after giving last rites; a man vents hatred for his deceased brother by drowning his dog; a child avenges his

mistreatment by a local bully by pushing him into a bullring, where he is maimed; a visiting military officer organizes the execution of a local citizen (burning at the stake) for an insignificant slight, only to reveal at the last minute that it is all just a joke.

This last story, “El Mayor” (“The Major”), is particularly clear in foregrounding cruelty as an explicit matter of concern for Casaccia. The eponymous protagonist is described as being known for his “cruelties and predations,” and indeed, it is not the first time that he frightens someone by “joking” that he is going to have him burned to death.<sup>23</sup> In a private conversation, anticipating the coming prank, a lieutenant asks the major: “You’re going to do like you did in Paraguari?” illustrating that this kind of episode is already becoming a kind of routine.<sup>24</sup> When the major pounds his fist on the table and defiantly says, “Yes ... is there a problem?” the lieutenant replies: “It’s cruel. A stupid joke.”<sup>25</sup> In the end, the major ignores the lieutenant and carries out the prank.

Recognizing the organizing thread of cruelty in *El guajbí* is little consolation to the disconcerted reader who scours the text to find some meaning or redemption in the terrible misfortunes with which she is faced. If the tragic events of each story seem to be sparked by senseless acts of cruelty, the senselessness itself becomes a new riddle no more easily solved than the first. Perhaps the actions of the major are not so difficult to explain: His succinct response to the lieutenant, “I’m the one giving orders here ... don’t forget it,” suggests that he is executing a tactic of domination, which reflects a belief that power is constituted through its indiscriminate exercise and the cultivation of fear.<sup>26</sup> Still, searching for confirmation of this message by cross-indexing it with the different impetus for cruelty in other stories leads to strange outcomes. While one might also read “El Mayor” as a lingering specter of the Chaco War (violence Casaccia had recently experienced firsthand as an auditor), or of Paraguay’s history of political upheaval (a series of *coups d’état* indicating a slow-burning civil war), what happens when one compares the major’s prank to Rojas’s offhand killing of a lizard or to the meanness of a schoolyard bully? The possibility of finding concrete causes for the cruel reality Casaccia depicts is confounded by the many tales that seem to transcend Paraguay’s unique historical contingency.<sup>27</sup>

The ambivalence of Casaccia’s positioning toward the question of how to understand Paraguayan reality, between scientific and magical epistemologies, is mirrored by the tension between the historically specific cause of cruel behavior and its ahistorical, spontaneous, “mythical”

irruption into the present. The question that *El guajibú* considers gradually transforms into an assertion that cruelty finds itself entrenched at the point of inflection between empirical materiality and magic—history and myth. Although I have already read “La pora” as a tale that represents and promotes scientific developmentalism, further investigation turns up a level of complexity that leads to this thesis that cruelty confuses the strict opposition between history and myth.

On the one hand, “La pora” maintains that the falsification of Fernando’s history is the cause for his belief in a mythical creature, the ghost. In so doing, the narrator clearly reveals a belief that the ghost is a fiction, a form of madness brought on by certain stimulations on an overactive imagination. Yet even if the narrator would not admit that the ghost is an objectively measurable natural phenomenon, the story nevertheless provides an avenue for understanding the haunting as something that is not altogether unreal.

Just as in other works in which a ghost stands in for a repressed truth, a terrifying memory, or a nagging question about the past, the specter of Fernando’s mother seems to represent Fernando’s own unfulfilled desire for his parents to have done a better job caring for him.<sup>28</sup> The specter lingers first as an effect of a tragic event in his life, a seemingly willful abandonment by his mother. Soon, however, through some hidden maneuver, the effect of this cruel betrayal takes on a life of its own, becoming an agent of additional misfortunes. As a ghost, it is a system of reinforcement, a self-fulfilling prophecy of Fernando’s forsakenness on the earth. Perhaps what is most disturbing about “La pora” is the fact that Fernando is destined to relive his victimization over and over. The child has no part in deciding his fate, but the misfortune that bears on him is a mark that even the innocent cannot erase. One cruelty facilitates and begets others; translated through the ghost, his original abandonment leads to his banishment by the overseer, the resulting sickness, mental breakdown, ridicule, and ultimately, murder. The ghost, while a figment of Fernando’s imagination indicates the real presence of a social or ontological structure that drives against justice (understood loosely as a general equilibrium between good and evil in the world, a balance of scales), a chain reaction of cruelty that once initiated, irrevocably leads to horror and destruction.

“La pora” suggests a deep irony governing Paraguay’s reality insofar as the lasting resonance of misfortune and cruelty in the world is at least partly an effect of a need to explain misfortune and cruelty itself. The

stories arise out of a need to come to grips with unfortunate events that have no discernable cause or meaning compound and magnify their negative effects. Something bad is happening, and even trying to comprehend or explain it seems only to make the situation worse.

Casaccia repeatedly describes the feeling of being left with no reliable means by which to understand the misfortune and cruelty that haunts the experience of everyday life. Amid the indeterminacy between ostensibly incompatible and opposing scientific (Western) and mythical (indigenous) worldviews, the only solid thing to hold on to is the cruelty itself. Indeed, especially in “La pora,” we can see this abstract concept becoming autonomous. The only figure one can rely on to make an appearance in any of stories Casaccia tells gradually takes on a life and agency of its own. In *El guajibú*, cruelty emerges as a ghost that definitively dictates the Paraguayan reality he describes, but which is at the same time irreducible and incomprehensible. Time and again in the text, this quality seems to be both a cause and an effect of confusion and madness: the delirium that ends up defining the universe he describes.

Through his depiction of a situation that cannot be understood or redeemed, and in which the conceptual tools available to explain it lose their power due to a mutual contamination, Casaccia creates the prototype of the “delirious reality” that Roa Bastos would later incorporate in his thinking. The ten episodes of abasement in *Hijo de hombre*, taking place in the Chaco, a mate plantation, or the town of Sapukai, come to mind as obvious examples of this. Still, *El fiscal* (1993) even more directly recreates a literary tension in which paradigms of myth and modernity vie to account for vicious cruelty, but then fail to succeed in doing so. In this novel, Paraguay is defined on the one hand by a mythical, eternal return to the crucifixion (hence deification) of Solano López at the end of the War of the Triple Alliance; and on the other, by the political repression epitomized by a hypermodern torture device that bombards the eyes with white and infrared rays, causing “atrocious pain and cerebral perturbation, along with a paralysis of the body and of the respiratory system.”<sup>29</sup>

A radical interpretation of Casaccia’s Paraguayan “realidad que delira” that we encounter in Roa Bastos’s vision of absolute, incommensurable suffering in the eternal return to crucifixion and the *técnica*’s torture methods discovers a new metaphysics. His description of the machine’s effects amounts to a Nietzschean transvaluation of morals, the inversion of black and white in all possible senses that touches the very core of human being:

One has the sensation of being entirely transported from brain to heels by the «black bone of the light»: the invisible light that makes the darkness visible... this «black skeleton without my knowing, without my paying the slightest attention to it, accompanied me, incrustated in me and mine.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the sense that reality is cruel, through Roa Bastos, *El guajbhú* elaborates a sense that the cruel has begun to be bound up with a concept of the Real itself: the dark skeleton of human being. Insofar as cruelty emerges as an expression of, or means of accessing the Real, and yet remains at the same time incommensurable, it emerges as a theological concept, a vision of the sacred.<sup>31</sup>

It is crucial to recognize that Casaccia's theology, or metaphysics of cruelty, is distinct from a view of Paraguay as a site of myth. Whereas the latter depends on a framework of opposition between two irreconcilable worlds, the former represents a radical "illegibility" (Acosta) or a "third space" (Moreiras) that signals a breakdown of the dialectic of Enlightenment. In *El guajbhú*, Casaccia confuses the opposition between modernity and tradition, science (calculation of difference) and magic (detection of affinity). In so doing, he produces a consciousness of what Enlightenment ideology would conceal: (1) the theological basis of Western institutions and conceptual achievements, the extent to which myth cannot be banished by instrumentality and continues to inhere in an ostensibly disenchanted modernity; and (2) the extent to which a country, like Paraguay, whose culture is largely rural, and whose national integration remains incomplete, comprises an integral part of modernity.

Consequently, Casaccia undermines the mutual exclusivity of other binaries encoded within this categorical opposition, such as Europe and America, civilization and barbarism. The metaphysics of cruelty arising at the point where these differences collapse is not a "barbarism" that defines Latin American difference. What he describes is not unique or limited to the South American sphere. Indeed, at the outset of World War II, with his description of Paraguay's integration into modernity—the Guaraní scream (*El guajbhú*) that calls out across the ocean to join with Munch's—Casaccia also anticipates the way in which cruelty would come to act as a theological touchstone in Europe as well. In a similar way, the vicissitudes of Auschwitz and the holocaust, for example, would represent an achievement of technical instrumentality, while at the same time taking on a value of radical evil; that is, it would represent the conceptual dissonance arising from the apotheosis of a specific application of



morally indifferent scientific thought into a new (negative) moral absolute.<sup>32</sup>

Even though the difficulty in explaining cruelty using the epistemological systems of the Enlightenment has been exposed repeatedly, it has not ceased to be any less bewildering. In *Cruel Modernity*, Jean Franco frames the question of understanding extreme violence in Latin America today as the challenge of fitting it into the categorical opposition between a cold, calculating modernity (neoliberalism, global capitalism) and a barbaric backwardness (the corrupt and underdeveloped state). In a chapter on violence in Mexico Franco observes:

Most commentators attribute the violence to a complex of factors, among which two stand out: first, the insertion of the drug trafficking into an already corrupt state, and second, the poverty caused by the collapse of the agrarian economy as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the flooding of the market with cheap US corn, which has in turn created a pool of unemployed who are ready and able to work for the cartels.<sup>33</sup>

Still, Franco presses on, struggling for many pages to illuminate the reason behind violence on the US–Mexico border, including the Juarez feminicides—a multitude of cases in which women have been raped, tortured, murdered, and deserted on the outskirts of the city. She summarizes accounts of this phenomenon made by various scholars, journalists, and novelists. Some (Rita Laura Segato, Ileana Rodríguez, Charles Bowden) ascribe its cause largely to the unfettering of a “savage” or instrumentalizing global capitalism. Others (Rosa Linda Fregoso, Cynthia Bejarano) see it as an expression of traditional machismo. Some (Sergio González Rodríguez) cast it as a new, rogue transformation of a theological political concept: sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> And Franco herself suggests, with an extended reading of Roberto Bolaño, that the violence is an effect of the nihilism left in the wake of secularization: a nihilism connected to a feeling that the deaths themselves start to become meaningless, “as gratuitous as the haphazard features of the landscape:” “that none of it made any sense.”<sup>35</sup>

If Casaccia presents a categorical list of different kinds of cruelty—historically contingent and universal, that caused by superstitious stories and that caused by a lack of faith in traditional myths—Franco provides an index of its many different explanations. And yet something nevertheless

escapes. Her chapter offers no concluding synthesis. The afterword is unsystematic, mentioning only how military training has often catalyzed violence and reiterating the importance of cruelty as a philosophical question. If her extensive treatment of Bolaño suggests that she is ultimately most compelled by his vision of cruelty, it seems she finally retreats into the narrator's own feeling that "none of it made any sense." By the end of this book dedicated to cruelty, cruelty remains a mystery.

It is possible that cruelty, in its quest to maximize displeasure, discovers and manifests "the new," and creates avenues by which things previously thought to be impossible or unthinkable can come into being. New technology is developed to increase suffering during torture; mechanical reproduction turns sadism into a product, like a snuff film.<sup>36</sup> Cruelty is one of the forces that precipitates the unforeseen into the present and thus carries us toward the future. Yet, as Franco notes, one cannot say cruelty was less cruel in the past. Like Walter Benjamin's dictum regarding the purview of redemption, cruelty is always the cruelest in its own time.<sup>37</sup>

Casaccia's "delirious reality" understands that a cruel modernity cannot be explained from within a dialectic of Enlightenment: It cannot be reduced exclusively to cold, calculating, technical instrumentalization, or backsliding barbarism. It reveals itself to be an attempt to fix the gaze upon that which is entirely incommensurable: in Roa Bastos's elaboration, the contemplation of a theology of nihilism organized around providing access to the Real.

Today, a theology of cruelty is being expressed through an ongoing transvaluation of morals, not only an inversion of state law, but also the structure of prohibition and taboo that conditions our very understanding of reality. In particular, it seems that a concept of the human—whose invention, according to Georges Bataille, is closely linked to the most fundamental forms of prohibition and law—is being called into question as a form of false consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Cruelty, by way of a pure instrumentality, organizes a fantasy of the Real, the understanding that what had been previously unthinkable is actually possible once certain forms of ideology are undone.

Be it as a new theology or the self-concealing truth of capitalism, even as scholars and journalists attempt to denounce this violence, they end up reinforcing its valuation as a new sense of the Real. In the compelling arguments of journalist John Gibler, for example, who relentlessly maintains that cruelty in Mexico is all business, violence still takes on a

transcendental value. It is the secret that must be exposed, and for which one must be willing to die in order to do so:

Silence is essential. Where murder is part of the overhead in an illicit multi-billion-dollar industry, impunity becomes a fundamental investment. And impunity cannot hold without silence. Hence Mexico has become the most dangerous country in the hemisphere for journalists, those whose labor requires voice.<sup>39</sup>

The journalist risks life and limb in the name of truth, becoming exegete of death messages, scourer of deserts in search of the secret hecatombs, a savage detective: Aestheticized language and strange fantasies become temptations almost impossible to avoid even when simply describing dispositions toward a violence that is supposed to simply appall.

Gibler at one point describes a sign left on the body of the murdered journalist Valentín Valdés Espinosa, on which it was written: "THIS IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO THOSE WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND. THE MESSAGE IS FOR EVERYONE."<sup>40</sup> According to common usage, the sign implies that what this journalist failed to understand was the fact that investigating and exposing certain circumstances of the crimes, and the names of the victims and murderers, is prohibited. Read at face value, however, it means that the message—that is, death—is for everyone precisely because no one really understands the delirious reality in which they find themselves, not those who experience narco-violence in Mexico, nor the Paraguayan subjects of Casaccia's tales. The message, which is for "everyone"—in Latin America and beyond—also means that the understanding the journalist produces will be of no value in quelling the violence (at least not yet) but, instead, will only cause more. Consequently, the nature of the value it undeniably creates remains to be understood.

## NOTES

1. In this 1982 introduction to *Hijo de hombre*, Roa Bastos describes his novels as being "steeped in the juices of Paraguayan reality, in the strange and tragic vicissitudes of its social and historical life: this *delirious reality* which Rafael Barrett perceived and described at the beginning of the century." Augusto Roa Bastos, *Hijo de hombre* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. Although Augusto Roa Bastos himself describes Casaccia as the “initiator of an incipient Paraguayan narrative,” the work of the latter writer is less widely known. Augusto Roa Bastos, “Una cultura oral,” *Hispanamérica* 16, 46/47 (1987), 105. Key academic studies of his work include *Paraguay: novela y exilio* (Somerville, NJ: SLUSA, 1985) by Teresa Méndez-Faith, *El Paraguay en la obra de Gabriel Casaccia* (Buenos Aires: García Cambiero, 1977) by Francisco Feito, and a collection of essays they edited together called *La Babosa y sus críticos* (Asunción: Intercontinental, 2007). Josefina Plá treats Casaccia’s work briefly in *Literatura paraguaya del siglo XX* (Asunción: Ediciones Comunerós, 1976). More recent publications include *Gabriel Casaccia y Areguá: espacio e identidad* (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 2009) by Ignacio Roldán Martínez, and *Gabriel Casaccia: el padre de la novela en el Paraguay* (Asunción: Arandurã, 2007) by Armando Almada Roche.
3. Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
4. Prior to the present study, Josefina Plá recognized the central importance of cruelty and the questions it raises in Casaccia’s work. Armando Almada Roche quotes the following statement (no citation is given), in which she reflects on his life and work: “Gabriel Casaccia has left us at a moment when he could have continued purifying experiences and deepening horizons, with new testimonial texts, cruel, with a cruelty known by the true creators within and without, a cilice on the soul.” Roche, *Gabriel Casaccia*, 22.
5. Franco illustrates this problem in the last chapter of *Cruel Modernity* as she grapples with the difficulty in accounting for cruelty using a purely scientific or materialist methodology. Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 214–245.
6. In the second chapter of *Thresholds of Illiteracy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), Abraham Acosta describes a major theoretical problem defining the field, which has resulted from defining the indigenous world in strict opposition to the ontology of Western modernity. Against the ostensible opposition between literacy and orality in the Peruvian national imaginary, he reads José María Arguedas’s *Los ríos profundos* (1958) as an expression of an “illiteracy” that exceeds a system of opposition that he defines as falling entirely within the Western worldview. His description of this critical difficulty in addressing Peruvian *indigenismo* also applies to the description of Paraguayan “reality:” “What has made this tradition so pivotal and yet so ripe for contention is the degree to which *indigenista* cultural production can be said to be representative of Peruvian ‘reality;’ most critiques seem to imply that the symbolic field constituted by *indigenista* discourse—an economy of dichotomies, the most salient of which are Indio/Criollo, Quechua/Spanish, orality/literacy, modern/traditional, coast/sierra—can very easily be determined to

- be either ‘real’ or simply an ideological conceptualization of Peru’s socio-cultural grounds.” Acosta, *Thresholds*, 78. Acosta finds that these oppositions are in fact false: “We are simply not dealing with an antagonistic duality wherein Western and non-Western forms of consciousness compete for prominence [...] but rather one inscribed entirely within Western reason (Self/Other, identity/difference).” *Ibid.*, 81.
7. Refer to Leopoldo Zea’s *The Latin American Mind* (Norman: U Oklahoma Press, 1949) as well as the dissertation written by the author of this work, *Fantasies of Independence and Their Latin American Legacies* (Diss. University of Michigan. Print. 2014)
  8. Along the lines set out by Acosta, one can see that even positions seeking to affirm indigenous culture against Western culture, by defining the latter through empiricism and reason, ironically affirm a racist Western belief that indigenous peoples and cultures are “irrational.” In such a view, indigenous people would not have access to reason (even though Western people still clearly access myth through religion and other means). Charles Hatfield also critiques this view that describes reason itself as being a Western cultural construct. Charles Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity* (Austin: U Texas Press, 2015).
  9. Roa Bastos reflects on the complexities of Paraguayan bilingualism, or diglossia, at length in his article “Una cultura oral.” Roa Bastos, “Cultura,” 85–112.
  10. Gabriel Casaccia, *El guajbú* (Buenos Aires: Castañeda 1978), 29.
  11. *Ibid.*, 26.
  12. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
  13. *Ibid.*, 78.
  14. *Ibid.*, 78.
  15. *Ibid.*, 86.
  16. *Ibid.*, 78.
  17. In an interview with Armando Almada Roche, Casaccia is elusive about the influence of Quiroga in his work. “*Did Quiroga serve as the inspiration for some of your stories?* No, No. I have read almost all of his books, but he didn’t influence my literature. Perhaps unconsciously. You never know.” Roche, *Casaccia*, 197.
  18. Horacio Quiroga, *Cuentos* (México: Porrúa, 1968), 3.
  19. In “La miel silvestre” the urban, romantic protagonist is paralyzed when he eats some honey he finds while traipsing through the forest. In his immobilized state he is helpless when a wave of carnivorous ants passes by and eats him alive. The final paragraph reads: “It is not common that wild honey should have these narcotic or paralyzing properties, but it has been known to occur. Flowers with such characteristics abound in the tropics, and in the majority of cases, the taste of the honey announces

- its condition; such is the aftertaste of eucalyptus that Benincasa believed he was perceiving.” Quiroga, *Cuentos*, 28. Beatriz Sarlo suggests that Quiroga was fascinated more with technical innovation than science itself, and notes that his work did not represent the purest literary “naturalism.” She admits, however, that even if he did ridicule a striving for total objectivity in other writers, “several of his stories do contain something of this medical outlook, which was the face of science at the end of the nineteenth century.” Beatriz Sarlo, *The Technical Imagination. Argentine Culture’s Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 28.
20. Josefina Plá, “Palabras preliminares” in *La Babosa y sus críticos*, ed. by Francisco Feito and Teresa Méndez-Faith (Asunción: Intercontinental, 2007), 14.
  21. *Ibid.*, 19. The negative reception of Casaccia’s work in Paraguay, which hinges largely on a sense that it was an act of betrayal against the fatherland, has been an important topic of discussion among Casaccia’s scholars. *La babosa y sus críticos* reprints newspaper editorials comprising the polemical exchange between Casaccia and his detractors.
  22. *Ibid.*, 14.
  23. Casaccia, *El guajbú*, 41.
  24. *Ibid.*, 52.
  25. *Ibid.*, 52.
  26. *Ibid.*, 53.
  27. Rubén Bareiro Saguier’s “*La Babosa y el contexto socio-cultural*” published in *La babosa y sus críticos*, considers Casaccia’s work as an expression of Paraguayan historical contingency. See Feito and Méndez-Faith eds., *La babosa*, 115–130. In this essay, he describes the sociocultural conditions of Casaccia’s work in general, placing particular emphasis on the importance of the Chaco War, and the racist nationalism defining Paraguayan politics. In an essay published in the same collection, “Gabriel Casaccia o la difícil alianza entre el compromiso y el arte,” although stopping short of disagreeing with Bareiro Saguier, Francisco Feito finds it curious that the Chaco War would not figure more prominently in Casaccia’s work. He writes: “Far from sympathetically exalting the sentiments of this epic, and investing himself in it, as one might expect, Casaccia takes the opposite path, divesting all possible importance from this bellico-historical contingency, in order to treat it, it would seem, with utmost iconoclasm.” Feito and Méndez-Faith eds., *La babosa*, 24. Still, Feito notes the influence of other historical factors on his work, including his own political exile, which was the obvious impetus behind his later novel *Los exiliados* (1966).

28. The “ghost” (or *pora*) though not part of a scientific lexicon is nevertheless a means by which to refer to certain emotional, historical effects. Human science—especially psychology—makes the observation and analysis of the “ghost” as a natural phenomenon possible.
29. Augusto Roa Bastos, *El fiscal* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1993), 226.
30. *Ibid.*, 227.
31. In his elaboration of this Lacanian concept in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek describes the Real as “the idea of a possible end to ideology,” “the illusion of a possible return to nature.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989): 2; 5. For Žižek, the Real is forever unattainable, an “original ‘trauma’ an impossible kernel that resists symbolization, totalization, and symbolic integration,” but which nevertheless conditions and directs human desire. *Ibid.*, 6. This concept shares common ground with George Bataille’s concept of the sacred, which, even as an affect, can be understood as a dream of de-alienation defined through the human relation with nature. In volume 2 of *The Accursed Share*—in particular the chapter entitled “The Transition for Animal to Man”—Bataille argues that human being is constituted through an imposition of law in the form of proscription or taboo, by which we separate ourselves from nature. Through this process of entering into an “artificial” or “fictive” contract, which he identifies specifically as the prohibition of incest, we constitute ourselves as subjects. Transgression of the taboo therefore provides a view to our experience of the world as it was prior to its mediation by law (which is artificial by definition): the primitive, pre-subjective experience of being part of nature. While Bataille maintains that erotic experiences are in fact attainable, his thinking of the erotic still mirrors Žižek’s Lacanian Real insofar as it is not a true return to a more primitive state of being, because it is necessarily conditioned by a memory of prohibition that qualifies it as an act of transgression. The exaltation of eroticism is not actually part of the animal experience, but, rather, is exclusively human. Another parallel between Žižek’s Real and Bataille’s sacred or erotic lies in their similar theorizations of totalitarianism as a desire for a communion with the “totality of Being” or the “totality of the real,” a return to the real that entails a loss of the self as a “strictly separate entity.” George Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 111; 16.
32. “La calesita de Ferreyra” (“Ferreyra’s Merry-Go-Round”) is the one story in *El guajbú* in which technical modernity makes its appearance as such. This tale describes a scenario in which a mechanical merry-go-round, an innovation that is supposed to bring joy to the world, creates violence between two men for whom it has become a fetish.

33. Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 216.
34. "What links the assassination of women to drug killings is that both are expressive crimes that publicize the ideology and power of rogue groups." Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 225.
35. Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 240; Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, Trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2008), 595. "Once we strip humanity of transcendental destiny, once the utopian has been discredited, once we take away the ethical imperatives of either religious belief or humanism, there is nothing to reign in our infamous desires." Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 235.
36. Along the same lines, cruelty, as a frontier of the imagination, leads Cormack McCarthy to imagine "la bolita" in his screenplay for the Ridley Scott film, *The Counselor*. It is the portable, automated decapitation device that can be quickly and discreetly employed by an assassin in a public place: a wire noose which, once applied and activated, slowly tightens through mechanical action until the victim's head comes off.
37. "Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 254.
38. In the section of *The Accursed Share* called "The Transition from Animal to Man," Bataille discusses the prohibition of incest, invoking Hegel and Levi-Strauss in arguing that "the change evidenced in the advent of man cannot be isolated from *all* that man's becoming" and submits "as a principle the incontestable fact that man is an animal who does not simply accept the natural given, who negates it." Bataille, *Accursed*, 52. He continues, "Man essentially denies his animal needs, and this is the point on which his basic prohibitions are brought to bear." *Ibid.*, 53.
39. John Gibler, *To Die in Mexico* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011), 19.
40. *Ibid.*, 23.



## Rafael Barrett's Haunted Letter

*Marcelino Viera*

The figure of Rafael Barrett stands on the literary scene as the ideal of the passionate intellectual engaged with social causes. His arrival in Paraguay in 1904 would lay the groundwork for his rebellion, one that he had only subtly insinuated in the anecdotes of a dandy that first made him famous.<sup>1</sup> Álvaro Yunque describes the mark that Barrett made: “Barrett’s intense labor generates a sensation of overflow. Something inside him was welling up as if stymied by a dam. His rebellion rushed in a torrent as soon as this dam gave way: it was time to destroy and fecundate!”<sup>2</sup> Barrett’s refined use of literary style and his sharp critique of social and political events fascinated the most discerning Spanish American writers of his period, including José Enrique Rodó and Pío Baroja. Baroja singled him out as a “crazy” writer who openly spoke the truth about a government and a social class that condemned the people to live in misery, enslaved by abject poverty in a life made of daily abjections. Half a century later, Augusto Roa Bastos characterized Barrett as the precursor of Paraguayan literature who became an inspiration for a generation of writers.

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Barrett's oeuvre seeks to dislocate the overwhelming discourse of reason and science. In this endeavor, he develops a path to social change in his use of a logic of reality rooted in the "passion" held within the vitalism of every individual in its surroundings. What is the effect of this method? A *realidad que delira* ["delirious reality"]. Augusto Roa Bastos's perceptive assessment sheds light on this:

It is with a mix of gratitude and proud modesty that I confess that Rafael Barrett's presence haunts my narrative work, as does his central repertoire of topics and problems, his immersion in this "delirious reality" ["*realidad que delira*"] that shapes the context of Paraguayan society and, above all, a fundamental lesson in the use of myth and symbolic forms to represent social forces, and in how myths can be elevated as the most meaningful form of reality.<sup>3</sup>

This *realidad que delira* refers to a space and a time that exists within two margins: on the one hand, the reality of social injustice and, on the other, the reactivation of the reader's affects by the writer's passionate and overflowing feelings. Indeed, it is in this plethoric passion that Barrett's style discloses a hidden past in the everyday life of the reader.

First this chapter frames this "delirious reality" in relation to Barrett's surroundings. Later it aims to define this notion as more than a description of Paraguay, and fleshes it out as the "encounter" that happens between the reader and Barrett's haunted letter. This "encounter" is a mode of the political that is guided not by logical scientific rationality (traditionally linked to dialectics) but, rather, by a sensibility that is open to the affects of closeness and the distance of written (mediated) bodies. The materiality pervading Barrett's work, his singularity expressed in the combination of each letter, reaches out to readers by touching their sensibilities. However, this sensibility configures an imprecise and uncertain relationship. At a time when the liberal project's adherence to positivism overlapped with scientific socialism (or scientific anarchism) and their emancipatory ideals, Barrett's writing displaces the stern and technically oriented figure of the man of science in search of a universal truth to explore a new discursive frontier. In a tense relation with positivism, vitalism becomes, for Barrett, a path for an (im)possible community.<sup>4</sup>

In his attempt to create community, he breaks down the conceptual opposition between the individual and their surroundings, fusing them while maintaining their specificity. Therefore, Barrett returns to the surrounding of writing itself in a constant return to the nature of community living. He summons an infinite past made of finite facts that stretch out toward the uncertain future of humans' defined creative (and transformative) action.

By following Roa Bastos's remark (Barrett's "fundamental lesson" consisted in highlighting the truth expressed in "myths" and to channel it as a meaning-making mechanism), this chapter will explore how Barrett's letter affects readers and transforms itself. Here it is argued that "myth" refers to the infinite state of the multiple relations and encounters that happen in nature.<sup>5</sup> As Barrett's letter is also part of this nature, it even goes beyond denouncing the "horror" of the modern liberal project or bearing witness to it. His writing is, rather, a creative action that falls toward an infinite future with no teleological order, as if in a *clinamen*.<sup>6</sup> In no way does this imply that description and the observation of reality are brushed aside in Barrett's writing; instead, the familiarity, evocative capacity, and melodiousness of his prose render visible and finite those unknown and incalculable aspects that make up the multiplicity and plurality of Paraguay.

His writing carries the reader toward the sensibility of a familiar scene, as palpable and finite as it is unknown and sinister: A visible past made of invisibilities projected toward an uncertain future. To use an expression coined by González Pacheco, Rafael Barrett dwells his own letter as a guardian "apostle" actively seeking to contaminate the members of its congregation with faith in a possible coexistence. González Pacheco attests to the intimate dimension of his experience as a reader:

When reading Barrett, one feels as if he is in his room, sitting and listening to him. It's an unaffected intimacy. Confident in his knowledge of all things, he discusses them effortlessly. But, even knowing as much as he does, he reveals rather than teaches. He is your master, he is an apostle. He owns his thinking as he would a ship prepared for any yard, he leads us not to the ship's hold but to its prow, not to the burden and ballast that weighs him down, but to the sharp edges that thrust it into the dark waves. That was Barrett's talent.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the singular and radiating figure that Barrett cut, he was also haunted by the specter of anarchism wandering across the River Plate region. Barrett's thinking was therefore not anomalous in relation to the period, even if his interpretation of the world was the result of his own efforts—a common claim among anarchists. While the analysis presented in this essay will not discuss the minute details of anarchist philosophy or the density of specific terms (e.g., “morality,” “genius,” and “reason,” among others), its interpretation of Barrett will necessarily situate him with respect to region-wide anarchist thought. The present framing of Barrett's writing connects it to the anarchist idea that creative action undertaken by humans constitutes the only path toward social change. Under this modern spell, Barrett's writing haunts his reader by transforming itself into a place of possible encounter of sensibilities.

### A SPECTRAL REALITY

Barrett's writing is surrounded by the liberal revolution of 1904 that sought to impose the dominion of national law.<sup>8</sup> Following the Triple Alliance War, Argentina frequently intervened in Paraguay's national affairs and turned these into a canvas on which to project its liberal ideals concerning commerce and government. As historian Efraím Cardozo comments, “Argentine capitalists became the country's largest landowners, thanks to the sale of public lands. The Argentine Republic had a monopoly over Paraguay's channels of communication with the world, and it remained the main market for these.”<sup>9</sup>

Those Paraguayan political leaders who had won the support of the war's victors are the ones who turned this moribund nation into a banquet for birds of prey. As general disarray and administrative chaos stymied the development of optimal conditions for production, a group of young liberals felt prompted to join forces in opposition to the country's long-standing and corrupt leaders. Opposing the Partido Colorado, which had been in power since the retreat of Argentine and Brazilian troops from Paraguay in 1876, the liberal group's agreement document specified the causes that led its members to commit to revolution:

[the country's] disorderly administration which favors pecuniary gains and squanders public assets, which improvises the private wealth of its statesmen and their coterie, whose financial plans are openly hostile to the country's conservative forces. [...] Its barely functioning schools, where a

vegetating population of children languish in the most condemnable abandonment when, with a proper education, they could become the most humble expansive force of nationality.<sup>10</sup>

As this revolution aimed to end the administrative chaos that harmed the “conservative forces,” it defended the premises of conservatism and consequently spurred a conflict of interests amid the governing class.<sup>11</sup>

Francisco Gaona nevertheless recalls that the 1904 revolution initially enjoyed a measure of popular support (which quickly faded after the liberals’ victory). During the Partido Colorado’s decades-long government following the War of the Triple Alliance, a law was passed granting the government the power to sell state lands which were then purchased in large part by Argentine *latifundistas*.<sup>12</sup> In a move that saw the Marxian myth of the so-called primitive accumulation belatedly come to life in Guaraní lands, the peasants who inhabited them were dispossessed of their means of subsistence.<sup>13</sup> This led these people to launch the struggle against expropriation, in which they consequently saw liberals as their allies.

Gaona signals the battle of Agaguigó in his discussion of the peasant’s struggle:

The episode of resistance that stands out for its stubbornness and its violent characteristics is the one that involved the agricultural workers of the site called “campo de Agaguigó” which was sold February 19, 1902 to Mr. Cristian G. Haisecke by auctioneer Américo Zuanny for the sum of two-hundred thousand *pesos fuertes*, and measured 32 leagues, in the district of Villa Concepción, being occupied by 600 families of agricultural workers.<sup>14</sup>

The peasants’ violent struggle over these lands illustrates the attitude that workers should adopt in reclaiming their rights. It is in this episode that Gaona situates the start of unions’ struggle in Paraguay, as it would mark the beginnings of a peasant consciousness and, by dint of identification, a worker’s consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

The liberal revolution of 1904 assured a period of close relations between Paraguay and Argentina as, even if the liberal party governed with its ups and downs (going through fifteen presidents between 1904 and 1922), it maintained the goal of prioritizing trades and reviving and stimulating commercial activities. The challenges stemming from this agenda consisted in developing a social policy capable of addressing both

the people's demands and the bourgeoisie's aspirations. But what the liberal administrations sought to achieve above all was to impose "order" in its exercise of a *nomos* of the earth.

The initial outlines of the project for a liberal state in Paraguay were drawn at the start of the twentieth century and followed in the footsteps of the neighboring nations. Similar to how the latter project for modernization brought in the anarchist "plague" in its influx of migrants in the River Plate region, the 1904 Revolution enabled the birth of the first Regional Workers Federation (*Federación Obrera Regional*) in 1906.

At the revolution's outset, economic and governmental measures coincided with the principles of free trade, which then constituted an emerging ideology.<sup>16</sup> Yet, unlike in the nations of the River Plate region, where the liberal tradition had strong footing, the legal sphere in Paraguay had been controlled by the dictatorships of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, then Carlos Antonio López, and his son Francisco Solano López. Consequently, the overthrow of this lineage left an institutional vacuum in its wake. The repercussions of such a vacuum on society are easily observable: They could be identified as "chaos" or, to use the expression with which historian Cardozo refers to this period, as "anarchy" in the common definition that equates it with disarray and lack of leadership.<sup>17</sup> Despite the launch in Paraguay of a period of increased economic activity, the oligarchy was unprepared for the new liberal ideas.

As the Spanish popular saying goes "troubled waters are fisherman's gain." This is precisely what Paraguayan workers experienced in the early twentieth century. Gaona states that the presence of Italian intellectual Pietro Gori in Asunción in 1901, the support of Argentine workers, and the dearth of local workers led to the foundation of the Regional Workers' Federation of Paraguay (F.O.R.P) in 1906.<sup>18</sup> This confluence of factors made clear the need to internationally unionize as part of the ongoing social changes taking place in Paraguay.<sup>19</sup>

It can still be stated that the "soaring of the Argentine anarchist movement across the coastal region at the outset of the twentieth century also reached Paraguay. Active exchanges of correspondence and emissaries' frequent visits to the Republic capital [Asunción] definitely contributed to the coalescing of resistance in the formation of unions and in strikes."<sup>20</sup>

Rafael Barrett is one of those envoys from the South who arrived in Paraguay in 1904, not as an anarchist but as a Spanish journalist—a

correspondent assigned to cover the liberal revolution for Buenos Aires's *El Tiempo*. Instead of returning to the *del Plata* city once the Revolution has concluded, Barrett stayed in the "village" (as Rodó dubbed Asunción), guided solely by his unbridled passion for adventure. At least, this is what José Rodríguez Alcalá attests to as he remembers his friend.<sup>21</sup>

Even if Barrett was not directly involved in union activities, he played a foundational role in the Paraguayan workers' movement, writing exalted propaganda columns in his newspaper *Germinal* (which had a total run of eleven issues, edited by Barrett and José Guillermo Bertotto), and giving three conferences sponsored by the F.O.R.P. Barrett's considerable significance in that area of Paraguayan anarchism was such that the Center for Social Studies [Centro de Estudios Sociales] was named after him in 1912.<sup>22</sup> Francisco Gaona also claims him as "the first doctrinaire of Paraguay's workers' movements."<sup>23</sup>

In the "Prologue" to *El dolor Paraguayo*, Roa Bastos phrases a question that can be situated on the outer-margins of two universes: the individual's singular universe and the multiplicity of one's surroundings. Roa Bastos asks: "How does one answer those who demand the impossible from us, those who are no longer surprised by anything?"<sup>24</sup> Barrett's response would point to the sweet falling apart, a tearing away through which the worker assumes his voluntary orphanhood. In Roa Bastos's view, the love that Barrett experienced led him to try to tear himself away from the looming legacy of the "fatality of specters."<sup>25</sup> This question nevertheless also points to other directions. What is "impossible" and outside of the human sphere should be located in the depth of relations and in the encounters between parts and whole, rather than in an imagined future that is both calculable and inexhaustible, aside from its condition of "impossible." Barrett's thought demands that we readers consider nature's own contradiction as residing in its ability to sustain life itself, all the while revealing the tensions and forces, the distance and nearness that characterize the limits of an affect (a love) that is both violent and at peace.

The workers' demand, that "impossible" one, stems from an order beyond that of men's layers of unaffected knowledge. However, those same layers show the path for a "possible" demand—that is by definition "impossible"—that takes the shape of a return to a natural expression of living in community. By unveiling the layers concealing the truth in nature, each individual creates attempts to reach out to others despite

the impossible condition of multiplicity. The return to nature is impossible, but it is worth attempting.

### SWERVING TOWARD EACH OTHER: A COMMUNITY OF CREATORS

The platonic perception of the world as comprised of “matter and idea” is in Barrett’s writing an amalgamated unity that is both established upon “truth” and hidden and veiled in multiple deceptive layers. For Barrett, in order to exist, man unceasingly should uncover and lift these veils concealing the truth inside him. That would require violence and destruction, as he directly suggests to readers that they/we:

wound morality. Morality is real. Make men ashamed that they obey. Eliminate priests, captains, [factory and land] owners, the professorial wiseacre. Kill the principle of authority wherever you may find it. Let man examine everything on his own. Let him be responsible for himself. Then, if he falls, it will be because of his own mistake, not because of another’s mistake. Let’s fight against the chief, and against all chiefs. Within us, we have everything we could possibly need.<sup>26</sup>

It is worth noting that, for Barrett, “morality” (the “real” one) is a mechanism that acts upon human relations much like a chemical catalyst.<sup>27</sup> This process is exemplified in his essay “De estética” (“Of aesthetics”), particularly in the vision of “man” that he reveals in his discussion of the artist’s logic. There, Barrett explains that every individual is an artist who creates and recreates the reality that surrounds him. The artist’s action unveils the multiple layers hiding the truth that is to be found in nature. “Being” is then an exuberance for this creative life regulated by nature, which also thrusts it onward. “Unveiling” the layers of concealment is in itself a creative action that lays the groundwork for the true reason for human existence.

Barrett asks: “What is art?” In the ensuing discussion of theories and hypotheses, Barrett ends up rejecting them, opting for what could be called, following Freud, the “reality principle,” and adopting a hypothesis based on how the individual and its ego swerve toward the communal in a *clinamen*. Barrett says that:



Much like martyrs in their bodily torments, [artists and their work] allow us to feel this *internal consolation* of which the mystics speak.

We are comforted by the intimate proof that dignity and vivification are all ours, that the artist reveals our inner-world to us, that, without creating anything, he allows us to discover ourselves. Artists and their work are the mirror and the echo, the reagent which causes the characters drawn in an invisible ink to appear. They re-engender us without robbing us of our personality, and that's why we turn to it, grateful for it and full of noble pride. [They reveal] the grandiose construction of genius already existed within us; that the symphony of its emotions was already singing deep from within our sensibility.<sup>28</sup>

The artist and his work establish the necessary conditions that allow the individual to “assert and glorify his own individuality, harmonizing and ennobling it through the power of art.”<sup>29</sup> “Creativity” is the sap that makes the artist's heart pulsate and, in doing so, nourishes the social core; this is why “[the artist's] wondrous action contains nothing else but love, love for the brother who diffuses and modifies the manifestation of races across the earth.”<sup>30</sup> Like an incarnated deity, (the artist's) “genius” finds itself alone in the world, no longer sheltered by the idols of yore. This is a stormy solitude that pushes him toward “creation” guided by the longing to find one's fellow in their projecting and expanding being, similar to the way tree branches reach out to find the sun's blessing. This individual is not at war with its neighbor, since their fellow reasserts collaboration and solidarity in this individual's life instead of seeking to kill them.

According to this creative principle, the universe is constantly in movement, eternally in change, in tension, and dynamic; this is why “our spiritual state is best characterized by the speed of change.”<sup>31</sup> As catalysts reacting with chemical substances, artists affect the speeds of the *climamen*. This is why “genius” is always at the service of the revolution, of change, as it possesses the virtue of manifesting itself “in the springtime of nations, in the puberty of the centuries, and because it is the supreme *macho* of civilized humanity.”<sup>32</sup> As artists engender and create life, they also create truth. When Barrett speaks of “genius,” he is referring to the human ability to create a “truth” meaningful for his own being, but not a universal “truth” to which the artist would have exclusive access. This genius' truth indeed is not fixed, static, crystallized, or agreed upon among men. “Genius” is the attribute that lives within each of us, much

like a lighthouse which provides light in the darkest nights and guidance in the stormy sea that is life. For Barrett, the artist's ability to function as a prophet situates artists at the center of revolution, as they are able to catalyze their surrounding into the creation of truths, in other words, to unveil the multiplicities of nature. This knowledge is, nevertheless, not precise or based on certainties. Rather, as the artist-prophet is a part of that same nature, he is subjected to the creative conditioning forces that constitute him: his multiplicity. The artist's own work is thus incorporated into the constant cycles of life and concealment, language's expropriation, and falsehood.

For Barrett, nature is not a lost origin to which one must nostalgically return. Instead, it is active and ever-present in any place of community. Man's return is toward knowing and appropriating himself, that is to say, to attempt to know the very nature of his being.

### A (IM)POSSIBLE COMMUNITY

The twentieth century was launched with one of the most emblematic literary works of the Latin American literary canon, José Enrique Rodó's essay *Ariel* (1900), known for its praise of idealism.<sup>33</sup> Roberto Giusti described this period as follows:

From a perspective that is less immediately political, we can point out the success and increasing popularity of spiritualist philosophies and of what has been characterized as an "idealist reaction against the sciences," in addition to the appeal among the diverse literary *bohèmes*—including those in the River Plate region—of Nietzsche's rejection of bourgeois society's moral philistinism and the call to edify a superior civilization based on a gentlemen's ethics.<sup>34</sup>

While Barrett did not participate directly in these literary *bohèmes*, his stoic figure impregnated the milieu of Montevideo. Barrett interrupts the positivist logic of cause and effect to emphasize the mythical origins of reality; however, he keeps the tension between spiritualism and positivism. By refuting the modern premise stating that one must "think" and therefore "exist," Barrett reasserts the very diversity of existence in which "what brings men together is not necessarily the community of ideas. The latter is unachievable—and supposing that it were not, it would be impossible anyway. Diversity engenders life and harmony. [Therefore,] if

the mixture of notes pleases our ear upon reaching it, this is due to their difference.”<sup>35</sup>

Barrett points out how the “spirit” of ideas that are dissociated from the reality of men can become a mask that generates confusion in the benefit of a minority.<sup>36</sup> In his “Epifonemas,” Barrett maintains that “[men] come together not because they share the same ideas, but because they are equally sincere. The universe is wide enough to harbor diverging opinions. Lies are what separates and divides. When the individual betrays himself, other individuals are betrayed in turn and the world is poisoned.”<sup>37</sup> On the edges of languages, more than forty years later, Simone Weil posits a similar appreciation: “Social force is bound to be accompanied by lies—but, as she adds, those same lies bring their own transformative power. That is why all that is highest in human life, every effort of thought, every effort of love, has a corrosive action on the established order.”<sup>38</sup>

As an antidote in the struggle against the “concealment” woven by the “ideas” of a secularized spiritualism, Barrett emphasizes the actions taken on the basis of individuals’ findings—truths. Still, due to the effects of his rhetoric, Barrett’s signaling of “falsehood” is expressed in an abstract language, thus embodying the same principles that he denounces. It nevertheless remains that, for Barrett, a deeper logic guides the articulation of truths given in nature: love’s creative forces.

In the following dialogue between Don Justo and Don Tomás, Barrett illustrates the presence of an order that is not sustained in the grammar of language:

Don Justo—I am a man of order. I will always support the government, as long as it has no additional aspirations than maintaining order. Without order, civilization can’t exist.

Don Tomás—How do you define order?

Don Justo—To me, it’s something very different from the dynamite bombs and outlandish actions of those who seek to redeem society.

Don Tomás—I fail to see any disorder [chaos] in what you’ve just described.

Don Justo—In that case, how do we define disorder?

Don Tomás—I don’t know. I don’t think disorder exists. For us, the word has no meaning. Someone lights a fuse and the bomb goes off. Can we

find disarray in this? We would be faced with true disarray if the fuse failed to burn or the dynamite, to explode. A dynamite insensitive to human fulminations wouldn't truly be dynamite. These phenomena are doubtless unpleasant but none of them justifies the argument that the path of the metallic shell that destroys one's womb didn't follow the laws of mechanics. We are surrounded entirely by order.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to constituting an apology of violence that could potentially cause a moral scandal, Barrett's definition empties out a notion of "order" based on the arbitrariness of language. Despite the difficulty of sustaining an "order" outside of language, Barrett points to what could be identified as an event linked to an object, which transcends human rationality ("A dynamite *insensitive* to human fulminations wouldn't truly be dynamite").

Barrett's notion of "order" is not sustained exclusively by language capable of generating a knowledge of the "event," but also in the two aspects through which things impose their call and demand attention: their materiality and their property.<sup>40</sup> As Barrett reasons, "We would be faced with true disorder if the fuse failed to burn or the dynamite, to explode." This is why when the fuse burns it is true to its essence; what is true for the fuse is also true for the dynamite: They are true to their proper essence when they burn and explode, respectively. This notion of order stems from the realization of the essence where one thing is set off by another already-existing essence, within the broader frame of what Barrett calls a tautological logic (from this, it is easy to infer the intervention of language a posteriori), tantamount to the principle of concealment. Barrett proposes a necessary voyage through language, one that leads us to witness infinitude. Through the voice of his character, Barrett describes the tension between finitude and infinitude at the border of the exhaustion of language:

Don Tomás—[...] We are too imbecilic to understand at once that the current period's certainty and divinity can amount to nothing else than a tautology: "A is A" as Fichte had stated, or "I am who I am," in the words of the ancient gods who avoided treading on murkier waters. This tautology leads back to the starting point. "A is A" or "zero equals zero" is where we will wind up once, through force of study, we have eliminated contingency from the world, or transformed facts in formulas and condensed all formulas in a single one.<sup>41</sup>

Barrett invites readers to think through the exhaustion of representation, of abstraction, and of the spirit that, by only revealing itself through

ideas, denies the contingency taking place in the plurality of nature. Reading Barrett alongside the theses of Mikhail Bakunin shows that the function of representation is not denied; rather, it is enhanced in the type of creative action which is made possible in (and by) nature's power and force.<sup>42</sup> Nature, as Bakunin will say, "is merely the result produced by the simultaneous actions of particular causes, the totality of which constitutes universal causality [...] each point acts upon the Whole (here the Universe is the resultant product); and the Whole acts upon every point (here Universe is the Creator)."<sup>43</sup>

A "cooperation" harmonizes the parts within the whole and the whole in each of the parts, inasmuch as, for Bakunin—as for Barrett—freedom is what resolves the tension between singularity and whole. There is nothing naïve about this notion of freedom. Bakunin understands freedom as an impossible that is situated in the anarchist future and as a force that acts (from nature's multiplicity) in the common space by orienting and outlining possible human relationships. This is to say that, as it is an impossible articulation, freedom (located in the future) manifests itself as a point from which to project oneself toward a present in which actions and language mutually reveal each other's shape. If this struggle against a representation, that is dislocated from nature, is an arduous one, it also has its rewards. When Barrett's character Don Tomás is asked whether codes are necessary, he answers:

Ha! The code is so foreign to the motivations behind crimes committed as the dam is to the rise and fall of the tide. Let's enjoy the current order without imagining that it is eternal, or stable or even worthy of lasting. Let us eat the fruit before it spoils and unflinchingly await the human tide, the savage tide which will deposit on beaches the booty of the future.<sup>44</sup>

While it may seem that Don Tomás contradicts himself by negating the relation of equivalency that he had previously established (between the "essence" of the tides and the "essence" of the dams; and between codes and criminals), he emphasizes the unknown forces of that which movement can generate. A slight possibility, a light in the night, an actuality which we can only know as ephemeral through the rise and fall of what the thing reveals and hides: its truth. This is why the future can bring booty.

Passionate struggles also bring about violence and destruction because, even keeping in mind that destruction is an anachronistic construction, these struggles are a means of emancipation. The logic of

construction/destruction determines that, after the fall of bourgeois institutions, the reconstruction of a new social world (or the construction initiated in destruction) will be endowed with a form of order residing within its very nature.

Bakunin's consideration of the bodily passions, of the love that exists in universal solidarity (as a logic that guides the way that human beings encounter nature anew), is crucial to understand how a possibility for community may be possible. The law stems from nature as it dictates the order that is to come, an order to which humans are sensible, as they are also a part of this very same nature. How does this law reveal itself? Through displacements and unveilings of the truth hidden in the multiple relations that happen in nature.

### BARRETT'S LETTER: A DUALY ACTING FORCE IN THE PATH TO HUMAN TRANSFORMATION

In his essay titled "La cuestión social," Barrett denounces the liberal government of the time for spreading terror. Yet he does not criticize the people for not raising their voice and tells them instead like a sacrificial Christ: "But here I am, without terror. I will speak."<sup>45</sup> This sacrifice is more than a simple erasure of the individual in the benefit of the social whole. The reference to Christianity is not new for Barrett. It is, instead, a frequently used device that likens Barrett to one of his most meaningful references: Leo Tolstoy. As Barrett adds in another essay included in *Al margen*, this "I will speak" is not the lettered voice for the terrorized subaltern. Instead, foreshadowing Simone Weil's critique of Marxism, Barrett sets forth an intellectual and manual labor fusion focusing on the surrounding human creative forces.<sup>46</sup>

In "Gorky y Tolstoy," the Spaniard reflects on the significance of Gorky and Tolstoy for the upcoming Russian Revolution (this is not the Bolshevik Revolution, which his premature death would prevent him from witnessing). Barrett remarks that the two writers complement one another, as, at least in their writing, one is linked to action and the other to theory. Barrett considers Gorky's novel *Mother* as an invitation to action in the face of injustice. The uncompromising attitude of the novel's protagonist, "the mother," constitutes an example of struggle in which propaganda and a mother's love unite in the fight against a ruthless and oppressive government. In Tolstoy, however, "the aristocrat's hand [...] is disdainful, it points out, it raises itself toward the sky, but

it does not execute. Tolstoy is the philosopher and prophet.”<sup>47</sup> Barrett refers abundantly to the Russian nobleman to account for how falsehood finds its justification in mysticism and ignorance. The actual meaning of an “error” (falsehood) ends up residing in the Church, Science, the State, and Civilization.

These two amalgamated references operate nonetheless as a dually oriented critique: On the one hand, Barrett signals out the falsehood (as an intentional concealment) that lies at the root of oppression, while on the other hand, he points to a “model” that could provide the basis for a morality capable of containing new notions of “individual” and “society.” This is why Jesus becomes a human model, appearing as a god on earth, one which must be followed and not idolized (as churches do). The figure of Jesus unites this experience of the ideal with the material-earthly sphere. Barrett states that:

The world’s problem is of a moral nature. This is why, despite our increasing mastery of matter and despite the monstrous dimension of our civilization, Jesus’s figure remains high above, always out of reach. As Jesus was a strictly moral energy. No one has penetrated in the reaches where he has. After Jesus, nothing new has happened to humanity. The contrast between the sterility of our consciousness and the sumptuousness of our external riches has engendered our pessimist philosophy and our human literature.<sup>48</sup>

As an idea, Jesus is a utopia that is both out of reach and that guides human actions, not by prompting imitation, but by stimulating to learn from his attitudes inherent to the nature of each individual too.

Barrett’s writing stands for this dual intervention on the sensibility (morality) of the reader. Since the very sensibility condensed in Barrett’s work is part of an ongoing creation and movement (by a dually oriented critique of the social conditions), the transformation of morality would guarantee a place for social revolution. Sensibility here is therefore both the permeable medium for social change and the launching point for that same transformation. This is why, in encouraging workers, Barrett resorts to other creative models:

Spartacus uses violence in his attempts to bring about “the kingdom of god” in this world—seeking out a better distribution of wealth—; Jesus uses the sweetness of spirits in his attempts to bring this about: “my

kingdom is not of this world;” that is to say that it isn’t that of today’s world but it is that of the world to come. What is spirituality, what is the sky if not the image of the future, the vision of our children’s happiness? Property backs away in the face of Spartacus and Jesus, and of every blow it receives and every prayer.<sup>49</sup>

Revolution is not only about changing the social conditions of “this world,” but also spacing “this world” by interjecting in it “the world to come.” Just as Gorky and Tolstoy, Spartacus and Jesus share a sensible body that, acting in two different directions, operates as a creative “genius.” The artist, worker, genius, or individual has this power and force inside of them; therefore, they become the means and ends for social-individual change.

Rafael Barrett’s theoretical–practical thinking comes to the fore in his essay “La cuestión social.” The essay is a response to Rodolfo Ritter who, like Barrett, was an immigrant—though he had come from Germany—and wrote in the local newspaper of Asunción *El Economista Paraguayo*. Ritter stated that the “social question is insoluble” and argued that history had demonstrated this hypothesis.<sup>50</sup> Barrett passionately accuses Ritter of lacking “faith” in social changes and of turning a blind eye to the small progress made by humanity in the name of emancipation. The end result of Ritter’s short-sightedness—caused by a cold spirit (intellectual positivism)—would be that of a “dark” future which offers no hope for workers. With his characteristic irony, Barrett pokes fun at Ritter, claiming that for him, “our epoch is isolated from the ones that preceded it; our conflicts, torments and hopes have no past. Accordingly, Babeuf and Owen must have spontaneously generated themselves, and Marx and Kropotkin, fallen from the moon...”<sup>51</sup> Paradoxically, Barrett emphasizes Ritter’s lack of “faith” in history, claiming that if Ritter had observed and analyzed history with “common sense,” inductively (scientifically, even!), he would have concluded that the future would be one made of freedoms. In the Spaniard’s reasoning, faith is the motor of observation, and observation is what confirms the existence of this faith. The ability to walk between faith and reason is the revolutionary ideal that is sustained in “common sense,” that sense that emerged from the closest surrounding of the personal experience.<sup>52</sup> This is why Barrett agrees with some of Ritter’s criticisms of Karl Marx, as the latter does not take into consideration this passional aspect in the life of men.



While Barrett acknowledges Marx's emancipatory spirit, he refutes the idea that reason in science is what will reveal the ideological farce that oppresses workers: "reasoning doesn't generate energy. Reason is anything but a motor"—a statement which he follows with a rhetorical question: "how can the proletariat possibly invigorate the idea of economic determinism?"<sup>53</sup> While Barrett does not posit the necessity of creating a church, it is there that he finds a revolutionary force, which is why "the character of movement is religious, and the greatest social transformations happen because of magnificent epidemics of faith and hope."<sup>54</sup> The encounter between social participants is mediated by the multiplicity of manifestations of nature, without regard to origin or hierarchies. The double articulation of faith (passion) and reason would culminate in the possibility, in the *clinamen*, toward the community's interior.

#### AN ANARCHY: BARRETT'S SPECTER HAUNTING HIS READER

Barrett's "Mi anarquismo" is frequently read as a kind of epithet explaining his ideology. This essay nonetheless exposes a complex web of discursive relations. As Francisco Corral remarks:

[w]hen it comes to situating Rafael Barrett along the spectrum of anarchist thought, a basic difficulty stems from the anti-dogmatic essence of anarchism. How to define the edges and outline of something that is by definition opposed to all norm, law or authority? Anarchist thought scuttles off on the open horizon of freedom and variety, resisting any attempt to capture it in a synthesis that defines its limits.<sup>55</sup>

At stake in the essay is the struggle for an "order" that differs from that put forward by the regional liberal project. However, this does not mean that Barrett combats "order" by opposing another notion of "order;" rather, he uses that same religious discourse (connected to the spiritualist tradition), as much as the rationality of positivism and the pressures of secularized "technique," to subvert the established order. Both of these traditions (spiritualism and positivism, myth and technique) emerge in Barrett, pushing and elevating one another as one force without diminishing the author's unflinching criticism of the nascent twentieth century.

Taking this force as a starting point, Barrett begins his "Mi anarquismo" by arguing that he considers the etymology of the word

“anarchism” as a sufficient justification for social change. His approach to anarchism is therefore that of a logical and rational relation which appeals to the word’s history to reconnect it to its older meaning. Barrett hastens to add: “It is necessary to destroy the spirit of authority and the prestige held by laws. That is all.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, in the same moment that Barrett appeals to reason through the word’s history, he performs the opposite gesture by calling in the destruction of a “passionate” spirit.

Barrett then looks to his surroundings and points out “those ignorant people who equate anarchy with disorder and think that a society without government is bound to be chaotic. They are unable to conceive of another order than that which is imposed from the outside through the terror of arms.”<sup>57</sup> What does this Barrett’s different conception of order look like? Taking into account the indecipherable multiplicity found in nature, order emerges for Barrett from the individual experience, rooted in the creative force of love that all men feel. This notion of “love” is neither narcissist nor “sacrificial” since death is considered to be an effect of life.<sup>58</sup> More precisely, “[t]here is no such thing as death. All that is left is life. But if life is a harmonious transformation that maintains the internal unity among innumerable and ephemeral bodily elements—the river’s bed that lies below the fleeing waters—, then death is a disorderly transformation, it’s a Waterloo in which the infinitesimal soldiers of the army-organism are scattered and regrouped.”<sup>59</sup> The destructive forces of Barrett’s anarchy are tied to a notion of nature that considers the singular part as existing in action and reaction to the social whole. His relativization of death broadens the notion of love, as the latter does not involve a sacrificial “Ego” that would stand in antagonism with the social. The “individual” is inherently social just as the social cannot help but be “individual.”

Under the present time of an action and reaction, Barrett invites readers to destroy the shackles of an oppressive social minority in which he advocates for an uncertain future. Rhetorically, he asks: “What do future forms matter?”<sup>60</sup> Barrett situates therefore an order-form in the present time of action whose contours can be grasped in a faraway figuration. Barrett adds:

[o]ur ideal should be the highest. Let us not be *practical*. Let us not try to *better* laws, replacing one walking shoe with another. The more out-of-reach the ideal, the better. Stars guide the sailor. Let’s soon set our sights on the farthest term. That way we will trace the shortest path and

will triumph sooner. What is to be done? Educate ourselves and educate. Everything comes down to unfettered examination.<sup>61</sup>

Between not being practical and not being deceived by abstract concealments, Barrett's "unfettered examination" is at the horizon that, in order to be possible, the affably violent spirit must initiate revolution. Social transformation, for Barrett, is carried out by "terms" (the metaphor and representation) guiding concrete action on the "shortest path" toward the expression of a nature without hierarchies.

Barrett's "what is to be done?" calls for a campaign against the enemy of the people mediated by the "unfettered examination." Thus, Barrett's anarchy is not to be taken as a concise, precise narrative whose path is outlined along the tracks of what one "should be." Jorge R. Forteza says about Barrett's writing that, "in each article, [he] puts a part of himself, and one immediately notices in his lines the mood that inspired them. A fine ironist, pointed satirist, inveterate dreamer whose words are suffused with his immense longing for justice, his constant preaching *for* love toward others."<sup>62</sup> Barrett does not tell directly to his reader what is to be done; rather, he exposes what he has done: He has thrown himself into letters. He has become a *realidad que delira*.

Roa Bastos observes that

Barrett's use of a language and writing that are powerfully inflected with a personal radiance (long before other writers did) negated the excesses of populist realism and the oversimplifications of what would subsequently come to be known as—in an equally misguided label—*socialist realism*. Barrett showed how one could produce autonomous texts harboring their own values; texts that would eschew the simple transcription of visible reality, choosing instead to show and reveal invisible reality in the virtue of its multiple meanings.<sup>63</sup>

However, what Barrett transcribes is not solely a "*realidad que delira*" (because "what is truthful is precisely what is unrealistic and what is real is all that is phantasmagorical"), he also becomes a transcendental reality in his writing. By registering both the visible and the historical in its phantasmagorical form, Barrett's work returns to the familiar but unbearable power and force of nature.<sup>64</sup> His life, his work, his struggle for social justice, or his anarchism are part of that same nature of a "*realidad que delira*;" Barrett thus is an active passion that overflows with

reality and he is the reason that overflows with delirium. He dwells in his writing. Barrett's readers come face to face with a reflection of humanity in nature, a distorted humanity whose past still resonates. It is Barrett's specter hounding the reader, one that "should have remained hidden and has come into the open."<sup>65</sup>

## NOTES

1. Barrett became a public figure when his scandalous behavior attracted the attention of Madrid's high society at the turn of the century. For more information, see Francisco Corral, *El pensamiento cautivo de Rafael Barrett. Crisis de fin de siglo, juventud del 98 y anarquismo* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1994).
2. Álvaro Yunque. *Barrett. Su vida y su Obra* (Buenos Aires: Claridad, n.d.), 31. All translations are ours.
3. Augusto Roa Bastos. "Prólogo: Rafael Barrett. Descubridor de la realidad social del Paraguay." In R. Barrett, *El dolor paraguayo* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, n.d.), xxx.
4. "Vitalism" is related to "spiritualism" that here alludes to the philosophical tendency that, in Latin America, is opposed to "positivism" and refers to the secularization of the "spirit," which it situates at the basis of the formation of a Latin American identity. For more information on "positivism" and "spiritualism," see Arturo Ardao *Espiritualismo y Positivismo en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Departamento de Publicaciones de la Universidad de la República, 1968), and Leopoldo Zea's edited volume *Pensamiento positivista latinoamericano* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980).
5. "Mythical" here is not synonymous for an "origin" that would be more or less true, but, instead, as a notion linked to "nature." Nature will be discussed later in this essay in relation to the thinking of Mikhail Bakunin.
6. Louis Althusser explains in *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings, 1978–87* (London/New York: Verso, 2006) that "[the] clinamen is an infinitesimal *swerve*, 'as small as possible'; 'no one knows where, or when, or how' it occurs, or what causes an atom to 'swerve' from its vertical fall in the void, and, breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, induce *an encounter* with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world—that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter" (169).
7. González Pacheco, in A. Yunque, *Barrett*, 12.
8. The revolution's agreement expresses the hope of "representing all the nuclei of independent thought that eagerly awaits the rebirth of the

- nation [*patria*] through the procedures outlined in [*ajustados a*] the Constitution and laws, along with the full dedication to the vital interests of nationhood." In Miguel Ángel Pangrazio Ciancio, *Guerras Civiles, Revoluciones y Asonadas en el Paraguay* (Asunción: International Editora, 2008), 60.
9. Efraím Cardozo, *Breve historia del Paraguay* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1965), 117.
  10. In Pangrazio Ciancio, *Guerras Civiles*, 60.
  11. The Paraguayan Navy supported the rebellion since the order that the revolutionaries promised had been greeted positively by Argentine authorities.
  12. Francisco Gaona, *Introducción a la Historia Gremial y Social del Paraguay* 3 Volumes (Asunción: Germinal—Arandurã, 2007), T 1, 140. It is useful to recall that since the period of Francia's government, the Paraguayan state possessed the majority of lands in the country.
  13. The violent expropriation of land would make possible the incipient primitive accumulation of capital. Further on, this essay discusses how, for Barrett, "falsehood/concealment" is at the basis of the expropriation of life itself at the service of the accumulation of capital (just as it was for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon). In *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* (Massachusetts: Benj. R. Tucker, 1876) Proudhon posits that property is "theft," a means of concealing/hiding truth, in other words, as intentional deception. Concretely, he writes: "The Latin words for robber are *fur* and *latro*; the former taken from the Greek *φορ φόρ* [*phór*], from *φέρω* [*pheró*], Latin *fero*, I carry away; the latter from *λαθρῶ* [*latharó*], I play the part of a brigand, which is derived from *ληθῶ* [*léthó*], Latin *lateo*, I conceal myself. The Greeks have also *κλεπτης* [*kleptés*], from *κλεπτο* [*kleptó*], I filch, whose radical consonants are the same as those of *καλυπτο* [*kaluptó*], I cover, I conceal. Thus, in these languages, the idea of a robber is that of a man who conceals, carries away, or diverts, in any manner whatever, a thing which does not belong to him" (262).
  14. Gaona, *Introducción*, T 1, 143.
  15. *Ibid.*, 144.
  16. *Ibid.*, 205.
  17. Cardozo, *Breve historia*, 119.
  18. Gaona clarifies that Gori did not found the first Paraguayan union (local workers did it), but the Italian did get in touch with local workers. For more information see Gaona's *Introducción*, T 1, 292.
  19. Gaona suggests that "[the F.O.R.P.] adopted an anarcho-syndicalist ideology in the initial stage of its trajectory, following in the footsteps of unions across the world" (Gaona, *Introducción*, T 1, 189). While the

Paraguayan historian does not precisely situate the Federation's ideology, he does add that this "ideology was in part a projection of the River Plate region's anarchist movement" (Ibid.). The latter characterization justifies qualifying this ideology as a form of "anarcho-communism," rather than as "anarcho-syndicalist," as it was in keeping with the (internationalist) federation of workers' struggle pronounced in the F.O.R.A of the Fifth Conference. Proof of this link with "anarcho-communism" can be found in one of the F.O.R.P.'s propaganda journals, *El Despertar*, which published, as Robert Alexander affirms in *A History of Organized Labor in Uruguay and Paraguay* (USA: Praeger, 2005, 98) "articles by Peter Kropotkin, Anselmo Lorenzo, and other International anarchist leaders." Like Gaona, Alexander also insists on characterizing the federation as "anarcho-syndicalist." Perhaps Gaona emphasizes this characterization in a way that leads Alexander to agree with it when he observes that the declaration stemming from the F.O.R.P.'s First Conference emphasizes the struggle for the improvement of workers' material conditions. The Paraguayan document stresses "economic transformation," differing in that respect from Argentine anarchists' holistic vision of the human being that led them to define the struggle more broadly than through the focus on material conditions and to promote alternatives to bourgeois culture and morality.

20. Gaona, *Introducción*, 190.
21. Gaona quotes Rodríguez Alcalá: "the two friends [Barrett and Joaquín Boceta] rode up the river. The landscape had bewitched them." *Introducción* T 1, 228.
22. Gaona, *Introducción*, T 1, 281.
23. Ibid., 246. Barrett's life-long dedication to gaining supporters to the cause of social justice is also emphasized in Rama and Cappelletti's *El Anarquismo en América Latina*. Carlos Rama and Ángel Cappelletti, *El Anarquismo en América Latina* (Venezuela: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1990).
24. Roa Bastos, "Prólogo," XI.
25. Ibid., XI.
26. Rafael Barrett, *Obras Completas*. 3 Volumes (Buenos Aires: Américalee, 1954), T 2, 164.
27. Pierre Kropotkin has a similar perspective on "morality." He says in *La morale anarchiste* (Paris: Apostolat de la Prière, 1907): "The young anarchist philosopher [Guyau] concluded, "The plant can't avoid blooming. Sometimes, this blooming will mean dying. Who cares? Sap will always flow!" The same happens to the human being, when he is full of strength and energy. Strength builds up inside of him. He spreads his life. He gives without caring about it; without that he couldn't live. And if he were to die, as the withered flower, who cares? Sap will always flow, if there is

any. Be strong! Spill passionate and intellectual energy, and you will pour onto the others your intelligence, your love, your force of action! Moral teachings are reduced to this, stripped from the hypocrisies of oriental asceticism” (26–27). I could not find an English translation aside from Rogers Baldwin’s edition from 1927. Since his translation unfortunately carries out a very free interpretation, this passage was translated here into English from the French edition.

28. Barrett, “De estética,” T 3, 26.
29. *Ibid.*, 26.
30. *Ibid.*, 27.
31. *Ibid.*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 27. The term “macho” here is synonymous with “active creator.”
33. José Enrique Rodó. “Ariel,” in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Antonio Zamora, 1948).
34. Roberto Guisti, in Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano *Ensayos Argentinos. De Sarmiento a la Vanguardia* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1997), 164.
35. Barrett, “Epifonemas,” T 2, 163.
36. Similarly, one could understand the “nationalist” spirit as masking the interests of the dominant classes.
37. Barrett, “Epifonemas,” T 2, 163.
38. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (London/New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 137.
39. Barrett, “El orden,” T 2, 83–84.
40. Augusto Roa Bastos points to how Barrett criticizes the “wise men ensconced in their libraries” (“Prólogo,” XIII) in a narrative text that reveals the arrogance of the “scientific spirit” (*Ibid.*). Roa Bastos quotes Barrett: “In one of my journeys to faraway lands, I discovered an island. I visited a famed geographer upon my return. He listened to me, consulted at length books and maps, and told me: —The island you have discovered doesn’t exist. It isn’t on the map” (*Ibid.*).
41. Barrett, “El orden,” T 2, 84.
42. Bakunin adds in relation to nature: “Whatever exists, all the beings which constitute the undefined totality of the Universe, all things existing in the world, whatever their particular nature may be in respect to quality or quantity—the most diverse and the most similar things, great or small, close together or far apart—necessarily and unconsciously exercise upon one another, whether directly or indirectly, perpetual action and reaction. All this boundless multitude of particular actions and reactions, combined in one general movement, produces and constitutes what we call Life, Solidarity, Universal Causality, Nature.” Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* Ed. By G. P. Maximoff (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 53.

43. M. Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy*, 53–54.
44. Barrett, “El orden,” T 2, 54.
45. Barrett did indeed speak and he paid dearly for it: He was jailed in 1909 and subsequently freed thanks to the British government’s intervention (as his father was British, Barrett could obtain citizenship). He was nevertheless sent into exile, which is how he arrived on the shores of Montevideo. The portrait that his physique inspires is even more striking, as Emilio Oribe describes it: “His face radiated the immense sweetness of the rabbi of Galilee. The same eyes. His face, elongated toward the chest, with a very expressive blond beard... Like Jesus, he was affectionate and sought justice. This quest for justice is rooted in his love for the powerless/weak, for those whom fate has disinherited, for those who know all too well what the caress of mud and the pangs of hunger feel like” (in Vladimir Muñoz *Barrett en Montevideo*—Montevideo: Talleres de Imprenta García, 1982—, 35). The fascination with Barrett’s appearance leads Oribe to compare him to the Jesus of Christianity, using baroque and exaggerated language. According to the coordinates laid out in this chapter, Barrett’s figure oscillates between the margins of the “church” and religions, and the certainty of the daily experience of his own exercise in autonomous thinking. Interestingly, José María Fernández Vázquez claims that “as all politically committed writers do, Barrett faces the tenor of his own words, the usefulness of his works. Barrett’s actual readers were not his ideal readers, as he writes for an illiterate people, one that has yet to become conscious.” This perception has little actual basis since the only recognition that Barrett earned during his lifetime was when he had gained a small circle of readers in Montevideo. *La Razón* (the newspaper for which he wrote his columns) only circulated among subscribers, and lower classes therefore had no access to it. Then again, his refined (modernist) style did not precisely target the workers who toiled in the *yerba* fields. One could hypothesize that Barrett was aiming for his work to transcend its present epoch and had intended it for future generations. Considering the celebrations of his work held in Paraguay upon the centennial anniversary of his passing, there is little doubt that Barrett’s voice still resonates and that he is considered a luminary among a population who continues to seek justice one hundred years later. Keeping in mind the above objection, one could echo the quote from Barrett highlighted by Fernández Velázquez: “And let us speak to those of us who suffer, those who are sick, yes, to those of us who have spent time in hospitals and jails. But it is not for your hat I’m writing, but for my suffering Paraguayan brothers who have learned to read” (in Fernández Velázquez S/N).
46. Simone Weil says in *Oppression and Liberty*: “the analysis of the present system—an analysis that is found scattered through several of Marx’s



works—fixes the source of the cruel oppression suffered by the workers not in men, nor in institutions, but in the very mechanism of social relations. If the workers are exhausted by fatigue and want, this is because they do not count for anything and the growth of the factories counts for everything.” Later on she adds: “They [workers] do not count for anything because the role that the majority of them play in production is that of mere cogs, and they are degraded to this role of cogs because intellectual labour has become separated from manual labour,” 140.

47. Barrett, “Gorki y Tolstoi,” T 3, 127.
48. Barrett, “Conferencias,” T 3, 90.
49. Barrett, “La cuestión social,” T 3, 40.
50. *Ibid.*, 37.
51. *Ibid.*, 38.
52. *In La morale anarchiste* Kropotkin discusses religions as follows: “Religions have always sought to appropriate [the devotion of one to others] and to derive benefit from it. It is not only because of ignorance that religions continue to live on, but also because they have always appealed precisely to this type of devotion and courage toward others. Revolutionaries, particularly socialist revolutionaries, also appeal to the[se affects]” (26).
53. Barrett, “La cuestión social,” T.3, 49. While Ritter highlights Marx’s contradictions from a scientific perspective, Barrett posits the necessity of finding in these inconsistencies interpretative paths to understand the world. He states that “with the concept of class struggle and historical materialism, Marx has provided us with an easy and trustworthy method, so long as we apply it when it is appropriate.” *Ibid.*, 49.
54. *Ibid.*, 49.
55. Corral, *El pensamiento cautivo de Rafael Barrett*, 251.
56. Barrett, “Mi anarquismo,” T 2, 296.
57. Barrett, “Mi anarquismo,” T 2, 296.
58. Freud posits the existence of two types of love: narcissistic and anaclitic. The first refers the primary process of the Ego, whereas the latter encompasses secondary processes in which cultural factors intervene. (In “On Narcissism: An Introduction” from 1914)
59. Barrett, “Epifonemas,” T 2, 165.
60. Barrett, “Mi anarquismo,” T 2, 298.
61. *Ibid.*, 297–98.
62. Jorge Forteza, *Rafael Barrett. Su obra, su prédica, su moral* (Buenos Aires: Atlas, 1927), 15.
63. Roa Bastos, “Prólogo,” XXIX.
64. *Ibid.*, XIX.
65. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 148.

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