

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Regionalism Re-imagined: Avant-garde Voices of Non-urban Spaces

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0hb171sj>

Author

Brock, Ashley Roome

Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Regionalism Re-imagined: Avant-garde Voices of Non-urban Spaces

By

Ashley Roome Brock

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Natalia Brizuela, Chair

Professor Francine Masiello

Professor Anne-Lise François

Professor Candace Slater

Spring 2017

Abstract

Regionalism Re-imagined: Avant-garde Voices of Non-urban Spaces

By

Ashley Roome Brock

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Natalia Brizuela, Chair

This project challenges the perceived dichotomies between regionalist literature and high literature, between political literature and avant-garde literature, by tracing the emergence of a Critical Regionalist literary aesthetic in the mid-twentieth-century Americas. In the most experimental works of James Agee (United States), João Guimarães Rosa (Brazil), José María Arguedas (Peru), and Juan José Saer (Argentina), I identify a common commitment to transmitting the experiential dimensions of regional life – the daily rhythms of working life, the precarious existence of marginalized rural communities – through avant-garde poetics. All four of the diverse works examined are characterized by the dissolution of visual landscapes in favor of an immersive, sensorial experience of material place, and the related renunciation of an objective and omniscient point of view in favor of intimate proximity to and participation in the local world depicted. At the same time, these texts remind their readers, through the defamiliarization of language and recourse to metafictional techniques, of the mediated nature of the “authentic” experiences conjured. Though many of these formal features are common to urban high modernist and postmodernist fiction as well, I argue that they are freighted with a particular political function in the regionalist texts I examine: these works critique not only the hegemony of Western modernity but also the self-sameness of local identity, the quaint and timeless pastoral ideal, the construct of a coherent national culture grounded in an autochthonous past, and the facility with which images of local color circulate in an age of visual culture.

In my first chapter, I argue that the literary journalism of James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), illustrates the political and ethical stakes of breaking with the model of documentary realism that predominated in North American regionalism of the 1930s, and which is widely acknowledged to have informed the leftist, social realist vein of Latin American regionalism in the same time period. In fact, I read *Famous Men* as a manifesto of sorts for a conscience-driven quest to represent rural poverty in more humanizing and less sensationalistic terms. Agee replaces invasive and objectifying expository prose with dense, difficult, and highly self-reflexive language, which I read as training the reader to respect the opacity of the surfaces that buffer the

rural subjects depicted from our gaze. These surfaces include those of the written pages and photographic images through which we encounter this world. My second chapter continues to explore the relationship between word and image in Juan José Saer's *El limonero real* (1974). I contend that Saer disrupts the image of Argentina's rural interior as an ahistorical landscape by drawing attention to the inescapable temporality of perception, in contrast with the illusion of stillness furnished by the photographic image. I read the iterative structure and temporally animate gaze of Saer's most experimental novel as restoring the within-timeness of rural life, thereby challenging nationalistic progress narratives invested in displacing regional spaces into archaic time.

Chapter Three turns to João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956), which has often been read as marking the moment when Brazilian literature overcomes regionalism – treated as a minor genre and a symptom of cultural underdevelopment – in order to become universal and modern. Yet, I read this iconic novel as signaling the continued relevance of regionalist literature. I argue that the spiraling, recursive narrative structure of the novel thwarts any teleological reading that seeks an end (either of the sertão or of the story related) and, instead, asks the reader to inhabit this landscape from within. *Grande sertão: veredas* insists that neither the region nor its figuration in the Brazilian imaginary can be dismissed as quaint, archaic, and fully of the past. My fourth and final chapter comes full circle to draw unlikely parallels between *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the last novel of José María Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971). Like Agee's text, *Los zorros*, continually interrupts its representational project in order to foreground the ethical and aesthetic challenges that haunt it and which, the author fears, condemn it to failure. I read *Los zorros* as dramatizing the struggle to reimagine regional landscapes at a historical moment when rural-urban migration and increasingly complex economic structures collapse the geographic and cultural distance between city and country.

Ultimately, I argue, these works all insist on the contemporaneity and coevalness of the region, underscoring the fraught social, political, and economic relationships that bind the region to the urban centers that seek to figure it as archaic. In doing so, they also expose the ideological mechanisms through which the modern American nation has tried to absorb and domesticate unruly and untimely regional subcultures by mourning their passing and nostalgically celebrating them as folklore. The Critical Regionalist aesthetic I articulate thus removes the nostalgic patina that often obscures urgent social issues in which regional spaces are enmeshed: class, race, rural-urban migration, and the uneven rates of development that condemn many rural communities to stagnation and poverty. Moreover, each of these texts I examine confront us – as the readers who consume images of barbarity, underdevelopment and rural poverty – with our complicity in the systems of exploitation and marginalization that ravage the regional spaces depicted. Stressing the interconnectedness of natural and social worlds, of the landscape and the viewer, of literary representation and material reality, this project engages with the political and ethical questions that have become central to Critical Regionalism, Ecocriticism, Landscape Studies, and Postcolonial Studies.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	
Anything but Quaint: Re-thinking Regionalism in the Americas	1
Chapter One	
James Agee's <i>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</i> : A Lesson in Looking with Care	23
Chapter Two	
<i>Algo más que mirar</i> : the Temporality of Looking in Juan José Saer's <i>El limonero real</i>	69
Chapter Three	
Back, Back into the Backlands: the Regressive Temporality of <i>Grande sertão: veredas</i>	114
Chapter Four	
Regionalism in the Wake of Arguedas's Foxes	168
Coda	
Let the Bedbugs Bite	217
Works Cited	224

Acknowledgements

This has been a journey of finding my way through a labyrinth of texts and ideas I have never presumed to master. I am grateful to have undertaken it with guides who have honored my need to lose myself in the material, while also persistently steering me towards making the fruits of my immersive approach communicable and relevant to others.

I could not have written this dissertation without Natalia Brizuela, who recognized and named patterns in my thinking when I felt the most lost, who always seemed to know which reading suggestions would provide the landmarks I needed, and who offered her enthusiasm, support, and humor from beginning to end. I have always been able to count on Francine Masiello to read my work attentively, nudge me towards more rigorous thought and expression, celebrate ground gained, and most importantly, reinforce my faith in the value of spending time with literary texts. Candace Slater has inducted me into the world of Brazilian literature with infectious passion, and she has reminded me again and again that real people and the chance of connecting with them are what make academic work worthwhile. Anne-Lise François has expanded my conception of what literary criticism can be and empowered me to define and defend my own ethos for my work; she continues to inspire me to pursue thought that is both radical and beautiful.

At various stages in the process, I received additional guidance from Karl Britto, Adriana Amante, David Oubiña, and Marília Librandi-Rocha; this project would not be what it is without their intellectual generosity.

For financial support, I am grateful to the Department of Comparative Literature and the Graduate Division at the University of California, Berkeley. It is increasingly rare to be afforded the time to carry a project like this to term, and I thank UC Berkeley for investing in the intellectual process.

For countless other forms of support, I would like to thank the many people who have worked to make the Department of Comparative Literature a community where rigor goes hand-in-hand with camaraderie, including Kathy McCarthy, Miryam Sas, Vicky Kahn, Chana Kronfeld, Barbara Spackman, Erica Roberts, Kathy Barrett, Sandy Richmond, Tony Soyka, and Gail Ganino.

I would also like to extend my gratitude the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and to Verónica López in particular, for taking me in as one of their own.

I have had the extremely good fortune of overlapping at Berkeley with colleagues-turned-friends who are as kind and as they are brilliant. I am proud to have shared the entirety of this journey with my fellow *comparativista-latinoamericanista*, Paco Brito, without whose humor, compassion, and principled leadership I would have been far more lost. My time at Berkeley has been colored, in the best possible way, by the grace and poise of Laura Wagner, whose thoughtfulness and friendship have brightened the best and the worst days. Ramsey McGlazer manages to make the life of the mind both dazzlingly attractive and warm and inviting; I grateful for his conversation, which on so many occasions has made work feel like play. Emily Drumsta is a rock star who keeps it real, and I have been enriched by our exchanges on everything from

research to wardrobe. Julie Ward is my role model in very nearly everything, and I am immeasurably grateful to her, Julia Chang, Krista Brune, and Manuel Cuellar for the ongoing support of our writing group. Without them I am not sure there would have been a dissertation. I thank Yael Segalovitz and Alex Brostoff for the openness, honesty, and laughter born of our shared *travessia* in the South Bay, and I cherish the friendship of those with whom I have braved the trials of the last couple of years – Ivett López Malagamba, Camilo Jaramillo, and Jacqueline Bialostozky – all the more because it grew where the seeds of rivalry should have been sewn. Though they are too numerous to name, I thank all of my colleagues who have taken the time to share with me the wisdom of their experience, to exchange ideas and reading suggestions, and to read and comment on my work.

Finally, there is no adequate way to thank the friends and family who have put up with my distraction these many years and talked to me about my dissertation even though they did not have to. In particular, my appreciation goes out to Phoebe Bronstein, my long-time confidante and partner in crime, who has become my big sister in academia, and Leah Sykes, whose questions prove that intellectual curiosity knows no disciplinary bounds and whose wisdom has guided me to life's most valuable resources. My brother Peter (Baji) Brock has generously treated my academic work as interesting (even cool) and is one of my all-time favorite interlocutors. My brother Reilly Brock started college the same semester I started the Ph.D. program, and comparing notes, sharing meals, and finding humor in our parallel paths has been one of the most pleasurable parts of this process. My parents, Maureen King and Peter Brock, deserve the credit for everything, from teaching me to love literature to knowing better than to rush me. I have treasured being near them these past years and thank them for a lifetime of love and encouragement. Last but far from least, Joshua Mathews has never wavered in his support of what must seem like a mad career choice and has sustained me every step of this journey.

Introduction

Anything but Quaint: Re-thinking Regionalism in the Americas

“[Regionalist literature] has already exhausted itself in almost all Latin American countries, and one can say today that it is a thing of the past” – Mario Benedetti

Is regionalist literature in the Americas a thing of the past? If we take the term in the historical sense, as most critics do, then to talk about literary regionalism is to cast our gaze backwards to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Latin America, more so than in the North America, *regionalismo* has come to signify not only a now-distant historical moment but, in fact, a precursor to literary modernity, an adolescent stage in the region’s cultural development. More than designating a particular school or style, *regionalismo* has come to stand for everything that must be left behind in order for Latin American literature to emerge as modern: the provincialism, colonial legacy, and cultural dependency of the global south; the inherited forms of romanticism, naturalism, and *costumbrismo*; the ideologically driven treatment of autochthonous and nationalistic themes; and the naïve ignorance of literary style associated with writers on the margins of cosmopolitan modernity. The disparate set of qualities bundled together under the mantle of regionalism when used in this pejorative sense belies the degree to which the term coheres only as a retrospective and negative designation.

But when did regionalist literature fall from grace? Throughout the Americas, the shift seems to occur in between the 1940’s and the 1960s. With the rise of high modernism and later *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana*, with the new era of global consciousness ushered in by the Second World War, and with the demographic shifts that accompany rapid economic development and urbanization, the regionalist literary tradition, which had been integral to discourses of national identity in the nineteenth century, began to look provincial, old-fashioned.

Though we should be wary of assuming that literature about traditional ways of life is itself stylistically or ideologically retrograde, such conflation is common and contributes to the reductive binary thinking that opposes regionalism to movements such as *vanguardismo* and *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana*, which are celebrated for their novelty. Of course, painting the *vanguardias* as driven solely by the cult of the new occludes the way their innovations result from dialog with the past, just as insisting too much on the newness of *la nueva narrativa*, misrepresents the celebrated ‘boom’ novels as emerging out of a vacuum.¹ Yet, such nuances have not always been heeded by literary historiography, and it is common in literary criticism of

¹ For example, Ángel Rama points to José Donoso’s *Historia personal del boom* as painting the 1940s and 1950s as a creative wasteland in Latin America when, in reality, these were decades of great productivity and innovation for authors such as Cortázar, Onetti, Rulfo, Rosa, Lispector, and Borges (“El ‘Boom’” 65). As Rama points out, the ‘boom’ of international publication and distribution of Latin American authors in the 1960s would not have been possible had the preceding decades not yielded such a rich and deep pool of works to be fed into the literary market (ibid 101). There has been much debate about whether the ‘boom’ of the 1960’s was driven by the newfound eagerness of foreign editors to distribute Latin American literature internationally, by an increasing interest in Latin America among the global readership in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, or by the accelerated literary production of a newly professionalized class of Latin American writers. All of these factors likely contributed to the phenomenon, but the idea that Latin American literature itself underwent a sudden qualitative change in the 1960’s (becoming more formally innovative, more ‘universal’) has been largely discredited: the phenomenon of *la nueva narrativa* (itself far too nebulous to be defined as a movement or a style or the work of a single generation) can be traced at least as far back as the 1940’s, if not to the *vanguardias* of the 1920’s. See Ángel Rama’s “El ‘boom’ en perspectiva” and David Viñas’s, “Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana.”

the mid-twentieth century for “regionalism” to be invoked as little more than a foil against which to celebrate the modern, the global, formally innovative. The reasons for this dualistic thinking have to do in part with Cold War politics. As Jean Franco has argued, the Cold War and the scourge of populist and military dictatorships in Latin America from the mid-century forward create a polarizing discourse around the relationship between art and politics.² In many discourses, politically committed literature is diametrically opposed to high literature and reduced to soviet realism, retrospectively casting much of the realist regionalist literature of the nineteen-twenties through forties into disrepute.

That early-twentieth-century Latin American regionalist literature has been unfairly treated by literary historiography is undeniable. Jennifer French describes the *novelas de la tierra* of the 1920’s as “one of the most neglected bodies of texts in the Spanish American Canon” (8). Beginning in the 1980’s, a wave of revisionist readings of early-twentieth century regionalism has called into question the longstanding equation of regionalism with a naïve faith in “straight”, naturalistic representation and with unwitting complicity in nationalistic ideological projects³. Nevertheless, the myth of regionalist literature as retrograde has proved quite intractable. As French laments, in spite of the prominence and insightfulness of such revisionist readings, the *novelas de la tierra* continue to be viewed as “a literary precondition, hopelessly backward in their representational simplicity, their isolation from international literary developments, and their naïve political formulas” (8).

Moving beyond the impoverished understanding of regionalism as shorthand for literature that is stylistically belated or unsophisticated is not only necessary to enriching our understanding of the *novelas de la tierra* (and contemporaneous literary production throughout the Americas); bringing a greater sense of complexity and nuance to the term will also enrich our understanding of the stylistically diverse and oftentimes innovative literature set in non-urban spaces that has continued to proliferate ever since. The alternative – reducing literary regionalism to a signifier for the cultural history from which Latin American literature must break in order to become modern – raises obvious problems for how we are to talk about the decidedly regionalist features (rural setting, use of local dialect, incorporation of autochthonous myths, etc.) of many of the most universally read and celebrated works of twentieth-century Latin American literature. Fully addressing the problem requires more than redeeming individual works; it requires revising the teleologically-driven trend in literary periodization that requires that the new must always be

² As Franco argues in *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, this false dichotomy was propped up for decades by Cold War politics, as regionalist, realist, and socially committed literature would be pitted against “universal,” modernist, and “autonomous” literature in an ideological battle. In the forties, fifties, and sixties, the United States both indirectly disseminated and directly promoted “the international style,” characterized by abstraction rather than figuration, “universal” over regional subject matter, and the “autonomous” aesthetics of the avant-garde over the socially committed realism associated with soviet realism. Because of the position it occupied in this stylistic binary, it is possible that soviet realism enjoyed decades of privilege among leftists, even though its ideological potency is undeniably undercut by its formal ossification and its resulting inability to contain the complex realities of Latin America (Franco 4). I would argue that the texts I am considering are representative of middle space – characterized by the combination of regional subject matter, social commitment, and formal innovation – which has no place within the polarized critical discourses of the time.

³ French’s book *Nature, Neo-Colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers*, which brings Marxist, eco-critical, and postcolonial criticism to bear on early-twentieth century regional works is one of the most recent instantiations of this trend. Prominent earlier examples include Carlos Alonso’s *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony* and Roberto González Echevarría’s *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*.

offset against the old, for it is this logic that has made regionalism the implicit other to cosmopolitanism, international modernism, and “universal” literature.

A major obstacle to overturning the narrative that stigmatizes regionalist literature as anachronistic by definition is the fact that the rural is always already coded as anachronistic in the metropolitan imaginary. Country life is so integrally woven in to the origins myths, the nostalgic pastoral fantasies, and the triumphant tales of progress that define urban modernity that representing the country from the city almost always involves a temporal displacement into the archaic past. As Joan Ramon Resina observes, the twin ideologies of the metropolis as locus of modernity, innovation, and change and the region as locus of backwardness, tradition, and permanence have great staying power (14-15). I thus understand the persistence of the empirically unfounded misperception that regionalist literature is old-fashioned, simple, or naïve (and therefore not worthy of serious critical attention) as owing in large part to the seemingly inexorable myth that regional life can only be perceived through a backward-looking gaze. In order to reclaim literary regionalism from the dismissive use it has fallen into, then, it is not sufficient to cite examples of formally sophisticated regionalist texts, although these abound; it is also necessary to reconceive of regionalist literature not simply as literature *about* non-urban places but as literature that negotiates *the problem of representing non-urban places*, and, in particular, one that illuminates the complex temporality of depicting the region.⁴

In this project, I highlight a series of works from the mid-twentieth-century that not only break dramatically with stereotypes about what regionalist literature looks like, but also interrogate their own roles in reifying the regional ways of life they represent: James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Juan José Saer’s *El limonero real* (1974), João Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956), José María Arguedas’s *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971). I read these texts, each of which represents the most sustained experimental work of its author, as united by the pursuit of modes of representation that avoid sequestering regional life in an archaic past as a quaint and timeless landscape. Through their recourse to avant-garde techniques – such as temporal fragmentation and recursivity, self-conscious reflection on the limits of language as a medium for transmitting experience, and the poetics of difficulty, illegibility, and failure – in the representation of traditionally regionalist subject matter, these authors demonstrate that there is nothing inherently traditional or naturalistic about regionalist aesthetics. Although the works I focus on were written in the four decades following the heyday of “traditional” regionalism in the 1920’s and 30’s, I do not read them as marking the next stage in a teleological development (i.e. as neo-regionalism, modernist regionalism, or transculturated regionalism) but, rather, as continuing a regionalist tradition that has always had a greater capacity for self-critique and formal innovation than is generally acknowledged.

I situate this project within the transnational, interdisciplinary movement of Critical Regionalism, which I understand as committed to bringing about two closely linked paradigm shifts: 1) the recognition that places and cultures at the margins of urban, cosmopolitan modernity are neither belated nor autochthonous but, rather, offer fully contemporary (though oftentimes endangered) alternative models for organizing community, space, time, and narrative, all of which shape and are shaped by metropolitan centers of culture, commerce, and power; and 2) the recognition that literary and artistic renderings of such places and cultures need not, by virtue of depicting “rustic” subject matter, be technically unsophisticated. In other words, Critical Regionalism insists that regionalist art and literature, as much as any other type of art

⁴ Carlos Alonso makes such a shift in his re-definition of autochthony as a discursive practice.

and literature, use aesthetic form to reflect on problems of representation, such as the distortions caused by memory and nostalgia, the ethical dilemmas posed by representing marginalized, disenfranchised, and largely illiterate populations, the challenges of translating the temporality and corporality of life lived off the land into narrative form, or the risk of betraying the singularity, dynamism, and complexity of lived experience by reducing it to a commodity (the market value of local color or exotic tales) or an ideological signifier (i.e. “the good old days,” “barbarie,” or “the essence of national identity”).

I use “Critical Regionalism” to refer to literary as well as critical endeavors invested in bringing about these paradigm shifts. My use of the term draws on but by no means fully accounts for the wide variety of definitions Critical Regionalism has accrued in the diverse disciplines in which it circulates.⁵ Not all of the projects and conversations I invoke as interlocutors in articulating my understanding of Critical Regionalism have explicitly embraced the term. To the contrary, Critical Regionalism has not yet been widely adopted in literary studies nor Latin American studies; nevertheless, we might recognize elements of Critical Regionalism in contemporary conversations surrounding transnational regionalism, local modernism, “new ruralism,” critical landscape studies, narrative transculturation, *testimonio*, and postcolonial and queer temporalities, to name just a few.⁶

I have gravitated to the term Critical Regionalism in part because the recent work of Gayatri Spivak has highlighted its political urgency in the current moment as a way of reflecting on hotly contested issues surrounding migration, citizenship, and cultural and linguistic belonging⁷. But even more fundamentally, I prefer Critical Regionalism to, say, neo-regionalism as a way of describing the literary and critical works featured in this project because instead of positing a break with the past, it implies a critical re-reading of what has come before. This gesture of return characterizes both the aesthetics I trace in the works of Agee, Saer, Rosa, and Arguedas, and my own methodology, which entails a certain looping back to recuperate past traditions – such as regionalism writ large – that might otherwise be forgotten or dismissed. My hope is that this project will both model Critical Regionalism as a mode of comparison or intertextuality and shed light on what an avant-garde, Critical Regionalist aesthetic might look like and what kinds of ethical and political projects it might express.

⁵ The history of Critical Regionalism is appropriately migratory: the term has traveled from the world of architecture (Kenneth Frampton’s seminal 1983 essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism” and Frederic Jameson’s elaboration of a critical regionalist architectural aesthetic in *The Seeds of Time* (1994)), to U.S. regional and cultural studies (Krista Comer on 3rd spaces and affect, Neil Campbell’s *The Rhizomatic West* (2008), and Douglas R. Powell’s *Critical Regionalism* (2007),) to border studies (the work of José Limón and Melina Vizcaíno-Alemán on frontier spaces), to global postcolonial studies, where it has been articulated as both a critique of cultural and area studies (Alberto Moereiras and Cheryl Temple Herr) and as a quest for a form of transnational solidarity and citizenship that could bypass the exclusionary and othering discourses of the nation state (Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler). Though Critical Regionalism will likely continue to resist categorical definition, José E. Limón offers the following working definition: “Derived from the architectural thinking of Kenneth Frampton and a general Western Marxist tradition, Critical regionalism is simultaneously a theory, methodology, and praxis for recognizing, closely examining, fostering, but also linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities, especially as these stand in antagonistic, if also negotiated, relationships with late capitalist globalization” (Limón 167).

⁶ The first three of these terms represent emerging fields of research. We might point to the 2014 Special Issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* on “Transnational Approaches to North American Regionalism,” the 2015 conference hosted by the Centre for the Study of Cultural Modernity at the University of Birmingham on “Local Modernisms: 1890-1950,” and the 2012 Iberoamericana and Vervuert volume edited by Joan Ramon Resina and William R. Viestenz, *The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space*, respectively as places where these conversations have begun to take form.

⁷ See the 2010 conversation between Spivak and Judith Butler, *Who Sings the Nation State?*.

Critical Regionalism: Looking back and looking forward

As critical approach devoted to exposing porousness of boundaries and the mutability and heterogeneity of supposedly fixed and homogenous identities, Critical Regionalism is necessarily interdisciplinary and inherently hard to pin down. Over the past three decades, the field has grown ever-more nebulous, in its many incarnations from architectural theory, to American studies, to cultural studies, to postcolonial studies. I understand the openness and slipperiness of the term to be a resource rather than a problem: disrupting the notion of the region as a framing device for modernity's other is an ongoing dialectical process inimical to congealed definitions.

Tracing the term back to its origins both supports this point and offers a more rigorous theoretical understanding of Critical Regionalism than we might glean merely from its contemporary articulations. Critical Regionalism has its roots in Critical Theory and Adornian negative dialectics in particular.⁸ Kenneth Frampton, the North-American architect who coined the term gives the following definition: "Critical Regionalism is a dialectical expression. It self-consciously seeks to deconstruct universal modernism in terms of values and images which are locally cultivated, while at the same time adulterating these autochthonous elements with paradigms drawn from alien sources" (Frampton "Prospects" 149). Taking a Critical Regionalist perspective involves the double move of, on the one hand, asserting the alterity of local perspectives and their ability to resist the hegemony of universal modernity and, on the other hand, interrogating the constructedness of such perspectives rather than taking their identity and authenticity for granted, which would risk fetishizing their difference. As such, the object of its critique is not limited to the unexamined supremacy of the "universal" cosmopolitan perspective against which it is launched; Critical Regionalism is fundamentally a critique of any and all essentializing identity categories, especially those of the regional and the subaltern. In the words of Alberto Moreiras: "it moves beyond identity as well as difference in order to interrogate the processes of their constitution [. . .] Critical regionalism is then a regionalism against itself" (67). Thus understood, the negativity of critical regionalism allows it to interrogate not only the false universalism of master narratives of history but also the self-sameness of regional identities.

One of the reasons I am attracted to its approach is that, in spite of being particularly attuned to the globalized nature of the late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century world, it emphasizes the continuity between past and present (and, in fact, is originally articulated as an explicit repudiation of the supposed "end of history" in postmodernity).⁹ In this way, Critical Regionalism offers an alternative to the diachronic taxonomies that separate literary production into say, first, second, and third waves or regionalism or that otherwise cordon off "traditional

⁸ For example, Cheryl Temple Herr underscores that Frampton's conception of Critical Regionalism was strongly influenced by Adorno: Herr sees Critical Regionalism as driven by an impulse to resist and critique "the totalizing agenda of Enlightenment-linked modernism" by laying bare the limitations of our ability to know another culture from the outside and by confronting us with what Adorno called "the waste products and blind spots" of hegemonic accounts of history (qtd. in Herr 20).

⁹ See Jameson *The Seeds of Time* (190-191). Jameson also notes that Frampton's Critical Regionalism is inherently backwards looking or "rearguard": "a certain retrogression is built into the project itself where it is underscored by the slogan of an *arrière-garde* or rearguard action, whose untimely status is further emphasized by Frampton's insistence that whatever Critical Regionalism turns out to be, in its various regions of possibility, it must necessarily remain a "marginal practice" (190). The ensuing problem is both theoretical and political: "how to fashion a progressive strategy out of what are necessarily the materials of tradition and nostalgia? how to use the attempt to conserve in an actively liberatory and transformational way?" (202).

regionalism” from neo-regionalism, post-regionalism, or what Antonio Cândido has called, “super regionalismo” (“Literatura”). Many Critical Regionalist projects in fact turn back to previous moments in time, to seemingly traditional cultural production, to demonstrate that the region has always been relationally constructed and that regionalist literature, at its best, rather than furnishing successful positivistic representations of regional spaces, has always been about the difficulty of translating rural experience into literary form.¹⁰ This insistence on continuity rather than rupture with the past characterizes my project as well: I am reading mid-twentieth century texts as both continuous with an earlier tradition of regionalist literature whose experimentalism has often been underrecognized and as anticipating more contemporary conversations about the importance of the local and the particular as sites of resistance to the hegemony of national and global discourses of modernity. The beauty of the model, then, is that rather than hinging upon the novelty of its own approach, it allows us to read any number of earlier literary and critical works as already engaged in Critical Regionalism. For example, a short list of thinkers practicing Critical Regionalism before the term was coined might include Gilberto Freyre, Juan Carlos Mariátegui, Leo Marx, Raymond Williams, Antonio Cornejo Polar, and Ángel Rama. All of these figures have contributed to laying the groundwork for this project and will be discussed in more depth further on.

Another thinker whose work must be acknowledged as central to this and any Critical Regionalist approach to Spanish American literature is Carlos J. Alonso. Alonso contributes an understanding of the particularity of regional culture as both the lynchpin of Latin American identity and an intractable problem when it comes to making Latin American reality legible within the universalizing discourse of modernity. I would argue, moreover, that *The Spanish American regional novel: Modernity and Autochthony* (1990) has a fundamentally Critical Regionalist orientation: Alonso sheds critical light on the sleight of hand through which the *novelas de la tierra* achieve the illusion of autochthony even as they necessarily step outside of this “authentic” space of being in order to tell the tale.

We might also extend the umbrella of Critical Regionalism to cover more recent conversations about the temporality of the regional and the rural. For example, Joan Ramon Resina’s “new ruralism” proposes that the regional can disrupt and resist “the forms of thinking that led to the hegemony of the dissociated modern subject” not only through spatial particularity but also through temporal particularity, insisting on “this place, this hour – instead of burning them as dispensable fuel for the production of abstract, empty-formed, interchangeable thinking” (25). In *A Singular Modernity* (2012), Frederic Jameson argues that it is precisely this temporal alterity offered by the rural order that becomes an indispensable resource for high modernist aesthetics. Without the continued presence of “peasant regimes,” argues Jameson, the ideology of modernism would collapse for it would not be able to offset the shock of the new against the pre-modern and the traditional nor draw on the irrational realms that have been ushered into modernity as the result of uneven development. In this way, Jameson sees high modernism, not as the formal expression of a society that has fully achieved industrialized modernity, but, to the contrary, as the formal expression of incomplete modernization; its jarring qualities express the shuttling back and forth between two simultaneous but distinct temporal orders: the feudal rural order and the industrial order of the modern metropolis. Ericka Beckman has applied Jameson’s

¹⁰ For example, see the way that Krista Comer recuperates the anthropological work of James Clifford and Mary Louise Pratt as already anticipating Critical Regionalism, or the way Randi Tanglen and Melina Vizcaíno-Alemán each turn back to earlier moments in Mexican cultural production to locate instances of Critical Regionalism.

work to the context of Latin American literature to reveal the degree to which the rural worlds represented in classics like José Eustasio Rivera's *La Vorágine* and Jorge Isaacs's *María* do not exist outside of modern capitalist relations but, rather, are deeply imbricated in them.

In dialog with such interlocutors, I consider Critical Regionalism as a critical stance against any hegemonic discourses of modernity that would ignore the presence (in spatial *and* temporal terms) of the regional or seek to reduce it to temporally flattened and geographically isolated source of folklore and local color. Critical Regionalism as I understand it is both an aesthetic project that reflects critically on how regional spaces are represented in cultural forms and a political project with ethical and material consequences for how we recognize and interact with the very real people, cultures, and non-human inhabitants of such spaces. When the region can no longer be reduced to a stable and separate space, it can no longer be treated ahistorically as merely quaint, archaic, or backwards; its contemporaneity with urban modernity must be acknowledged, along with the interdependence of city and country life and the factors contributing to their uneven rates of development. Moreover, when the stability and boundedness of the region is radically called into question, it ceases to be available as the object of positivistic study, and the scholar must question her own relationality and/ or separateness from the place or culture being examined.

Questioning the spatial and temporal boundaries that have traditionally defined the region also implicitly challenges nationalistic discourses that claim autochthonous cultures and regional landscapes as their source of singularity and that (often simultaneously) seek to sequester rural life in an archaic past in order to assert the modernity of the nation. In fact, as articulated by Spivak and Butler in "Who Sings the Nation State?", Critical Regionalism might be understood as the pursuit of a "rigorously non-nationalistic" mode of belonging, a new way of saying "we" that goes "over and under" the nation-state and pries the concept of citizenship loose from birth and language to allow for the articulation of collective identities that are more appropriate to today's world of mass migration and dislocation. Spivak and Butler's conversation refers to political rather than literary regionalism, but a central claim to my argument in this project is that the political work of Critical Regionalism can and must be accomplished in part through aesthetic means. Re-drawing the area studies map and re-thinking how collective identities come to be, as Spivak advocates, entails shifting the way we represent the regional and critically examining the way we circulate and consume such representations. Critical Regionalism, in the words of Viscaíno-Alemán seeks to represent the world "in terms of routes – not roots – in order to better account for shifting and unfixed place of regions in late capitalism" (201). Critical regionalism, then, entails a gesture of reclaiming rural life from nationalistic narratives of modernity that would consign the regional to the past, and confronting us with the ongoing presence of rural lives in our time as well as the ongoing reconfiguration of the regional in our discursive practices.

When understood in this way, Critical Regionalism entails the potentially controversial deconstruction of identitarian categories such as autochthony and indigeneity. Espousing this approach, Alberto Moreiras sees Critical Regionalism as a mode of solidarity with the historically disempowered that avoids the pitfalls of essentializing and othering the subaltern not only by embracing models of hybridity, heterogeneity, and transculturation but also through "an extreme form of self-reflexivity" or negative dialectic that vigilantly defends against reproducing the forms of repression and domination it sets out to reveal and critique (72). As I hope will become apparent, these stakes inform the implicit (and sometimes explicit) politics of the Critical Regionalist literary aesthetic I set out to trace in this project.

Regionalism in the Americas

Because the objective of any Critical Regionalist project is to resist essentializing ideologies and challenge ossified notions of regional and national identity, it is crucial to recognize that every regional, national, and linguistic tradition is relationally constituted and constantly evolving in response to a global network of cultural, economic, and political forces.¹¹ In the face of a positivistic ethnographic tradition that seeks to separate its object of study from other cultures (most importantly the culture of the ethnographer), Critical Regionalism demands that we recognize the interconnection and interdependence of diverse regions. One of the reasons I have configured this project as a hemispheric study of American regionalism is that though the circulation of people and cultures in the Americas is well-established and increasingly visible, the Spanish-American, Luso-Brazilian, and North-American regionalist traditions have tended to be treated in isolation. I understand Spivak's call for a Critical Regionalism that redraws the traditional area studies map and highlights the connections between regions that have historically been cordoned off from one another by national and linguistic borders as compelling such a transnational approach.

There are, of course, large and important regions of the Americas that are not represented in this study, including Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, and Francophone America. My intent is not to be comprehensive, an impossibly ambitious goal for the scope of this project, but rather to sample a few of the most emblematic regions of the hemispheric Americas: the U.S. cotton belt, the Argentine pampas, the Brazilian sertão, and the Andean highlands. I have selected these regions over other equally important and interesting regions because the surrounding cultural traditions are those about which I am the most qualified to write, and because attending to the similarities and differences between the specific texts I have selected from Agee, Guimarães Rosa, Saer, and Arguedas allows us to put a finer point on what is meant by regionalist literature in the Americas and illuminates how and why our understanding of it needs to continue to evolve.

The comparison reveals that the trend towards treating regionalist literature as an aesthetically bankrupt and fundamentally pre-modern form is more pronounced in the literary historiography of Spanish America than in the Anglo-American or Luso-Brazilian traditions. This may be due in part to the strong influence of the Hispanic *costumbrismo* tradition over nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century regionalist literature.¹² As Adolpho Prieto and Jennifer French have each pointed out, the Spanish American regional novel also owes many of its conventions for visualizing the backlands of the nation to the tradition of colonial European travel writing. Both *costumbrismo* and colonial travel writing draw on the visual arts and the

¹¹ The turn towards understanding regional life as relationally constituted and always enmeshed in larger networks of culture, commerce, and power is a hallmark of the cultural studies vein of Critical Regionalism, the goal of which, according to Douglas Reichert Powell, should be “to make visible the forces that intersect and intercede to create a network of places, not to isolate them from the larger movements of culture, politics, and history but to enmesh them in these movements intricately and inextricably” (66).

¹² *Costumbrismo* refers to modes of representation, which include recourse to painting picturesque scenes and describing local color, inherited from the late 18th century Spanish genre of the *novela de tipos y costumbres*. Offering vignettes of diverse ways of life (the life of the poor, the life of the *campesino*, the life of the American colonial subject, etc.) along with social critique, the *novela de tipos and costumbres* combines the exoticism of travel writing with the progressive politics of social reform and relies heavily on Enlightenment “taxonomic and descriptive methodologies” (Segal 9). Beginning with *vanguardias* of the 1920's and the onset of the Cold War, regionalism is often lumped together with *costumbrismo*, and soviet realism as reactionary modes of representation that misguided leftists mistake for social commitment (Franco).

social and natural sciences to figure the American continent's unruly backlands as an object of positivistic knowledge.

Though regionalist literature does not always inherit the documentary realism of these genres, it is often understood as continuing their ideological legacy: that of discursively mastering those regions of the nation that are least developed (and often times least loyal to central governments) through totalizing spatial representations while simultaneously displacing them into archaic time. The same Indians, gauchos, and backland bandits who would pose a threat to the sovereignty of the nation state were their cultural difference and political demands acknowledged as pertaining to the historical time of the present can be safely assimilated and even celebrated as national patrimony when they are reduced to quaint, folkloric images of local color. In *De pronto el campo . . .*, for example, Graciela Montaldo observes of the rural tradition in Argentina: "el momento cuando lo rural se vuelve arcaico tiende a convertirse en patrimonio común y deseable"(26).¹³ Once it has been rendered an inert thing of the past, the popular and the rural can be safely appropriated by high literature as *a space* (an empty desert more specifically) to be filled by the nation's civilizing project (ibid 41).

In *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony*, Carlos Alonso analyzes how the rhetoric of progress allows the nation to claim the difference and autochthony of the region while disidentifying from its underdevelopment, untimeliness and *barbarie*. Alonso argues that in addition to serving as discursive ground on which to build national literatures, the cultural specificity of the region allows Latin American nations to conceive of modernity on different terms than those set by the European center. As long as modernity is defined on hegemonic European terms, Latin America can only ever lay claim to its margins, but if Latin American writers produce discourses of autochthony that "define a space outside of that rhetoric" (23), then they may be able to redefine Latin America's relationship to modernity in terms of non-hierarchical difference rather than those of imitation (as dependent), inadequacy (as underdeveloped), or belatedness (as pre-modern). As a result, regionalist literature becomes increasingly instrumental in nationalistic political rhetoric, creating an implicit sense of pressure for Latin American authors to pursue autochthonous subject matter. Backlash against the instrumentalization of regionalist literature in nationalistic politics undoubtedly contributes to its disrepute among intellectuals invested in artistic autonomy or critical of the nation state.¹⁴

North American regionalist literature, which gains traction as a movement in the wake of the Civil War and peaks between the two World Wars, is similarly instrumental in the articulation and consolidation of national identity. Like Latin American regionalism, it is forged under the dual influences of romanticism and realism, but the nineteenth-century romantic tradition is more robust in the United States and Brazil than in much of Spanish America and thus exerts a stronger influence on regionalist literature. As Leo Marx has argued, the fresh green landscapes throughout the new world represented to European settlers an opportunity to realize a pastoral fantasy that had already been foreclosed in much of the old world; yet not all American landscapes were seen as equally Edenic. Whereas in South America it was the polarity between the civilization of the cities and the barbarism of the "wild" *pampas* and *selvas* that provided the myths and fantasies of national identity, in the United States, it has always been what Marx calls the "middle landscape" of the pastoral that has given birth to foundational myths. Notwithstanding the role of frontier literature, which is heavily steeped in romanticism in its own

¹³ "The moment when the rural becomes archaic it tends to be converted into common and desirable patrimony." Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ See chapter Two for more detail.

right, North American regionalist literature is from its inception far more concerned with negotiating the ambivalent disconnect between the pastoral fantasy and the realities of rural life than in furthering a narrative of civilization's conquest of *barbarie*. As a result, the genre is never as strongly linked with the positivism associated with Spanish American *costumbrismo*.

The fate of North American regionalist literature is instructive in making sense of Spanish American regionalism because the relative plasticity of the term – it encompasses the politically inflected realism of John Steinbeck, the gothic tales of Flannery O'Connor, and the modernism of William Faulkner – allows for thinking of a diverse yet continuous spectrum of regionalisms rather than staging its history as a series of dramatic breaks with the past as Latin American literary periodization is wont to do. The formal innovations of Faulkner (often cited as a major influence on the *nueva narrativa latinoamericana*) can be celebrated without disavowing the realism of Steinbeck (often cited as a major influence on social realist regionalism in Latin America).

Moreover, the U.S. case, where the height of literary regionalism coincides with the Great Depression and the large-scale cultural projects of the New Deal, proves an excellent case study for examining the continuity as well as the differences between regionalist literature and the ethnographic and political propaganda movements with which it is often conflated throughout the Americas. At a time of dire economic need, the U.S. federal government employed hundreds of artists and writers to document the nation's cultural diversity, financial hardship, and spirit of unity and solidarity. The resulting guidebooks, photographs, and essays were carefully archived and preserved, making it easy for future scholars to pinpoint examples of government propaganda but harder to dismiss these as one-dimensional or aesthetically uninteresting (recall that many of the best artists and writers of the time contributed to New Deal programs). The North American case thus lays bare that what is really being disavowed when regionalist literature is dismissed as artistically crude and ideologically motivated are the extra-literary genres of ethnography, *costumbrismo*, and propaganda; it also ought to inure us against the belief that we can draw stark lines between such genres and high literature.

The case of Brazil would seem to fall somewhere in between that of Spanish America and that of the United States. Brazilian literary historiographers tend to acknowledge a multiplicity of regionalisms, encompassing romanticism, realism, and even modernism, rather than insisting on a single, monolithic regionalist movement, yet there is still a strong trend towards diachronically sequencing the stages of regionalism along a developmentalist model where regionalism occupies the space of an originary condition out of which Brazilian literature must evolve in order to become modern.¹⁵

In Brazil, the *regionalismo-modernismo* dichotomy is interrogated and deconstructed from within as early on as the 1920's: many of the most prominent poets of the time, such as

¹⁵ See, for example, Antônio Cândido's "Literatura e Subdesenvolvimento," where regionalism, naturalism, and "literatura pitoresca" are treated as cultural relics from Brazil's infancy. In spite of the innovations of Machado de Assis and the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (1926), Cândido laments that Brazilian literature remains largely derivative and reliant upon forms that are "esteticamente anacrônicas" well into the twentieth century (150). Cândido coins the term "super-regionalsita" to describe the anti-naturalistic, universally relevant work of Guimarães Rosa and Juan Rulfo. As the term suggest, this new phase of literary production is celebrated for transcending the aesthetic and ideological limitations of previous phases of literary regionalism. Gilberto Freyre will insist on the possibility of a modernist regionalism.

Mário de Andrade and Manuel Bandeira, engage with both movements.¹⁶ As a result, it is harder to reductively oppose Brazilian regionalism to more modern and cosmopolitan cultural movements. Gilberto Freyre insists on this point very early on in the twentieth-century: in his 1926 *Manifesto Regionalista*, Freyre makes the case for the modernity and relevance of regionalist cultures. Though staged as the Northeast's response to the decidedly *paulista* Semana de Arte Moderna and strongly denunciatory of "false modernisms" that superficially mimic European styles, Freyre's manifesto advocates for a new understanding of regionalism as inherently hybrid and cosmopolitan; in fact, Freyre insists that its practitioners are "a seu modo modernos e até modernistas" (95).¹⁷ Not to be confused with separatism, parochialism, or the fetishization of autochthony, the regionalism of Freyre's "Regionalistas-Tradicionalistas-Modernistas" embraces the hybridity, mobility, and dynamism of Brazilian culture: "Pois o Brasil é isto: combinação, fusão, mistura" (72).¹⁸ Freyre was, moreover, determined to correct the misperception of literary regionalism as anachronism, a dusty chapter with which no modern writer would wish to be associated: why, he wonders in his manifesto, does no one remark on the fact that Cervantes was a regionalist? (75). Freyre must thus be considered an important forefather to the Critical Regionalist turn I trace in this project.

Nevertheless, as Edson Nery da Fonseca alleges, Freyre's regionalism remains largely misunderstood, owing to "a lenda negra antinordestina e antifreyriana" that continues to construe Freyre's *Manifesto* as reactionary and anti-modern, and regionalist literature as a minor and anachronistic genre (221). He laments that even the literary success of the regionalist writers of the 1930s, such as José Lins do Rêgo, Jorge Amado, and Graciliano Ramos, is downplayed when their work is discussed in purely sociological and political terms, or misrepresented as an offshoot of the *modernismo* of São Paulo (229). So powerful is the narrative that regionalism is a stagnant genre that the aesthetically interesting contributions of regionalist writers are assimilated into a universalist-modernist tradition rather than being recognized as innovations within the regionalist tradition. We see once again in the case of Brazil that when regionalism is reductively equated with traditionalism, it becomes impossible to recognize the contemporaneity or coevalness of regional lives as well as the modernity and innovation of regionalist literature.

Avant-garde regionalism: A contradiction in terms?

One theory as to why North American regionalist literature escapes the worst of the disparagement that befalls Latin American regionalist literature lies in the prominence of William Faulkner's acclaimed modernist works within the North American regionalist canon. The myths of regionalism as a stylistically stagnant genre or an antithesis to high literature, which proliferate in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century, simply do not take hold in the North American context, where the foremost regionalist writer of this period is renowned as a formal innovator. What are we to make, then, of the fact that equally avant-garde works about non-urban spaces are being produced in Latin America during this period by the likes of Juan Rulfo and João Guimarães Rosa? Why are these celebrated Latin American writers unable to redeem the reputation of regionalist literature the way that Faulkner has done in the north? I would submit that the crucial difference is that Faulkner's work is received *as part of a*

¹⁶ Brazilian *modernismo* is not to be confused with Spanish American *modernismo*. The former is an avant-garde movement that appears in Sao Paulo in the 1920's, and it is more akin to Spanish American *vanguardismo* than Spanish American *modernismo*, which has its roots in the late 19th century.

¹⁷ "in their way modern and even modernist."

¹⁸ "That's Brazil: combination, mixture, fusion."

regionalist tradition (literature of the U.S. South), whereas the achievements of Rulfo and Rosa are more often read as marking a break with the regionalist tradition and a step towards Latin America's acceptance in the realm of global high literature. In other words, the work of Rulfo and Rosa has been celebrated for escaping the ghettoized denomination of regionalist literature to attain the status of great modern masterpieces, rather than recognized for attaining new heights within the regionalist tradition.

One of my principal arguments in this project is that cleaving innovative, experimental writers away from the regionalist tradition in this way has the effect of impoverishing our understanding of their work as well as the critical discourse of regionalism. It is ultimately hard to disentangle whether this phenomenon – of celebrating Latin America's most avant-garde writers for ceasing to be regionalists – is the cause or the result of a polarized discourse that can only understand literary modernity as the surmounting of literary regionalism. I am far from the first to critique this narrative. Figures such as Gilberto Freyre and Juan Carlos Mariátegui critiqued the *regionalismo/vanguardismo* binary as far back as the 1920's. More recently, both Mario Vargas Llosa and Ángel Rama, though approaching the problem from different angles, have attempted to revise the predominant narrative of the "boom" writers as entirely superseding the regionalist writers; their revisionist literary historiographies attempt to afford a more central place to writers such as Rulfo, Guimarães Rosa, and Arguedas, who maintain their allegiance to regionalist subject matter.

Mario Vargas Llosa's 1968 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Primitives and Creators," is in truth more reactionary than revisionary; it exemplifies many of the most problematic gestures of the narrative that seeks to celebrate *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana* by disparaging its predecessors. For Vargas Llosa, the "primitive novel" encompasses regionalism, *indigenismo*, and *costumbrismo*, all of which are dismissed as holding little literary value: while they may offer historical documentation and social criticism, Vargas Llosa insists they are aesthetically bankrupt. Indifferent to style or superficially and clumsily derivative of European forms, the primitive novel is prized only for its ability to represent distinctly Latin American subject matter: "Rustic and well-intentioned, earnest and garrulous, the primitive novel is, nevertheless, the first which can justifiably be called original to Latin America" (1287). In spite of Vargas Llosa's condescending tone in this article, which, it must be said, offers no worse than an extreme version of a pervasive sentiment among many Latin American intellectuals of the time, the author must be credited with making two distinctions missed by many version's of Latin American literature's coming-of-age story: 1) he insists that the two stages of literature he calls "primitive" and "creative" do not sequentially supersede on another but exist contemporaneously, and 2) he challenges the overly-simplistic narrative that "the change from the primitive novel to the new novel involves a move from the country to the city" (1288). As such, he succeeds in complicating the reductive narrative that the regionalist novel simply gives way to the urban, cosmopolitan, and avant-garde novel as the bearer of literary modernity.

A more nuanced challenge to this narrative comes from Ángel Rama in *La transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982). Rama critiques the predominant narrative of the Latin American 'boom' for disavowing the importance of the regional in reinventing Latin American literature and seeking to cleave modern Latin American literature from its regionalist roots. Rama claims that the regionalist tradition, though once a driving force of Latin American literary innovation and originality, risks becoming ossified and irrelevant in the mid-twentieth century and finds itself under "assault from the foreign modernism that entered through the ports

and capital cities” (15). For Rama, the “panoply of avant-garde devices” to which Latin American writers are suddenly exposed are readily assimilated by poetry and, in prose, give rise to the genre of literature of the fantastic, but Rama sees regionalist literature as ill-equipped to absorb these new techniques because it remains rooted in a “rigidly rationalizing ideology” that cannot accommodate the dynamic and fractured worldview of the avant-gardes (26). Though Rama’s version of events condemns historical and positivistic regionalism to extinction, or at least irrelevance, he emphasizes that the most vital elements of this tradition – namely “rural speech and popular story structures” – will be recuperated by a new generation of authors no longer bound by the ideological rigidity of regionalist literature (32-33). This new model of *transculturated* literature, argues Rama, allows the “continent’s hinterland cultures” to participate in a new era of global modernity rather than simply being ploughed under by it (46).¹⁹

Rama offers the hopeful vision that instead of being passively absorbed by western culture, local cultures will respond creatively to intercultural contact, leading to innovative and uniquely Latin American cultural production grounded in and inspired by autochthonous cultural materials:

In an era of rather childish cosmopolitanism, our aim is to demonstrate that one can indeed create new art on a high level based on the humble materials from one’s own traditions and that such traditions can do more than provide picturesque themes; they can also be the sources of well-designed techniques and shrewd artistic structures that fully translate the imaginaries of Latin American societies that have been crafting brilliant cultures for centuries. (84)

One of the most radical features of Rama’s theory of narrative transculturation is that it succeeds in disentangling formal sophistication from novelty and cosmopolitanism, insisting that centuries-old local traditions continue to evolve, to enter into dialog with western avant-garde movements, and to yield literature that is anything but rustic and quaint. For this reason, I consider Rama’s work, along with that of Gilberto Freyre, Juan Carlos Mariátegui, and Carlos Alonso, indispensable to the emergence of a Critical Regionalist mindset in Latin American literary theory.

Rama’s account of narrative transculturation does, however, fall short of fully accounting for the literary works I take as the primary objects of this study. Otherwise put, the works I have chosen to focus on point to the need to continue revising the story of how local, regional traditions enter into dialog with the forces of global modernity. From today’s perspective, the single largest criticism of Rama’s theory of transculturation is that it is overly optimistic in celebrating Latin American culture’s capacity to overcome or resist the forces of modernization through adaptation and creative fusion. Alberto Moreiras, for example, questions whether transculturated genres such as magical realism can succeed in, in Rama’s words, “plant[ing] the indigenous worldview and the indigenous protest on enemy soil” (142). In Moreiras’s view, transculturation cannot resist dissolving cultural difference any more than the models against which it defines itself, acculturation and cultural appropriation: all ultimately submit to the hegemony of modern western ideology. Moreiras bases his critique on a reading of *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, the last novel of José María Arguedas, whose 1958 novel *Los ríos profundos* Rama upholds as exemplary of narrative transculturation. As I argue in my fourth chapter, taking *Los zorros* into account does indeed lead to a different and less optimistic

¹⁹ The term “transculturation” was originally introduced by Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz as an alternative to acculturation which, according to Rama implies “acquiring another culture” and “necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation” (Rama *Writing Across Cultures* 19).

understanding of Arguedas's lifework than Rama arrives at based on his analysis of *Los ríos profundos*. I would not, however, go as far as Moreiras in declaring that the failure of this novel to affect conciliatory fusion between cultures brings the "transculturating machine" to a halt and replaces it with an abyss of meaning (204).

To the contrary, I find that the breakdown of communication in *Los zorros* may be instructive, steering the reader towards a more intimate, more humble, and ultimately more ethical mode of relating to the word represented. This humility arises out of sharing in the narrator's failure to make the heterogeneous world of the novel cohere. As such, for me the greatest blind spot in Rama's articulation of narrative transculturation is not the faith put in aesthetic innovation to engender dialog between disparate cultures and cultural forms but, rather, the belief that the desired outcome of such dialog should be to "fully translate the imaginaries of Latin American societies" (84). Recent work on cultural incommensurability and the limits of translation ought to make us skeptical of the possibility as well as the desirability of such a complete act of translation. For example, Emily Apter warns that rushing to make cultural difference fully legible in the "universal" arena of world literature silences cultural particularities that are truly untranslatable, replacing them with easily recognizable "identities" and stereotypes.

What distinguishes the works I focus on in this project from those Rama celebrates as successful instances of narrative transculturation is that the former abrasively confront the reader with aesthetics of opacity, illegibility, and failure. In addition to treating the encounter between disparate cultures as a site of creative fusion, they turn the negativity of avant-garde poetics into an ethical resource to highlight the necessary impasses, fissures, and moments of failed translation that accompany any such cross-cultural dialog. Oftentimes this is accomplished through the formal difficulty of the text, which may deliberately alienate and disarm the reader as a way of calling attention to, if not completely dismantling, the disparity in power between the subaltern subjects represented and the presumably educated, middle-class reader who consumes their images and stories.

By directly or indirectly staging encounters between urban intellectuals and "native informants" fraught with aporia of meaning and breakdowns of communication – untranslated and untranslatable indigenous words (Arguedas), lengthy meditations on mute objects and inarticulate sounds (Agee), language rendered nearly unintelligible by archaisms and vernacularization (Rosa), a moment when language degenerates into meaningless babble and eventually a black box on the page (Saer) – these texts call attention to the incommensurability of the world and the word, and, more specifically, of the largely oral cultures depicted and the primarily text-based media through which the reader encounters these cultural worlds. In other words, I read the experimental form of these works as underscoring the distance that separates the reading experience of the cosmopolitan audience from the local lives represented *and* planting the questions of if and how aesthetic experience might bridge this divide to yield an ethical encounter.

Towards a Critical Regionalist aesthetic

In this project, I am particularly interested in how the challenge of making the regional life communicable through literature without betraying its fundamental alterity becomes a formal concern. I believe that in spite of their diversity in subject matter, style, and cultural origins, the texts I have grouped together in this corpus share similar experimental techniques and similar aims: these works are committed to transmitting the experiential dimensions of regional life – the

daily rhythms of work and rest, the transitory lives of marginalized peoples – through their poetic form – their recursive temporal movement, their immersive and fragmented representational techniques – while also reminding us, through defamiliarized language and metatextuality, of the constructedness and mediated nature of the “authentic” experiences they conjure. Even as these texts flirt with the probability (and at times, it seems, the desirability) of their failure to render the spaces and cultures they represent in literary language, I argue that they also enact a politically radical re-configuration of what it means to *look at* and *move through* spaces associated with poverty, backwardness, and cultural otherness. As a condition of reading such texts, the reader must trade in the distant stance associated with visual and rational mastery for the immersive perspective of corporeally inhabiting the space and time of the world represented. In spite of the intimate proximity through which the reader comes to the world of the text, moments of textual opacity and self-reflexivity remind her of her outsider status and demand an ethos of humility.

In shuttling back and forth between intimacy and alienation, these texts perform the work of dialectical mediation that Adorno upholds as the moral duty of the thinker to resist reification: “The morality of thought lies in a procedure that is neither entrenched nor detached, neither blind nor empty, neither atomistic nor consequential [. . .] Nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that he should be at every moment both within things and outside them” (*Minima* 74-75). Cheryl Temple Herr has suggested that this paradoxical position articulated by Adorno might serve as a working definition of Critical Regionalism (22). Whereas positivistic ethnography demanded that the ethnographer gain empirical knowledge of another culture while retaining his separateness and objectivity, a Critical Regionalist approach to cultural studies would, according to Temple Herr, involve both admitting one’s intimate involvement in the local culture *and* keeping in view one’s outsider status as a check to any claims of full knowledge or “authentic” experience. This project probes the question of how such a theoretical stance might be expressed as a literary aesthetic.

As must by now be apparent, *experience* is a central and fraught term in the discussion of Critical Regionalist aesthetics. Frederic Jameson writes that in his articulation of a Critical Regionalist architectural aesthetic Frampton relies problematically on the “notion of ‘experience’ as an alternative to the spectacle and commodity conceptions of the visual and the scenographic” (197). Conceived as a reaction against the abstraction and placelessness of postmodernist architecture, Frampton’s Critical Regionalism seeks to challenge the reproducibility of postmodernism’s representational vocabulary (i.e. citing other buildings, styles, and traditions) with an aesthetic grounded in the somatic experience of “an individual [interacting] with her local habitat” (Herr 16). In other words, Frampton’s Critical Regionalism can be considered an “anti-representational” aesthetic in that it is less interested in visually depicting local tradition (i.e. producing a structure that reads as “New England farmhouse” or “Antebellum plantation”) than in creating an immersive experience of the local landscape through, for instance, the use of natural light, orientation to local topographical features, and the way the body physically moves through the landscape to enter and exit the building. Jameson emphasizes the importance of synesthetic experience grounded in the tactile and the tectonic as Frampton’s solution to “the isolation of the individual senses” and, specifically, the overreliance on vision that he considers a “symptom of postmodern alienation” (*Seeds* 198).

Though the formal solutions involved in creating such an embodied experience of place through architecture, an art form that quite literally dictates how we inhabit space, may seem far removed from those available to literature, at the heart of Frampton’s aesthetic is a shift from

showing us what the local looks like to inducing the *feeling* of what it means to inhabit the local. In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Jameson writes that the “antirepresentational equivalent [of Frampton’s architectural aesthetic] for the other arts (or literature) remains to be worked out” (197). I am interested in considering Jameson’s later work (particularly his discussion of affect in *The Antimonies of Realism*) as taking on the challenge of working out such an aesthetic. I also want to suggest, however, that well before the time of Jameson’s writing of *The Seeds of Time*, or even Frampton’s coining of the term “Critical Regionalism,” a number of authors had already been independently working out a Critical Regionalist literary aesthetic similarly grounded in repudiating the dominance of visual representation and conjuring embodied experience of place.

The aesthetic I trace in the mid-century works of Agee, Saer, Guimarães Rosa, and Arguedas can be generally characterized by four interrelated formal techniques 1) a shift from offering landscapes and local color up for visual consumption to demanding that the reader “live with” the worlds represented, a shift affected by reintegrating vision into a broader corporeal experience that includes participating in the temporality of the world narrated; 2) an espousal of non-linear, non-teleological narrative structures that implicitly challenge finality and very pastness of events, cultures, and spaces that discourses of modernity tend to code as archaic; 3) a tendency towards self-reflexivity and illegibility that calls attention to the tenuousness as well as the potential violence of the project of translating non-urban life into literary form and suggests that the partial failure of this project is both inevitable and ethically necessary; 4) a commitment to transmitting to the reader an affective sense of community or solidarity with the world represented, a commitment that is profoundly political in that it asks us to feel our relationality with places and beings (both human and non-human) not always considered as pertaining to modernity let alone to our sphere of ethical responsibility, but that resists assimilation to any national or party ideology. In the process, these works reveal the contemporaneity, or what Johannes Fabian has called the coevalness, of supposedly primitive or pre-modern ways of life, and often times their imbrication (in cultural, economic, and affective terms) with global modernity.

A timeless landscape no more

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams observes that country life has long been associated with landscape, conceived of as a scene to be visually consumed from a distant and unified perspective (120-121). This notion of landscape derives from the visual arts and from a specifically European school of painting, where landscape is by definition viewed from afar by one who surveys the land from a class-specific remove rather than one who works it. In a landscape painting, the illusions of totalizing vision and temporal stillness allow the viewer to apprehend the scene from an exterior perspective. Williams challenges this conception of landscape achieved through “impersonal procedures” early on in *The Country and the City*, a project which he admits is motivated by “personal pleasure and commitment” and not simply disinterested academic study (3). Williams emphasizes that for him, the country is not a landscape in the sense of a timeless tableau to be visually apprehended from without but, rather, a bustling scene in which he locates himself as an embodied subject:

It is the elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in the pockets of their khaki coats; It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light in the small hours, in the pig-farm across the road, in the crisis of a litter; the slow brown van met at the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep

jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of the silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road [. . .] (3) Conjuring not a still, and de-peopled natural landscape but, rather, a landscape animated by the daily and seasonal actions of the men and women who work it, Williams includes his own subjectivity, both by specifying his vantage point as an observer of this landscape (“the window where I am writing”) and by registering the smells, as well as the sights he experiences. Importantly, Williams acknowledges that he is an outside observer of the rural labor he describes (he looks down on the fields from his window rather than working in them), but he also reveals his deep personal familiarity with the sights, smells, and temporal rhythms of this landscape: one must have walked along country roads to know the shape of tractor tracks, the contours of difficult-to-navigate corners, and the smell of clay; one has to have done so repeatedly at different times of the day and in different seasons to describe the light, the clothing, the sense of calm or sense of urgency that accompany each moment evoked.

I find this move of Williams’s – that of conjuring an animated, personal, and embodied experience of country life for the reader – as significant as his subsequent analysis of the history and politics of representing country life. The impulse towards renouncing the detached position of Michel de Certeau’s “voyeur-god” and laying bare the interconnectedness of the landscape not only with the viewer but also with “larger movements of culture, politics, and history” has become a hallmark of Critical Regionalism (Reichert Powell 47, 66). Yet what Williams does in the passage cited above, and what the literary texts I focus on in this project do, is importantly different than simply revealing (intellectually or cognitively) that rural landscapes are social constructs. In addition to demystifying the view of the rural landscape as a naturalized external backdrop, Williams asks the reader to momentarily inhabit what Tim Ingold will call the “dwelling perspective.”

In “The Temporality of the Landscape” (1993), Ingold differentiates landscape from land, space, and nature. Landscape, for Ingold, is not a material (land) that can be quantified, bought, and sold; neither is it an abstract space that can be rationally measured, cartographically mapped, surveyed, and partitioned by “a consciousness at once immobile and omnipresent”(155). Finally, landscape is not nature, so long as nature is conceived as something “out there,” separate from human activities. To the contrary, “through living in it, the landscape becomes part of us, just as we are part of it” (154). Ingold understands landscape as a place (rather than a space) that derives its meaning from the embodied, and necessarily and temporal, experience of dwelling there:

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. It is from this relational context of people’s engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance. (155)

Landscape is not, then, a pre-existing entity to be looked at but, rather, a place to be looked around from within, a place that is formed as the viewer watches *and participates* (166-167).

“Dwelling” is the key term Ingold uses to describe the fundamentally temporal process through which landscapes (man-made and natural alike) acquire form and meaning. The landscape is the embodiment of the cyclical dwelling processes that transpire in a given place: these processes include human activities as well as the natural rhythms of day and night, seasons, tides, etc. with which human activities resonate (163). Ingold provides the example of a pear tree whose present form, consisting of its unique twisting and spreading of branches as well as its unique role within a human and natural ecosystem, is the embodiment of:

the entire history of its development from the moment it first took root. And that history consists in the unfolding of its relations with manifold components of its environment, including the people who have nurtured it, tilled the soil around it, pruned its branches, picked its fruit, and – as at present – use it as something to lean against. (168)

Because landscape is a living process, not an object, it cannot be visually apprehended from an exterior and atemporal perspective; to the contrary, its form and meaning are produced through rhythm and resonance and therefore can only be perceived through the “dwelling perspective” of one attuned to the temporality of the landscape. From this immersive perspective, time, history, movement, cyclical change, and the rhythmic patterns of day-to-day dwelling are all constitutive of the landscape.

The key point I take from Ingold’s argument is that *knowing the landscape* cannot be separated from *dwelling in the landscape*, and dwelling, which Ingold defines as attending to the rhythms of (human and non-human) others in the landscape, necessarily involves bodily perception (of sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, and physical movement across the topography), interaction, and temporal duration. Drawing on contemporary work in geology and anthropology, Ingold advances the idea that the body is an instrument of knowledge and that we understand space and culture alike through “immediate experience” and “everyday involvement in the world” (152). Perhaps the most radical move Ingold makes is to apply these principles to the field of archeology. Though it may seem impossible to know long-dead cultures through direct experience of them, Ingold argues that archeology is fundamentally “the study of the temporality of the landscape”: if we recognize the landscape as embodying the dwelling activities of those who have lived there, and if we can educate our attention to the landscape the way a hunter, tracker, or farmer must, becoming attuned to the rhythms (past and present) it expresses, we may indeed learn to use our bodies as archeological instruments (172, 152).

I am interested in the implications of Ingold’s thesis for how we might come to know regional landscapes through the act of reading literature. Can a literary text educate our attention to perceive the rhythms of the landscape? Though the reader cannot literally dwell in the text the way an anthropologist, archeologist, or architecture student can physically inhabit a culture, site, or building, might the fundamentally corporeal and temporal act of dwelling still be useful as a model of reading? The idea that poetic language can transmit a somatic experience through its rhythms is not new; we might think back to Susan Sontag’s 1964 call for “an erotics of art” in place of a hermeneutics²⁰. This idea has gained new traction though in recent conversations surrounding the politics of poetry (Masiello), affect and embodiment (Steward), and surface reading (Best and Marcus). Why, then, would we not grant poetic language the capacity to generate an embodied experience of place?

I believe the texts I examine in this project aspire to nothing less than to make the reader feel the temporality of the landscapes depicted from the dwelling perspective. Yet they also confront the reader with the unbridgeable gap between their medium and the form of embodied experience they strive to capture, raising questions about the limits of literature as a medium for affecting political change in how we relate to regional spaces. The point, then, is not to solve the problem of how we can have full access to regional lives through literature but, rather, to draw attention to this problem. We may not (and should not) come away from these texts satisfied that we have experienced regional life, but we will come away with them with a heightened sense of

²⁰ In “Against Interpretation,” Sontag argues that “Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now. [. . .] What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more” (20).

what we miss – the sensual pleasure of sensory immersion as well as the affective pull of recognizing our relationality with regional lives – when we limit our encounter with the regional to visually consuming landscapes and local color.

This shift from conceiving the landscape as a space to be *seen* to conceiving it as time-space to be *inhabited* is particularly important to heed in the age of visual culture in which we have lived for some time now. The texts that I analyze directly and indirectly engage with the visual media of photography and cinema, which, by the mid-twentieth century, had already permeated the cultural imaginary. In the face of pervasive visual documentation of spaces near and far and the lives of the people who inhabit them, these authors draw our attention to that which cannot be represented in visual terms, to the impossibility and undesirability of beholding rural landscapes through a panoramic, cartographic perspective, and to the tedium and intimacy of following the iterative rhythms of working life. Breaking with the positivistic use of photography to document what was, these texts ask us to recognize the intersubjective nature of looking, making us aware not only of our distance from the subjects we behold, but also of our relationality and of the shared time of experience that links us to those we behold.

The dwelling perspective as a site of resistance?

Before rushing to celebrate the ethical and political potential of a Critical Regionalist aesthetic, it is worth pausing to interrogate the capacity for resistance that Frampton attributes to *experience* of the local. Frampton's critics have dismissed his position as expressing naïve belief that the local can and must be expressed through an essential and autochthonous style, unadulterated by dialog with other cultures and innocent of ideological construction. This criticism represents a gross misunderstanding of Critical Regionalism as a retrograde insistence on preserving traditional styles (which Frampton explicitly disavows), rather than as advocating innovation attuned to the lived experience of the local setting (which Frampton clearly does). In fact, this misunderstanding very closely echoes the misperception of regionalism Gilberto Freyre attempted to address in his manifesto more than half-a-century earlier (Freyre's primary examples are, interestingly enough, also architectural).

There is, however, a critique worth heeding with regards to Frampton's treatment of experience, and it is premised on the by-now familiar (though by no means simple nor fully resolved) objection to the idea that immanent, corporeal experience (*Erlebnis*) can be considered pre-representational or pre-ideological.²¹ Frampton's hope for Critical Regionalism is that an aesthetic grounded in such immediate experience of place-specificity would offer an outside perspective from which to demystify the ideologies of modernism and postmodernism alike, both of which he sees as implicitly repudiating the relevance of local tradition. But can this "rearguard" aesthetic succeed in resisting the culturally homogenizing forces of late capitalist globalization by conjuring an embodied, relational, and personal experience of place? Is it necessary to grant experience primacy over reason, language, and ideology in order to grant it this capacity for resistance? Or is it sufficient to allow, as Raymond Williams does, that experience offers something in excess of these categories: embodied knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, practical know-how etc.? (Jay 210).

²¹ See Martin Jay's *Songs of Experience*, and in particular Jay's discussions of Althusser's objections to naturalizing the primacy of lived experience over ideology (198) and Joan Wallach Scott's insistence that experience is always already discursively constructed (250-255).

The Critical Regionalist aesthetic I trace in this project does not take the answers to such questions for granted but, rather, actively and self-reflexively interrogates the relationship between experience, language, and knowledge. The texts I examine question their own authority to represent regional life and their capacity render it fully visible and legible to an outside audience. This self-critical function can be quite explicit. For example, James Agee's text in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* continually reminds us of the impossibility of rendering its tenant-farmer subjects in language, as well as the ethical violation that would be entailed were they to be exposed in this way. We see a similar case of an author-figure lamenting that his representational project is doomed to poetic as well as political failure in the last novel of José María Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*: Arguedas continually interrupts the fictional world being elaborated in order to question the narrative's ability to bring the world of Chimbote into being in language. In *Grande sertão: veredas*, it is a fictional frame narrative that draws the most explicit attention to the problems of transmissibility that plague the text. The narrative is delivered as a one-sided dialog between the *sertanejo* Riobaldo and a silent, urban, intellectual interlocutor known only as O doutor; Riobaldo persistently questions O doutor's ability to grasp the moral complexities of life lived in the sertão, at the same time that he seems to actively thwart O doutor's and the reader's ability to comprehend his tale at all by scrambling its chronology. In the case of Saer's *El limonero real*, the question of transmissibility ceases to be addressed explicitly and is expressed entirely through formal structures, such as the way the narrative incessantly breaks off and recommences, as if dissatisfied with the version of the events it has produced. In this way, the novel draws attention to the way literary form – and particularly that of the novel – may be at odds with the slow, iterative rhythms of rural life.

In all four cases, formal difficulty becomes a way of underscoring the problems of transmissibility that are inherent not only in encounters between native informant and urban intellectual but also, more fundamentally, in the translation between oral and written cultures, between embodied experience and its linguistic representation. It is worth noting that the extreme formal difficulty of these texts also limits their readership to a very particular kind of lettered subject; they are emphatically not popular literature. Though they do not necessarily demand erudition, they demand patience, time, and tolerance for confusion and disorientation. Their ideal reader is willing to submit herself to the arduous process of being educated in how to attend to the rhythms and moods of the landscapes conjured and does not mind emerging from this experience empty-handed. Although the scope of their influence is limited by their limited readership, the political work of such texts nevertheless lies in engendering such an ethos of readerly participation: the reader must humbly seek meaning and coherence in a narrative world where these are not to be found. I understand the highly unconventional regionalist texts assembled in this project as taking the aesthetics of fragmentation and opacity to their extremes in order to draw the reader into the ethical quandaries in which they find themselves mired: Who, and whose languages and cultural forms, are authorized to represent the perspectives that have been left out of official accounts of history: the subaltern, the colonized subject, the illiterate peasant? Can the written word prolong the life and preserve the memory of (largely oral) local ways of life slated for extinction in an age of global capitalism, and can it do so without repeating the objectifying and exoticizing gestures of colonialism?

In sum, this is a project that seeks to re-politicize avant-garde poetics and difficult form, but not by unequivocally celebrating their capacity for resistance – to the market, to translatability, to the culturally homogenizing forces of globalization. Rather, I read the experimental poetics of the texts analyzed as expressing a crisis of transmissibility of experience;

they aspire to make us feel this loss on a personal and affective level, at the same time that they offer non-rational ways of knowing – often through embodied experience – that they suggest just might afford a more ethical, if still not fully redemptive, way of reading across cultural differences.

In other words this project asks how literary language – in its rhythms, its sensuality, its opacity, its violence – can provide an *experience* of the contact zone between the *ciudad letrada* and a rural other that refuses to be sequestered in a nostalgic fantasy nor reduced to stereotypes of backwardness, barbarity, or quaint pre-modern existence. The Critical Regionalist aesthetic I trace aims to transmit the affective texture of this necessarily stilted encounter, which includes the alienation and non-comprehension that result from failed cultural translation and the guilt and shame surrounding the reader's complicity in the exploitation and reification of rural life, but also the humility and vulnerability that make ethical connection possible and the time-dependent, experiential familiarity (*conocimiento*) that engenders the feeling of caring that underlies any political commitment.²²

In keeping with this ethos of intimate inhabitation or dwelling, I approach these texts primarily through close reading: a central tenet of my argument is that these texts demand from the reader a prolonged and immersive encounter. Though I engage with sociological readings of these texts and am deeply interested in their political stakes, I try to honor the fact that they prove extremely elusive to direct political readings. Encountering these worlds on their own terms, rather than imposing a political agenda on them, requires that we lose ourselves in their sounds and textures, that we experience them poetically, which is to say in time, and in the body.

In Chapter One, I analyze James Agee and Walker Evans's 1941 collaboration, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I begin this project with a North American text not to suggest a model of North-South influence but, rather, to illustrate that the conversation surrounding mid-century regionalist literature benefits from being extended beyond the bounds of Latin America, where *regionalismo* becomes a pejorative term in many articulations of literary modernity. In his account of the weeks he spent living with impoverished Alabama tenant farmers, Agee dwells on the material surfaces that surround his subjects and demonstrates the ethical perils of presuming to have access to the interior lives that are carefully guarded from his gaze and that of Evans's camera. By juxtaposing photographic and verbal images, I argue, *Famous Men* ultimately lays bear the limitations of both media, offering them as humbling correctives to one another's claims to authenticity and confronting its readers with the fraudulence and violence of any claims to intimate and totalizing knowledge of how the other half lives.

Chapter Two continues to explore the relationship between word and image in the work of Juan José Saer, an author who has vociferously disavowed any affiliation with regionalist literature in spite of persistently setting his fiction in provincial settings. I contend that recognizing Saer's intervention in the regionalist tradition is essential to appreciating the political stakes of the formal experiments for which the author is known. Related through a recursive rather than linear narrative structure, Saer's *El limonero real* (1974) elaborates a version of the

²² This claim follows the logic of Kay Milton in *Loving Nature*: Milton argues that environmental activists and nature protectionists are no more and no less than nature *lovers*, people whose direct experience of the landscape and of wildlife has engendered *feelings* that motivate political action. That commitment, political and otherwise, is premised on affective experience rather than on pure reason underlies Milton's argument as well as the model of committed literature at play in this project. We might also think of a form of community and solidarity, or what Massumi calls "caring for belonging," which might allow us to not merely acknowledge intellectually but *feel* a connection to the rural worlds depicted (*Politics of Affect* 43).

Argentine *litoral* that is palpably shaped by the cyclical patterns of work and rest, by the presence of personal and collective memories, and by the future death that always already hangs over it. Moreover, I argue that by weaving analeptic and proleptic movement into the act of looking, Saer's narrative gaze foregrounds the temporal dimension of gathering fragmentary visions in order to "see" the whole. In addition to suggesting the insufficiency of a purely visual and instantaneous gaze, such as that of the camera, these techniques encourage the reader to patiently observe in order to perceive the affective charge that the banal scenes and actions described carry for those who live them. At the same time, its emphasis on the opacity of visual surfaces and its tedious temporal progression resists producing exotic images of local color for easy consumption on an international literary market.

Chapter Three turns to a particularly canonical text, João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas*, which nevertheless remains on the margins of the Latin American 'boom' by virtue of issuing from Brazil, and enjoys relatively low circulation on the international literary market owing to its formidable length and difficulty and the challenges it poses to translation. Rosa's work has often been read as marking a key moment when Brazilian literature overcomes regionalism; yet I read Rosa's masterpiece as in fact insisting on the continued relevance of regionalist literature, and of imaginings of the sertão in particular, in modern Brazil. As readers, we are afforded neither the spatial nor temporal distance from which to contemplate the sertão as other, as past. In addition to foreclosing any act of external judgment on this world, submerging the reader in the "tempo de jagunços" in this way restores, at least for the considerable duration of the narration, the unboundedness – in spatial and temporal terms – of the very sertão that progressive reformers seek to enclose, terminate, and relegate to the past. Ultimately, I argue, *Grande sertão: veredas* posits a sertão that extends into modern Brazil, and whose labyrinthine time-space remains accessible to (and perhaps even inescapable for) modern readers.

Chapter Four focuses on the last novel of José María Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971). Like Agee's text, *Los zorros*, continually interrupts its representational project in order to foreground the ethical and aesthetic challenges that haunt it and which, the author fears, condemn it to failure. In Arguedas's case, these are the challenges faced by an author whose life-long commitment to representing the rural, indigenous cultures of the Andes must be translated into new terms in order to account for the interconnection of rural and urban life in an age of global capitalism and rapid industrialization. The landscapes conjured in *Los zorros* are not only heterogeneous but also exceedingly unstable: as the boundaries between different cultural, linguistic, and racial groups grow increasingly porous, so, too, do the distinctions between the natural landscape, inner landscape and social landscape. Lost Andean landscapes infiltrate the city in the memories, songs, and language of *campesino* immigrants, and figurations of the natural world grow increasingly contaminated by violent and exploitative urban socio-economic structures. In the end, *Los zorros* refuses to yield a totalizing panorama and insists that the tumultuous landscape of Chimbote cannot be made known through vision alone; rather, it must be transmitted through the embodied experiences of traversing it and hearing it. The faint hope offered by this novel, which is generally characterized by a tone of despair, lies in the possibility that Chimbote's multicultural citizens and Arguedas's increasingly diverse readers might learn to listen for traces of music, magic, and nature in the defiled urban landscape, thus re-enchanting the modern city and allowing the traditions of Andean regional life to be transmitted into the future.

Chapter One

James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: A Lesson in Looking with Care

The posthumous publication of James Agee's *Cotton Tenants* in 2013 has caused a renewed wave of interest in its author, a wave whose ripples have reached the Spanish-speaking world.²³ The publishers of *Cotton Tenants* believe this 30,000-word report on three tenant families living in rural Alabama in the 1930s to be the article that James Agee submitted to *Fortune* magazine in fulfillment of the journalistic assignment that is better known for yielding *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). *Fortune* had commissioned a 5,000-word piece documenting New Deal rural electrification projects in the deep South. This assignment led Agee and photographer Walker Evans to take up residence with the Burroughs (a.k.a the Gudger) family in Hale County, Alabama for over three weeks during the summer of 1936. For reasons about which we can only conjecture, *Fortune* declined to publish Agee's report.²⁴ In response, Agee produced a much longer and more experimental text that he published five years later as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Consisting of several dozen of Evans's photographs and over four-hundred pages of text, *Famous Men* exceeds the bounds of any one genre, and constitutes a forceful rejection of the format for which it was originally commissioned: the photojournalistic spread popular in the Henry Luce publications *Fortune*, *Time*, and later *Life*. In *Famous Men* Agee's experimental expository prose ranges from the highly descriptive – we find photographically detailed renderings of surfaces such as wood grain and denim – to the highly introspective – we cannot escape Agee's anguished meta-commentary on the ethical violations endemic to the task with which he is charged. This task is none other than that of making the lives of his impoverished subjects visible and legible to a presumably middle class, educated readership. In fact, everything about Agee's style in *Famous Men* seems to repudiate and undermine the expository mission underwriting the project: his condescending tone and overt hostility towards the reader are immediately alienating; his long, run-on sentences linked together by colons, combined with the rambling, non-linear movements of the text tax the reader's patience and endurance; and the author's indulgence in dense visual description and in embarrassingly personal confessions effectively deflects the reader's attention away from the purported subjects of the book: the tenant farmer's themselves.

We may never know why the editors at *Fortune* rejected Agee's original submission; however, we do now know that before Agee wrote *Famous Men*, he produced a text that appears much better suited to the form for which it was commissioned. *Cotton Tenants* reads as a journalistic essay. Composed primarily of short, declarative sentences, it describes the working and living conditions of the tenant families in detailed and objective terms, right down to the price of cotton and how many mules and pairs of shoes each man owns. The rediscovery of this precursor to *Famous Men* then begs the question: Why would someone who had already succeeded in presenting the story of these tenant farmers in clear, compelling, and impassioned expository prose go on to rewrite it in the sprawling, indirect, extremely difficult form that

²³ The Spanish publisher Capitán Swing has released the translation, *Algodoneros. Tres familias de arrendatarios*, which was reviewed in the Cultura section of *El País* in May of 2014.

²⁴ Theories as to why the original manuscript was rejected include: it was too long, journalistic fads change quickly, and there may simply not have been the readership for yet another rural poverty piece by the time Agee submitted his report. Poor timing aside, it is easy to see how *Cotton Tenants* might be too literary and/ or too politically radical for a mainstream financial publication such as *Fortune*.

Famous Men takes? This is a pressing question, not only for readers who are impatient with the protracted descriptions, neurotic self-scrutiny, and poetic asides of *Famous Men*, but perhaps even more so for readers who delight in Agee's style. Shouldn't we be concerned that all of Agee's "formal pyrotechnics" in *Famous Men* risk distracting from the urgency of the political and moral message that *Cotton Tenants* so clearly imparts?²⁵

I. James Agee and the politics of avant-garde poetics

In this chapter, I argue that *Famous Men* performatively rejects a representational politics of disclosure grounded in realist and documentary conventions in favor of an affective politics generated through avant-garde formal experiments with alienation, indirection, and performative failure. Agee spurns invasive and objectifying realist techniques in favor of an avant-garde poetics whose difficulty, opacity, and indirection shield the subjects depicted from full disclosure at the same time that its nonlinearity and temporal dilation seek to capture the iterative temporality of working life as well as the discomfort, guilt, and vulnerability that accompany *living with* the cultural "other." Ultimately, I argue that Agee's experimental literary journalism asks the reader trade in the distance and mastery associated with sociological knowledge and visual representation in order to immersively inhabit the time-space of the tenant families. In the process of drawing out the duration and heightening the sensorial impact of our encounter with this world, the text also checks its claim to intimate knowledge of its subjects, training the reader to respect the opacity of the surfaces that buffer the people depicted from our gaze.

The political work of *Famous Men* thus lies primarily in providing its readers with an aesthetic, affective, and ethical education. Such a model of civic education, premised not on telling the viewer what to think or what to do, but rather, on inciting her to *feel* her relationality with the subjects depicted, is indebted to the documentary photographer Lewis Hine's "aesthetic of sociality," and also anticipates more recent conversations about the politics of affect. I read Agee's text as attempting to recuperate this affective potential from a documentary tradition (spanning prose and importantly also photography) which he perceives as becoming perniciously ideological at the height of the institutionalized documentation of rural poverty by New Deal programs.

Because Lewis Hine worked within a framework of Progressive reform and because his work was later championed by New Deal reformers such as Roy Striker, head of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the politics of his photographs are often mistakenly understood as lying in their ability to reveal unconscionable realities and thus provoke direct action. Yet, as Alan Trachtenberg contends, Hine understood the social work of documentary photography as lying in its aesthetic function rather than in its expository function (204).²⁶ Hine's stated objective was to imaginatively engage his viewer to produce a sense of empathy and community

²⁵ The phrase "formal pyrotechnics," used to describe Agee's style, comes from Hugh Davis (xvi).

²⁶ In contrast, Roy Striker, who was, like Hine, trained as a sociologist, famously had little patience for the nuances of the aesthetic. While he claimed Hine's work inspired the work of the FSA, he (perhaps deliberately) misunderstood the aims of Hine's work, which included promoting appreciation of the "non-economic, nonproductive ends of personal fulfillment and social democracy" (Trachtenberg 219). In spite of this commitment, Hine did not understand his form of social critique as subversive to industrial capitalism. To the contrary, he held out hope that the existing order could be reformed, that the alienating effects of industrial capitalism could be overcome by aesthetic experience, that industrial workers could be afforded the dignity and empowerment of craftsman if the system learned greater social responsibility (ibid). It is this non-threatening version of Hine's aesthetic of sociality that New Deal politicians and technocrats like Roy Striker appropriated.

between viewing subject and photographic subject. Coming from a background in education and particularly influenced by Dewey's model of experiential, participatory education in *School and Society* (1800), Hine believes the work of documentary photography is not simply to inform the viewer but to "open his eyes," to teach him to look differently by allowing him to *experience* another reality (Trachtenberg 193). Trachtenberg thus argues that Hine's "aesthetic of sociality" cannot be reduced to "making suffering and injustice visible and goading the conscientious viewer to action" and should not be conflated with the social work of government institutions, with which Hine was not always in agreement (Trachtenberg 219, 206).

Today, such a form of social commitment, premised on the ability of an aesthetic experience to circumvent ideological allegiance and affect the viewer personally, lends itself to being read through the lens of affect theory. I draw on this body of theory directly and indirectly in my reading of *Famous Men*. I emphasize Agee's turn to affective experience as an (at times aggressive) means of imposing humility upon vision and cognition as modes of knowing (Massumi), Agee's insistence on re-integrating vision within a broader sensory experience we might describe as immersive and embodied (Merleau-Ponty), and Agee's elevated treatment of banal, quotidian actions and objects as the most essential (indeed, almost sacred) part of the subjectivities he represents (Steward). Agee's poetics also express an interest in the haptic qualities of photography (Abel) the rhythmic, sensual qualities of poetic language (Sontag, Masiello), and the possibilities and limitations of both media as means of generating embodied experience.

Indispensable to the aesthetic, affective, and ethical education delivered by *Famous Men* is its temporal intervention. In the historical context in which Agee writes, characterized by the convergence of an explosion of documentary photography depicting how the other half lives with the increasingly fast-paced consumption of images following the daily news cycle, the tediously slow and recursive temporal movement of Agee's text places unusually arduous demands on the reader/viewer: that we linger in the emotionally uncomfortable experience of recognizing ourselves as voyeurs, that we grapple with the alterity of a world not governed by the time of urban modernity, and that we earn our tenuous claim to intimate knowledge of this world by patiently following its slow and iterative rhythms. It is by requiring the reader to spend copious amounts of time immersed in this world that the text can achieve its affective and ethical work: that of making us *care* that is, making us feel our relationality to these subjects and our imbrication in their suffering *on a personal level*.

"Care" is the word Agee repeatedly uses to describe his connection with and commitment to the families with whom he lived in Hale County. While the choice of the word "care" may seem continuous with the sentimentally charged political rhetoric of the New Deal documentary culture, Agee imbues it with an excruciating quality that makes it seem impossible to bear lightly. It is his "care" that Agee wishes to impart to Mrs. Ricketts in order to alleviate the fear and shame she feels around them: "Mrs. Ricketts; you can have no idea with what care for you," he writes, directing these words towards the image of her that haunts him (322). Care, it seems, is the only ethical mode, inadequate and incommunicable as it may be, in which to meet the gaze of the tenants. As an affective response that develops organically out of spending time and sharing experiences with others, care is difficult to teach. Like work, whose iterative temporality resists documentation in visual or narrative terms, care cannot be instantaneously communicated nor casually imparted to the reader. Rather, it is a time-dependent affect – a mixture of tenderness, compassion, and affection that slowly and delicately emerges out of *living with*. In order to transmit the care he feels for the tenants to the reader, Agee attempts to formally

replicate the experience of *living with*, which entails being attuned to the same rhythms and cycles of daily life, saturating one's senses with the same sights, sounds, smells, and material surroundings, and, above all, relinquishing the fast-paced, novelty-oriented temporality of the journalist and the tourist in order to inhabit along with the tenants the tediously, painfully recursive temporality of working families trapped in a cycle of poverty.

At a historical moment when the affective power of witnessing rural poverty (both first-hand and through journalistic and photographic representations) was being harnessed to shore up a shaken sense of national belonging and solidarity, Agee's call to caring is aggressively anti-nationalistic. In fact, Agee's early revolutionary poetry, rediscovered by Hugh Davis, expresses a strong commitment to "a utopian transnational collectivism" rather than to the nation-state, against which he rails in extremely violent imagery (Davis 40). In his poems, Agee seeks to demystify (and ultimately do away with) the construct of the nation and reveal it as violently oppressive and antithetical to the brotherhood it claims to foster. He writes, for example, "Learn the bloody fact of State,/ The great fence with the narrow gate/ Through which the splintered brotherhood/ Is marched to meet itself in blood." (40-41). Agee's aversion to the nation state and the forces of violence and exclusion it represents – sentiments all-too understandable in today's climate of resurgent nationalism and fence-building – lead him to violent proclamations such as "Kill America out of your mind"/ [. . .] rather see the millions of the land" (ibid). Interestingly, especially in light of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1937 "I see millions" speech, for Agee, the construct of "America" is what prevents us from seeing the individual inhabitants of the land rather than the whole we might envision as a result of seeing them.²⁷

While the "transnational collectivism" Davis identifies in these early poems is overtly Marxist, by the time of writing *Famous Men*, Agee had grown disillusioned with international communism as well as with liberal democracy. As such, his strongly anti-ideological model of ethical commitment – grounded in feelings of care, solidarity, and interdependence between individuals – serves as both a critique of the nationalistic rhetoric of many New Deal programs and a case study in pursuing a model of belonging that resists entirely the binary logic of Cold War ideologies. Agee's text offers – however tentatively and ill-assured of its success – the affective experience of *living together* as a model for how to overcome rifts rooted in differences in class, culture, and geographic location in order to create a sense of collective belonging independent of allegiance to nation or political party.

It is this utopic longing – for a solidarity without politics, an ethics of interconnection untainted by capitalist economic relations, an affective community premised on the care that arises out of living together and sharing the same quotidian time-space – that makes Agee's text a touchstone for the Critical Regionalism explored in this project. In its heavy-handed articulations of this desire and, even more interestingly I would argue, in its fraught attempts to perform this ethos through its formal construction, *Famous Men* anticipates the Critical Regionalist turn I trace in mid-century Latin American texts in my subsequent chapters. Because so much of the text is given over to anguished self-reflection, it also comes closer than any of the other texts I examine to explicitly engaging with the theoretical questions that underlie this Critical Regionalist turn. In Agee's vain expressions of longing to relate to the tenant farmers on

²⁷ Roosevelt repeats the phrase "I see millions [. . .]" many times over to rhetorically weave a panorama of American suffering and to, according to Jeff Allred, interpellate his audience as fellow viewers capable of surveying the suffering of the less fortunate. See my discussion of this speech at the end of this chapter.

less corrupt terms, we might detect traces of Agamben's Coming Community, of Massumi's "caring for belonging," and of Barthes' Living Together.²⁸

It is important to emphasize that by beginning this project with a North American text, I am in no way suggesting a narrative of North-South influence. I have no reason to believe that the Latin American authors to whom I will later turn had read Agee; it is instead Faulkner's experimental regionalism that was widely disseminated in Latin America and which is often credited with revolutionizing regionalist literature in the Americas.²⁹ Though the impact of Faulkner on what I am calling a Critical Regionalist turn in the literature of the Americas is unquestionable, I am not interested in rehashing this well-rehearsed narrative of influence. I am drawn to Agee's text not because it offers a successful model for how to overcome the problems that plague early-twentieth-century regionalist literature, but, rather, because its failure is so instructive about the intractable nature of the dilemma: how to break away from an ethnographic model of representing modernity's others and present regional life to metropolitan audiences in a way that safeguards it from exoticization while also making it available to the reader as a site of aesthetic experience and ethical encounter. In other words, Agee's text is quite explicitly obsessed with the question at the heart of each of the texts examined in this project: how can literature be true (*fidel* – both in the sense of technically accurate and affectively loyal) to the experience of regional life? The tremendous difficulty of achieving such fidelity reflects the interrelated challenges of faithfully capturing the largely iterative and work-based rhythms of rural experience in language *and* not betraying the specificity of local experience by overly digesting it, that is, by reducing it to easily recognizable stereotypes or by making it available for easy appropriation by ideological discourses issuing from the center (i.e. nationalism). Agee, like Guimarães Rosa, Arguedas, and Saer after him, attempts to respond to these challenges through experimental form.

Agee's pursuit of a purer affective connection to the tenant farmers about whom he writes is fraught from the beginning and ultimately doomed to fail: his text cannot escape the class differences and power differentials that taint his relationship to these subjects, and the more he performs his guilt and inadequacy, the more attention he draws to the privilege that separates him, as an educated, middle-class interloper, from the world he longs to intimately inhabit. Yet, even though Agee's meta-textual reflections on the double-bind in which he finds himself ultimately prove counterproductive, I find something instructive about the way he approaches the challenge of ethically representing the tenant farmers in between his indignant outbursts over the necessary failure of the entire endeavor.

Agee's strategy, I argue, is to turn the *limits* of the dual media of *Famous Men* (writing and photography) into ethical resources in order to deliver maximum affective impact to his reader without resorting to the sensationalism and abjection of poverty he deplores in contemporary journalistic accounts. Photography is unparalleled in its ability to capture the real, but it produces opaque surfaces rather than depth and interiority. Moreover, the time of looking at a photographic image is determined by the viewer; the medium itself cannot demand, as music or film can, that we experience it over time. Narrative, in contrast, is more adept at conveying temporality, but the indirection and imprecision of the language upon which it depends inevitably lead it to betray the real things and lives it aspires to represent. While Agee vociferously laments the inadequacies of his own chosen medium and expresses admiration and

²⁸ See *The Coming Community*, *The Politics of Affect* (esp. 41-43), and *How to Live Together*, respectively.

²⁹ Gabriela García Márquez has joked that the only difference between the *nueva narrativa* authors and their regionalist predecessors is that the former had read Faulkner whereas the latter had not (Vigil 98).

envy for the photographer, I argue that he actually turns the “shortcomings” of both media into virtues, or at least correctives: Agee uses the indirection of language to prolong the time of looking at the photographic images included in *Famous Men* and, simultaneously, conjures the flatness and impenetrability of the photographic image in his writing as a way of checking the projection invited by psychological language.³⁰ He thus denies his reader access to the interiority of his subjects and lays bare the limits of vision as a means of producing knowledge. Most urgently, the text attempts to reeducate the reader’s gaze so that looking becomes an act of caring rather than an act of voyeurism, appropriation, or mastery. This re-education entails drawing attention to the potential violence of looking at the other, prolonging the time of looking so that the act becomes more painful and more intimate, and activating the reader’s other senses so that the act of looking, and all of the connotations of domination and power it entails in Western culture, become integrated into a more profound and more difficult mode of experiencing tenant life.

It is only by transmitting to the reader the painfully slow and iterative temporality of *living with* the tenant farmers that Agee can hope to make the reader feel the burden of caring, yet he finds photography and prose narration to be woefully inadequate means of conveying temporal dilation and recursivity. It is, instead, the temporalities of cinema, poetry, and embodied experience that offer the affective resources Agee requires. In its gestures outside of itself and its continuous (and necessarily failed) attempts to approximate other genres and media, Agee’s expository prose not only engages in an avant-garde performance of failure but also chastens its own act of disclosure. In revealing as useless the ways of knowing that underlie documentary photography and prose (journalistic or ethnographic) alike – vision and cognition – Agee redirects his reader towards a more humble and intimate way of knowing grounded in immersive, sensorial experience, iteration, and temporal dilation. Rather than telling the stories of the tenant farmers, which would involve exposing them to a gaze that might not treat them kindly, Agee’s text asks us to spend time with the surfaces that surround their lives, to observe how these surfaces are touched and worn with daily use, and through this temporally protracted encounter, to develop an affective relationship with this world.

Documenting the nation

Famous Men is both a product of and a reaction to New Deal documentary culture. The unprecedented number of writers and photographers on the government payroll under New Deal sponsored programs (the Works Progress Administration, the Farm Security Administration, etc.) suggests how deeply enmeshed the explosion of the documentary genre was with President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s centrist, progressive political and economic agenda. Though we should not lose sight of the fact that the primary aim of programs such as the FSA and the American Guide Series was to employ out-of-work writers and artists in a time of dire economic hardship, scholars also recognize the government-sponsored efforts to document and archive the conditions in rural America served an ideological purpose: that of presenting an image of national unity and solidarity in the midst of a crisis that was putting the always-tenuous construct of collective national identity to the test.

The success of the New Deal depended upon re-integrating the most blighted regions into the nation’s economy *and* symbolically unifying the country. The South represented particularly important ground to be recovered on both fronts. The Great Depression had

³⁰ In fact, in his 1937 Guggenheim application, Agee describes “the Alabama project” as “a strict comparison of the photographs and the prose as relative liars and as relative reproduces of the same matters” (qtd. in Orvell 278).

confronted Washington with the failure of Reconstruction: the South had been hardest hit by the Great Depression, revealing its continued economic dependency, and New Deal reformers from Washington found that their modernization campaigns were still met with virulent regionalism and resentment. In addition to alleviating material poverty, then, an implicit goal of New Deal programs in the South was to symbolically reclaim this historically factious region. Presenting (or manufacturing) an image of national unity was a particularly pressing political need in the late 1930's, when Washington was seeking to drum up a spirit of nationalism on the brink of World War II. At this juncture, it was of utmost importance to draw the region back into the modern, capitalistic, industrial order in order to consolidate the national image as united and modern – but still diverse and inclusive (in opposition to the fascist enemies in Europe).³¹ In this political climate, more than ever, the deep South became emblematic of the challenges to national unity: the country's social and economic fringes, its belated zones and unruly frontier spaces.

New Deal programs drew on the traditions of ethnography, travel writing, and documentary photography to symbolically secure outlying regions to the nation. The growing use of sociological discourse allowed Washington experts to exercise academic authority over the social fringes, assimilating sub-cultures as ethnological objects of study. The mainstream marketing of rural regions as slightly exotic yet definitively domestic sights of tourism (the American Guide Series) and voyeurism (the popular photographic spreads of rural domestic life to be found on the pages of *Life*, *Time*, and *Fortune* magazines) turned the visual consumption of outlying places and peoples into a national pastime for the growing middle classes. Books, such as those produced by the American Guide Series, or for that matter, the increasingly popular documentary photography book, united voices and images from diverse regions in order to furnish “evidence of national community”, thus facilitating “the slippage between regionalism and nationalism” (Bold 13). Yet, what makes cultural production from this era so interesting is that the photographs, magazine articles, and guidebooks that New Deal artists produced rarely aligned perfectly with the official agenda of the administration sponsoring them. To the contrary, the famously centralized management of New Deal projects from Washington generated significant tension between the authority of “local knowledge” and that of “academic expertise” (Bold 128). Strong localist sentiments emerged from within projects that were supposed to be nationalistic, and the divergent political and aesthetic biases of the contributing writers and artists introduced discord and ambiguity into the official record, creating endless headaches for the bureaucrats charged with administering federal projects and a rich and nuanced archive for future scholars. As such, it is important to clarify that New Deal programs, while undoubtedly responsible for feeding the nation's appetite for images of local color, did not produce universally positivistic nor nationalistic representations of regional spaces.

I read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as launching a morally-grounded critique of the objectification and sensationalism that accompanied the nation's increasing obsession with documentary and journalistic representations of rural poverty. Though this cultural phenomenon arguably reached its zenith in New-Deal-era (North) America, I understand FDR's federally funded campaign to document the nation (and especially its most blighted regions) as it recovered from the Great Depression as only the most visible example of a phenomenon which predates his presidency and the Great Depression itself, and which transcends national borders.

³¹ This is one instance of how representations of the region serve nationalistic ideology: “the diverse physical resources of the country, went the argument, inescapably gave rise to diverse forms of cultural expression. Therein lay America's true richness and its full independence from Europe” (Bold 31).

Agee's text, like the other texts examined in this project, critiques the ideology underlying this phenomenon while abstaining from direct critique of any particular political regime. This distinction is important, both to the political autonomy staked out by each of these authors and to the implications of my comparative project. In claiming, for example, that James Agee and João Guimarães Rosa both deconstruct the rhetorical process through which national identity is consolidated through documentary practices, I do not mean to suggest a broad equivalency between FDR's centrist government in the United States and Vargas's centrist government in Brazil (though I do find it interesting that both FDR's left-leaning liberal democracy and Vargas's conservative autocracy invested heavily in photographically documenting their nations' most outlying regions). Nor do I mean to imply that Agee's repudiation of the documentary culture that pervaded the nation in the 1930's constitutes a critique of the efficacy of New Deal programs themselves. Agee expresses outrage over the failure of government programs to fully address the suffering and systematic exploitation of people like the tenant farmers he meets in Alabama, but the primary object of his critique is the pervasive culture of consumption in which images and stories of poverty and degradation circulate as commodities valued for the sensationalist and sentimental reactions they provoke. This critique is aimed more directly at the journalistic industry and its public than at government programs such as the FSA, although there was considerable continuity and collaboration between private press and government programs.

Producing the past through photography

The photographic camera proves to be a powerful instrument in strategically producing the image of the nation, owing to its ability to obscure its own participation in the shaping of the official record: the photo documentary image claims to be an unmediated record of the truth, thus mystifying the way "American culture" is created so much as recorded (Bold 5). Moreover, photography's ability to arrest, capture, immortalize, and preserve for posterity proves a potent rhetorical tool with which to face the crisis, as much cultural as ecological or economical, known as the Dust Bowl. During a crisis defined by the metaphor of erosion, when people, communities, and traditional ways of life cannot be secured in place any more than the soil on which they depend, when farming communities and the pastoral fantasy they represent in the national imaginary are prone to "blowing away," migrating, and dissipating out of existence, documentary, and photo-documentary in particular promise a powerful "fix."³² Even if documentary photographs fail to produce tangible benefits for the impoverished and displaced farmer, they offer reassurance to the middle-class, urban consumer of his image, who is able to hold in her gaze a rural way of life that provides proof of "roots" in a time that felt rootless and a sense of place in a time of displacement (Bold 11). The government's investment in the rhetorical work of "securing" a way of life that was extremely precarious through the documentary photography provided the illusion that the FSA was preserving a classical, American way of life, when in reality, as the agency's detractors allege, its material work consisted of shifting American farming practices away from the model of the family farm and towards a model of agribusiness (Trachtenberg 247).

Thus, there is an important temporal dimension to the ideological work of photographically documenting the nation's most rural regions: much as Fabian has argued of classical ethnographic discourse, creating a visual archive of the Depression-blighted South entails documenting its poverty and underdevelopment *and* displacing this version of the region

³² Miller writes, that erosion is "the fittest metaphor for the displacement, depopulation, and dispossession that industrial-capitalism was believed to have so relentlessly effected" (377).

into the archaic past, even as the “yeoman ideal” is claimed as a core American value.³³ The South becomes a spatial repository for a nostalgic pastoral fantasy. As Stuart Kidd notes, nostalgic images cut both ways, at once reassuring the country of the “soundness” of its origins and expressing wistfulness for simpler times and a less technological and homogenized world (Kidd 230, 237). Balancing nostalgia and progressive ideology requires what Jeff Allred describes as “an ideological ‘double shuffle,’ whereby the celebration of the nobility of the nation’s rural poor is coupled with its disappearance amid a national project of industrialization and modernization, figured as both inevitable and unambiguously good” (5).

While it is tempting to see nostalgic celebrations of the local and of small communities as indicting the urban, capitalistic order that is quickly overtaking them, James S. Miller, argues in “Inventing the ‘Found’ Object,” that the “dedication to recuperating the idea(1)s of ‘locality’ and ‘community’” that is present throughout such “Depression-era phenomena as regionalist fiction and the New Deal-sponsored States Guide Series” does not simply posit these “bygone” values as “redemptive counterpoints to the standardization and anonymity of modern commercial life;” these same discourses also contain a “legitimation strategy” that imbues modern commercial life “with the authenticating texture of ‘pastness’” (382, 390) According to Miller, the mechanism through which these discourses “discover” and elegeize the past (the pseudo-archeological excavation of artifacts, the documentation and display of such found objects in museums and in magazines with mass circulation, etc.) has the effect of dissolving the supposed opposition between artifact and commodity: both “obey the same cultural logic, that each circulates within an economy of representation and display” (388). Found objects, often themselves industrially manufactured goods, are pried lose from the specific locations, families, ways of life in which they were once integral and begin to circulate as signifiers of poverty, backwardness, and a lost rural past (ibid).³⁴ Beyond converting “junk” into artifacts, and back into commodities, discourses that celebrate the unearthing and documenting of the recent past may actually further jeopardize an already precarious existence by coding it as archaic and untimely.³⁵

Miller reads James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as “the most elaborated and self-conscious meditation” on this double-bind (385). Miller figures Agee as a guilty ethnographer who understands the violence and the fraudulence of the work in which he is engaged. Agee’s repudiation of ethnographic journalism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is indeed resounding; he distances his and Evans’s project from this genre and from its ideological work so explicitly and so emphatically that these vocal cries of protest are capable of drowning

³³ Kate Sampswell-Willman observes that this is a particularly strong movement in the interwar years when modernist “glorification of the machine age” yields to “a pastoral aesthetic that dominated regionalism and much social realism” (150). The economic and political turmoil of these years inspires an acute search for “a national cultural identity” that leads America to once again cleave to the pastoral ideal from which it had distanced itself in the first decades of the twentieth century (ibid).

³⁴ See also Mark Goble’s *Beautiful Circuits*, in which he discusses the translation of materiality into information as integral to modernist aesthetics: to archive is to make symbolic, to make the intransigent materiality of things symbolize (230-231).

³⁵ Paula Rabinowitz asks of the documentary genre in general: “Does making visible the invisible, subaltern or hidden doom its culture? Or, as James Clifford argues, is the narrative of doomed cultures part of the ethnographic conceit of discovery and revelation? The ethnographer constantly needs to search out a dying culture, and in doing so, ensures its death and secures his or her lament over it” (153) The violence that is done when we relegate a way of life to the past in order to remember and honor it is part of what Miller argues Agee’s text lays bare: “*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* routinely links the process of anatomizing and ordering the vestiges of this “vanishing” world with some form of violence – regularly highlighting, for example, the pervasive, problematic relationship between *remembering* a recuperated “folk” history and *dismembering* it” (387).

out the quiet work of documentation that *Famous Men* undertakes even as it declares such work impossible and unethical. Miller concludes that although Agee is committed to laying bare the process through which documentary culture assimilates the vernacular and the folk into the logic of modern capitalism, and although he expresses deep ambivalence about participating in this ideological enterprise, he is ultimately incapable of fully freeing himself from it. Agee's vociferous repudiations of ethnographic journalism must then be read as merely a performance of protest rather than as actual resistance.

I tend to agree with this conclusion, and I believe, moreover, that Agee would as well: the anguish he expresses throughout the meta-textual sections of *Famous Men* derives from his resignation to the fact that he cannot ultimately control the reception of his text nor prevent his subjects from being appropriated and reified by the very discourses he repudiates. Nevertheless, I believe we miss a great deal of what *Famous Men* is doing by focusing exclusively on its (inevitable) failure to fully escape the genre of ethnographic reportage. Ultimately, I am less interested in whether or not Agee succeeds in breaking with the ideology of New Deal-era documentary culture than in the questions: *to what ends* does Agee performatively stage this rift? And what is achieved *in the meantime* while Agee is lamenting his inevitable failure to represent the farmers on less corrupt terms?

In answer to these questions, I would go beyond Miller's thesis to suggest that by exposing the ideological processes through which the rural poverty is displaced into the past and commoditized as Americana, Agee also challenges his reader to come into a different temporal relationship with the lives he represents. He asks us to experience the tenant farmers as our contemporaries and to feel our imbrication in their lives as participants in the socio-economic system that victimizes them and as participants in the documentary culture that objectifies them. The violence with which Agee rails against and dismantles the conventions of ethnographic journalism and social realism is intended to jolt the reader out of her complacency with the modes of reading demanded by these genres. Agee's is a critique, then, not only of the potential violence of expository journalism and documentary photography but, also, of their implicit claims that making suffering visible is enough to generate ethical encounters, political solidarity, and affective community between the poor and the middle class consumers of their images and stories. Beyond repudiating the tradition of ethnographic journalism, which *Famous Men* does quite explicitly, the text also endeavors to retrain us as readers and viewers. Instead of encountering the text as voyeurs, ethnographers, or liberal do-gooders in search of spectacle, data, or political propaganda, we are asked to feel our relationality to this world. Agee's avant-garde poetics are indispensable to this endeavor: the density, difficulty, and indirection of Agee's text serve in part to keep the voyeuristic reader at bay; meanwhile, these same features prolong the duration of our encounter with lives of the tenant farmers, inviting us to come into a more intimate, more uncomfortable, but ultimately more ethical relationship with these lives.

Getting schooled in the intimacy of distance

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings [. . .] (5)

One of the central questions posed by *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is: if creating and circulating the images of these “poor defenseless” people amounts to such a violation, why not simply desist? What compels Agee to write page after anguished page if he believes his project to be futile at best and appallingly unethical at worst? Why not just let them be without violating the sanctity and isolation of what he describes as “a little country settlement so deep, so lost in shelve and shade of dew, no one so much as laughs at us” (48)? In the following two sections of this chapter, I answer this question by reading Agee’s text for its pedagogical strategy. I argue that Agee challenges himself and his readers, albeit with considerable skepticism as to both of their aptitudes for success, to come into a relationship of community with the tenant families without collapsing the distance upon which the ethical soundness of such community depends.

In my discussion of distance as an ethical strategy, I am drawing on Roland Barthes’s 1977 seminar series, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some everyday Spaces*, where Barthes articulates the fantasy of “idiorrhhythmic Living-Together” as “the utopia of a socialism of distance” (6), which embodies the paradox of a community based on “an ethics (or a physics) of distance between cohabitating subjects” (72). Though premised on ascetic colonies such as those to be found living “alone together” in monasteries, Barthes’ idiorhythmic fantasy is self-consciously utopic. For Agee, who cannot escape the power hierarchy that taints his relationship with the tenants, too, the longing for a more ethical form of community is an impossible and utopic longing that could only come into being outside of the class structure that binds him and his readers to the world of the tenant farmers.

What most interests me about Barthes’ utopic fantasy of a sociality premised on an ethics of distance is that he articulates it as a community built on affect: “The utopian tension – that inhabits the idiorhythmic fantasy – stems from this: what is desired is a distance that won’t destroy affect [. . .] a distance permeated, irrigated by tender feeling” (132). This utopian form of sociality would be governed by what Barthes calls “Tact” : “distance and respect, a relation that’s in no way oppressive but at the same time where there’s a real warmth of feeling” (ibid). It is this notion of distance as a both an expression of respect and a space in which affective connections might be cultivated that resonates with Agee’s aspirations in this project. This fantasy of relationality premised on respectful distance and nonsynchronicity provides an alternate model for community on the national level as well: at a time when New Deal-sponsored documentary projects sought to re-integrate the prodigal South into a modern and progressive order, Agee’s text longs for a way to honor those who are out-of-step with the times on their own terms rather than stigmatizing their backwardness or correctively folding them back in to the forward-moving rhythm of the nation.

The strategies of distancing that Agee employs range from decisions about how to live with the Gudgers – his decision to sleep on the porch rather than in the house, and to live out-of-synch with their rhythms, keeping vigil while they sleep and staying behind in the house while they work – to decisions about how to represent them in writing – his decision to introduce us to the Gudger’s while they are sleeping on the other side of “this so thin shell and protection of a wall” (62), to his preference for describing their house when they are not in it, to his proclivity for describing surfaces rather than personalities, and perhaps most famously, his choice to lavish his descriptions on George Gudger’s overalls rather than on the man who wears them³⁶. Agee states that “There will be no time in this volume to tell much of personalities” (247), but he finds the time to write four-page description of the way denim fades and conforms to the body through

³⁶ See *Famous Men* 234-238. This moment of the text will be treated in more detail in the next section.

time, weather and use. He finds time to write over eighty pages of detailed description of the tenant farmers' unoccupied homes, dutifully refusing to omit a single detail.³⁷ The text focuses more on the house than its residents out of deferential reverence to the people he does not dare try to "capture" in prose. This decision forms part of an ethical strategy that precludes identification with the tenants. The tedious process of reading a seemingly interminable text that screens us from direct interaction or identification with its characters teaches us to value the understated intimacy of *living together*, that is of being granted close proximity but not necessarily full disclosure. The rare moments when the text fully exposes the tenants to our gaze are so acutely uncomfortable that we learn to appreciate the ethical value of the distancing, shielding, and buffering the text has been providing as it performs its incapacity to more fully represent these families.

Delivering the bodily impact of the encounter

For Agee the political power of avant-garde art lies in its ability to affect the viewer or reader on a bodily level. Writing in defense of avant-garde artists from Gertrude Stein to surrealist filmmakers in a 1936 article in the communist journal *New Masses*, Agee insists that before we dismiss such experimental work as inaccessible and elitist, we ought to consider that it derives its "power and clarity" from its capacity for "hitting its audience in the belly as well as between the eyes" (49). For Agee, in fact, anti-realist aesthetics that aspire to speak to the body and the unconscious as well as the conscious mind strive for a different but no less valid form of universal accessibility than that of socialist realism:

For the materials of so-called surrealism are the commonest of all human property. And a man who cannot by mischance grasp a problem intellectually is grasped by it if it is presented through the subtler, more forceful, and more primitive logic of movement, timing, space, and light. (49)

Agee's fascination with surrealism and his longing to communicate through a "more primitive logic" than the intellect admittedly get him into trouble: this penchant leads him to primitivize his subjects at times, undercutting his efforts to communicate their contemporaneity and to imbue them with human dignity.³⁸ However, his instinct to pursue this more embodied and forceful mode of communication by drawing on the vocabulary of film – "movement, timing, space, and light" – reveals much about how Agee understands the relationship between "the belly" and "the eyes" and the political as well as aesthetic importance of appealing to both.

Agee's contemporaries were inundated with opportunities to feast their eyes upon the suffering of the poor, but simply apprehending such images visually and intellectually does not, according to Agee, deliver a sufficiently violent "blow" to the audience. In fact, Agee persistently laments that he cannot be *violent enough* when it comes to educating the reader: at one point he regrets his inability to "blow out the brains with it [the text] of you who take what it

³⁷ For example, the inventory of objects in the Gudgers' bedroom so thoroughly describes the exact location, quality, and craftsmanship of every object down to the last tchotchke that one could produce a detailed drawing or, for that matter, an insurance claim based on it. The reader may breath a small sigh of relief when Agee announces, "I shall not fully list the contents of the bureau drawers" (142), but we are not spared a robust paragraph describing (perhaps not as exhaustively as possible) these contents: schoolbooks, re-used wrapping paper, etc.

³⁸ Hugh Davis identifies this as one of the major failings of Agee's text: "Although he insists that he is attempting to present these families as they are, Agee's tendency to bestialize or aestheticize them demonstrates the difficulty of representing them outside the predetermined primitivism categories. It also renders them totally passive, objects of pity or contemplation for the civilized gaze. Even when he extols their primitive virtues, the effect is ambiguous" (159).

is talking of lightly, or not seriously enough” (271). Agee shudders to think that the lives of the tenant farmers might be “looked into” by readers “who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book, and who were actuated toward this reading by various possible reflexes of sympathy, curiosity, idleness, et cetera, and almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what they are doing” (10). Forcing the readers to realize “the enormity of what they are doing” by “looking into” the lives of others is one of Agee’s primary objectives, and I argue that this urgent need accounts for much of the text’s violence towards conventional forms and, frequently, towards its readers. The political efficacy of directing this hostility and violence towards the reader, instead of towards the social structures that have marginalized the tenant farmers in the first place, may seem dubious: after all, what can alienating the reader possibly accomplish for Agee or for the living conditions of the tenants? Yet, Agee intends his text to deliver an edifying injury to the reader: proclaiming itself “a swindle, an insult, and a corrective” the text seeks to disabuse the reader of the comfortable modes of reading we have learned from art and journalism and make us *feel* the suffering inflicted by an unjust system in which we are all complicit.

In other words, Agee’s strategy is not simply to alienate the reader but also to retrain the reader who possesses sufficient tenacity to withstand his abusive rhetoric. Agee considers the participation of his readership indispensable to the poetic project undertaken within *Famous Men*: only the well-trained reader can breathe life into the words on the page and rescue Agee’s project from reifying the very lives he aims to animate. Agee writes that successful realization of his project would require extreme dexterity not only on the part of the author but also on the part of the audience: “That [language] should have and impart the deftness, keenness, immediacy, speed and subtlety of the ‘reality’ it tries to reproduce, would require incredible strength and trained skill on the part of the handler, and would perhaps also require an audience, or the illusion of an audience, equally well trained in catching what is thrown” (208). Imparting this training to his audience will be one of Agee’s principal goals in *Famous Men*.

This training, as we will see, is conceived as one of physical, bodily rigor. In his introductory materials, Agee compares proper reading practices to listening to Beethoven or Schubert with masochistic devotion:

But I don’t mean just sit down and listen. I mean this: Turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there, breathing as lightly as possible, and not moving, and neither eating nor smoking nor drinking. Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won’t hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it (12-13)

Agee configures aesthetic experience as a form of sacrifice if not penance. Properly hearing Beethoven involves getting down on our knees, foregoing food and other temptations such as cigarettes, reverentially minimizing our movements and even our breathing, and gladly subjecting ourselves to bodily pain. This is of course a metaphor for how Agee would like us to experience his text, although, as we have seen, he seriously doubts his own capacity to produce the symphony of a text his subjects deserve, as well as his reader’s ability to read “seriously” enough to allow herself to be hurt by the text. Nevertheless, Agee does his utmost to make us *feel* the demands his text makes on us on a bodily level.

Agee turns to cinema, music, and poetry as forms that might deliver a sufficiently visceral and painful encounter. In “Animating the Gudgers,” Caroline Blinder argues that it is the moving camera, even more than the still camera, which Agee aims to emulate in his descriptive

prose (153). Agee explicitly invokes the moving camera as a muse of sorts on several occasions. When describing the floor of the Gudger's house, he writes:

and here a moving camera might know, on its bareness, the standing of the four iron feet of a bed, the wood of a chair, the scrolled treadle of a sewing machine, the standing up at right angles of plain wood out of plain wood, the great handsome grains and scars of this vertical and prostrate wood, the huge and noble motions of brooms and of knees and of feet . . . (131)

Interestingly, the vast majority of the "footage" Agee produces here shows only static objects, as if to suggest that "the huge and noble motions of brooms and knees and of feet" cross the frame only periodically, punctuating an otherwise still scene with movement. Hence, what Agee sees as the advantage of the moving camera is not its ability to capture action, but, in fact, its ability to capture the "empty" time in between actions. In other words, what Agee aspires to emulate from cinema is not simply its ability to record motion and change, but its ability to make us experience the temporal duration of motion and change, which often proves slow and tedious. Patience and endurance thus become conditions for "serious" reading and watching. In fact, Agee suggests in the Preface that the text, at over four-hundred pages, "be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident" (xi).

Agee again expresses his desire to record as the moving camera does in a section devoted to the wearying rhythms of work by which the tenants live. Here, once more, Agee emphasizes the slowness of the movements to which the moving camera might bear witness:

That is the general pattern, its motions within itself lithe-unfolded, slow, gradual, grand, tremendously and quietly weighted, as heroic a dance: and the bodies in this dance, and the spirits undergoing their slow, miraculous, and dreadful changes [. . .] Miss-Molly, chopping wood as if in each blow of the axe she held captured in focus the vengeance of all time; Woods, slowed in his picking, forced to stop and rest much too often, whose death is hastened against a doctor's warnings in that he is picking at all: I see these among others on the clay in the grave mutations of a dance whose business is the genius of a moving camera, and which is not my hope ever to record: yet here, perhaps, if not of these archaic circulations of the rude clay altar, yet of their shape of work, I can make a few crude sketches . . . (285-286)

Agee disavows the ability to see what the moving camera sees – namely the slow, repetitive dance that is tenant life – and opts instead for a mode of description that abides by the limits of still photography, hoping only to register in "crude sketches" the traces this dance leaves on the clay, to describe a scuffed surface on which the patterns of working life have been recorded. Reminding us that the medium through which we encounter these lives (language) falls short of cinema's ability to capture motion serves as a call to humility, a reminder that short of actually living with the Gudgers, we will only ever be able to contemplate traces of their lives.

Beyond performing the failure of language: Poetry's indirection as a resource

In a much-cited moment in the Preamble, Agee declares his impossible desire to deliver the raw materiality of experience:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement [. . .] A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. (10)

What starts as a longing for an extra-linguistic mode of transmitting experience does not come to rest on photography as a satisfactory alternative, as is initially suggested. After all, Agee easily could have kept his own commentary to a minimum, allowing Evans's photographs to speak for themselves. Instead, his insistence on supplementing these photographs with over four-hundred pages of text belies a conviction on the part of the author that photographs alone cannot deliver the direct, unmediated contact with life that the naïve viewer might expect of them. Given the impracticality of disseminating the ideal supplements to the photographs – objects, smells, voices, bodily fuel and bodily waste, and, ultimately, bodies themselves – Agee does his best to approximate this direct experience through language. Ironically then, Agee finds the best substitute for “no writing at all” to be an exorbitant amount of writing; Agee's overwhelming volubility is presented as an attempt to compensate for the hopeless inadequacy of language.

Yet, I would like to suggest that in Agee's text excess also serves a protective function. Through the glut of introductory materials including warnings, disclaimers, red herrings, rants, poems, and other strategies of indirection and deferment, Agee makes it difficult to pick up *Famous Men* casually, and more difficult still to access its ostensible contents, the representation of tenant life. We do not actually meet these families until we are fifty-some pages into the text, at which point they are introduced as nameless bodies sleeping in the next room; Agee does not have us look them in the face until we are over three-hundred pages in. Rather than simply representing a crisis of confidence as Agee claims – “I mistrust myself” – all of these equivocations also serve to condition reader to encounter the tenants in an appropriate and ethical way.

Yet, Agee is more prone to treat his “failure” to fully animate the tenants' world as an inevitability than as a choice. He fatalistically declares as much in one of his many preemptive disclaimers: “I feel sure in advance that any efforts, in what follows along the lines I have been speaking of, will be failures*” (210). Agee's asterisk leads us to his own annotation of his text, in which he expounds: “Failure, indeed, is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such a work”(ibid). In Agee's view, when the task at hand is bringing real people to life on the page, any presumption that success is possible is arrogant and blasphemous. Through this perverse, if noble, logic of self-sabotage, Agee provides an explanation of sorts for why he chooses writing as his medium when he clearly considers it an unwieldy and inappropriate tool for the job. As in the analogy of attempting to plough with a cow, the unsuitability of the blameless instrument ensures that the artist will meet his obligation to fail.³⁹

Though Agee is skeptical of the ability of language in general to transmit experience, he is particularly skeptical of realist prose.⁴⁰ Seeing the naturalistic genres most often used to address urgent social issues – journalistic reportage and realist prose more generally – as morally

³⁹ Agee writes: “Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit. That is more than can be said of the instrument of any other art. But it must be added of words that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication [. . .] It may, however, be added: words like all else are limited by certain laws. To call their achievement crippled in relation to what they have tried to convey may be all very well: but to call them crippled in their completely healthful obedience to their own nature is again a mistake: the same mistake as the accusation of a cow of her unhorsishness” (209).

⁴⁰ Agee writes: “I doubt that the straight ‘naturalist’ very well understands what music and poetry are about [. . .] if you share the naturalist's regard for the ‘real,’ but have this regard for it on a plane which in your mind brings it level in value at least to music and poetry, which you in turn you value as highly as anything on earth, it is important that your representation of ‘reality’ does not sag into, or become one with, naturalism; and in so far as it does, you have sinned, that is, you have fallen short even of the relative truth you have perceived and intended [. . .]” (209-210).

corrupt and aesthetically bankrupt, Agee experiments with prose that seeks to approximate music and poetry in its ability to imbue his representation of the tenant lives with rhythm, time, and motion. In a letter to Father Flye from 1930, Agee claims he wants to “*write symphonies*” but, he continues,

Well—this can’t be done to best advantage in a novel. Prose holds you down from the possibility of such music [. . .] It’s got to be narrative poetry, but of a sort that so far as I know has never been tried [. . .] I’ve thought of inventing a sort of amphibious style – prose that would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression. That may be the solution; but I don’t entirely like the idea. What I want to do is, to devise a poetic diction that will cover the whole range of events as perfectly and as evenly as skin covers every organ, vital as well as trivial, of the human body (Letters 42)

The “amphibious style” towards which Agee aspires would allow for the musicality of poetry but also the comprehensive coverage of prose. The bodily metaphor of skin emphasizes the need for this language to organically take on the shape of the organs that it covers and protects and to move with them. As such, this ideal language must itself be a vital and supple organ, a living surface that mediates contact with the world, and a sensory organ that transmits pleasure and pain. Later in this chapter, I explore the possibility that Agee’s dense poetic language acts as such a skin-like medium, protecting that which it represents from full disclosure through its opacity while also aspiring to transmit the sensations of the tenant world directly to the reader.⁴¹ Just as Agee praises cinema’s ability to hit us not only visually and intellectually but also “in the belly” and through the “more forceful, and more primitive logic of movement, timing, space, and light,” Agee aspires to write poetic prose that *we feel*.⁴²

It is to poetry rather than prose that Agee turns when he feels that words fail him with regards to “The things most seriously on my mind -- / Oh, war; free speech; my soul; atomic fission;” (Letters 141). In fact, in 1946 he initiated a game of sorts of corresponding in verse with Father Flye. Of this experiment, Flye playfully writes:

Epistolary versifying
May frequently prove well worth trying,
As carried on by lines that scan
We comment on the race of man,
Moralize, question, let our thought
Draw in its net and see what’s caught (144)

For his part, Agee expresses a characteristic sense of failure at adequately catching thoughts in the net of his language. Even when one impassioned stanza culminates with the definitive proclamation, “So, looking through the shattered prism,/ The one clear light is Socialism.”, Agee immediately undermines the finality of this conclusion in the next stanza:

Here I’m afraid my logic fails.
Couplets like these ought to be nails
Each one hit cleanly on the head
And with one stroke sent straight to bed:
And well used, that’s a better way

⁴¹ This discussion will be taken up more directly in Part II of this chapter.

⁴² For a more sustained discussion of the ethical dimensions of texts that make us *feel*, see Francine Masiello’s *El cuerpo de la voz*. Masiello argues that poetry that uses the sensorial reverberations of its rhythm and language to make the reader feel allows the reader to experience the relationality between the self and the other more profoundly and more ethically than language that engages primarily the intellect (220).

To make an idea have its say
Than prose, or even talk supplies:
Only it freezes into lies,
Half-truths, elisions and red-herrings
If, like an apple's spiraled parings,
One's thought like mine, gets to the ground
Only by going round and round . . . (149)

Agee clearly feels that he has failed to hit the nail on the head with his neat, tidy, and declarative couplet proclaiming Socialism “the one clear light.” While Agee maintains that poetry, when “well used,” is “a better way” to voice ideas than prose or talk, its greatest virtue – its ability to distill truths in pithy couplets – also proves its greatest liability: poetry's perfect couplets reify truisms in their attempt to neatly capture truths.

Of course, Agee is conceiving of a very specific kind of poetry composed of lines that scan and clean couplets, which will prove very different from the “amphibious” poetic prose he adopts in parts of *Famous Men*. The sprawling quality of the latter, with its skin-like aspiration to cover everything, necessarily sacrifices the formal regularity and concision of the former. In an earlier letter-in-verse, Agee writes, “I've always felt that poetry,/ Or even verse, if saying anything/ [. . .] Should say it tersely as the verb “to be” (142). Yet, terse “to be” statements, such as “The only clear light is Socialism,” are precisely what freeze into lies “Half-truths, elisions and red-herrings.” In order for language to avoid ossifying half-truths, it must remain in motion, “going round and round” “like an apple's spiraled pairings.” Although Agee laments the indirection of language here and elsewhere, targeting its “Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds” (209), it would seem that more direct and concise language could only be more fraudulent: if, as Agee insists, it is the nature of thought to spiral round and round on itself before getting “to the ground,” then language should remain equally open-ended, like the stanza that ends with “round and round . . .” (the ellipses are Agee's).

In fact, the capacity to be infinitely expanded upon is one of the most striking features of Agee's poetic prose in *Famous Men*. Embracing this model of poetry, however, involves abandoning the expectation that poetry ought to be able to deliver truths with clean blows that send the issues in question “straight to bed.” What Agee shows us in *Famous Men* is that the virtue of poetic prose may lie precisely in its indirection, in its ability to go round and round, deferring indefinitely the getting-to-the-ground or the putting-to-bed of issues. In this deferral lies the spiraling, iterative time of experience, which is what will make us feel our connections with others.⁴³ The indirection, tedium, and poetry of his text are indispensable to inducting us into an ethos of respectful distance and protracted temporality.

⁴³ We might think of what Barthes describes as the “poetic time” in which “words produce a kind of formal continuum from which there gradually emanates an intellectual or emotional density which would have been impossible without them; speech is then the solidified time of a more spiritual gestation, during which the ‘thought’ is prepared, installed little by little by the contingency of words” (*Writing Degree Zero* 43). In opposition to classical thought, which is “devoid of duration,” Barthes understands modern poetry as communicating indirectly in a way that is dependent upon time: the gestational time of reading allows the poem to communicate gradually and in “installments” (ibid).

II. We reach them thus: worn surfaces and the intimate iterations of living together

There are on this hill three such families I would tell you of: the Gudgers, who are sleeping in the next room; and the Woods, whose daughters are Emma and Annie Mae; and besides these, the Ricketts, who live on a little way beyond the Woods; and we reach them thus: (67)

So begins Section II of “A Country Letter.” Agee proceeds to guide the reader up the path that leads from the Gudgers’ house to the houses of the other tenant families. Rather than providing an overview of the layout of the property and of the relative location of each house (as he does, for instance, in *Cotton Tenants*), Agee has us feel our way along the dark and uneven path, as, we must assume, he himself has done in the pre-dawn hours.⁴⁴ We are told not only where to turn, which shortcuts to take, and which landmarks to observe in the dim light, but also how to step quietly so as not to wake the dogs, where “damp spider webs” will cling to our faces, and where brambles may scratch at our skin. Likewise, “In A Country Letter,” the guidance Agee will offer us on how to “reach” the tenant farmers, the elusive subjects of his book, will not come in the form of a map, a photograph, or any other form of visual document; instead, Agee’s first attempt to introduce us to these families takes place in the dark, while the tenants lie sleeping on the far side of a pine wall that will be one of the principal “characters” in this chapter. It is by contemplating this wall and listening to the sleeping families breathe on the far side of it that Agee, and by extension the reader, will be gradually inducted into their world. In this way, Agee establishes that it is not through the authority of clear and piercing vision that this world will be made known; rather, it is through the embodied communion of breathing together and through repeated, at times stumbling, at times sensuous contact with spider webs, thorns, dead logs, hewn pine walls, second-hand furniture, and heavily worn clothing that we might come into an intimate relationship with the tenant lives.

As many readers of *Famous Men* have noted, the text is “peopled” as much by mute objects and inanimate surfaces as it is by human beings. By no means a silent text – it is full of the inarticulate sounds of creaking, breathing, birdcalls, etc. – *Famous Men* stands out for its scarcity of dialogue. Setting himself apart from the predominate trend in regionalist writing at the time, Agee generally avoids reproducing the dialect of the tenant farmers. Rather than becoming acquainted with these families through their speech, which would both draw greater attention to their cultural difference and imply greater access to their psychological interiority, we become intimately acquainted with the objects they touch on a daily basis, with the clothes they have painstakingly mended, and with the walls that contain their collective breathing in the night. Agee lingers on these objects and surfaces at great length, often rendering them in sensuous detail. Agee thus emphasizes the material experience of living together – touching the same objects, walking on the same floors, being surrounded by the same walls – as the means by which intimate acquaintance might be gained. Yet, the same material objects and surfaces through which we come to know the tenants also serve as barriers that detains us on the outside of lives to which we empirically cannot and ethically must not presume to have full access.

Coming to know this world through its surfaces is a humbling exercise, and I contend that this is precisely the point of structuring our encounter with the tenants in this way. Always wary

⁴⁴ This way of coming to know the land through the embodied experience of traversing it echoes Tim Ingold’s conception of landscape: “The landscape, in short, is not a totality that you or anyone else can look *at*, it is rather the world in which we stand *in*” (171).

of the betrayal of words, Agee seeks to emulate the honesty of the camera's descriptive capacity: the tautological axiom "the camera sees what it sees" speaks to both the authenticity and the limits of the surface-level descriptions offered by the photographic camera. The camera can testify to the presence or absence of visual details, but it, on its own, cannot mobilize these to make them signify; it is instead the caption, the context in which a photograph is displayed, and the preconceptions of the viewer that will determine what the photograph means.⁴⁵ Moreover, what the camera sees is limited to the opaque surfaces of walls, skin, clothing, etc.. The limits of photographic vision are particularly apparent in Evans's frontal portraits of the tenants and of the façades of their homes: the viewer is given an abundance of visual detail – the folds of cloth, the wrinkles of skin, the grain of wood – but the restraint of the subjects' expressions combined with the shallow depth of the images remind us that, on a very literal level, all photography can do is reproduce the visual surfaces of the world. Likewise, in Agee's excessively detailed visual descriptions, the surplus of visual information becomes a conspicuously elaborate stand-in for all that cannot be seen.

In particular, Agee finds that what escapes his descriptive powers is the temporality of this world: the pulsating rhythm of daily life, the iterative cycles of work and rest, the cumulative weight of repeated actions.⁴⁶ I aim to show that the recursive narrative structure of the text in *Famous Men* as a whole, and of "A Country Letter" in particular *does* indirectly convey this temporality to the reader, who is asked to look again and again at the same recalcitrant surfaces, and for whom the tedious and halting narration of one night and one sunrise begins to feel like many nights and many sunrises. Nevertheless, Agee's inability to capture this temporality in, say, the narration of a single scene, weighs heavily on the author, who faces the impossibility of directly conveying what he most urgently yearns to impart to his readers: the intimacy of living together. This intimacy lies in banal daily actions, significant not because they are exceptional, but to the contrary, because their very repetition forms the rhythm of everyday life. Such actions, Agee claims, are next to impossible to put into words: "the forms of these plainest and most casual actions are the hardest I can conceive of to set down straight as they happen" (367). He goes on to offer the example of the casual conversation that accompanies the meal he eats, while George and Annie-Mae Gudger look on, the first night he spends under their roof:

two plain people and one complex one who scarcely know each other discourse while one eats and the others wait for him to finish so they may get back to bed: it has the rhythms and inflections of this triple shyness, of sleepiness, of fast eating, of minds in the influence of lamplight between pine walls, of talk which means little or nothing of itself and much in its inflections: What is the use? What is there I can do about it? *Let me try just a few surfaces instead.* (367, emphasis mine)

This scene marks the consummation of Agee's longing to be inducted into the daily life of this humble family. While Agee continues to emphasize his outsider status and the discomfort this causes – in the distinction between "two plain people and one complex one" and in the "triple shyness" of near strangers conversing – his voice and his "fast eating" have now become part of

⁴⁵ In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that it is for this reason that photographs of atrocities do not inherently take a stance against such atrocities: "The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it. [. . .] No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this?" (39,41).

⁴⁶ This component of rural time-space is what Tim Ingold calls the *taskscape*.

the indescribable chorus of rhythmic sounds and movements that make up “these plainest and most casual actions.” Now that he is a participant in this world, Agee finds his words are less adequate than ever to the task of describing such plain and casual scenes, where nothing in particular happens or is said but where the inflections and rhythms of people interacting over time create a mood and a texture. Admitting that the texture created by these rhythms and inflections eludes his descriptive capacities as thoroughly as it eludes the still camera, Agee turns instead to the surfaces where traces of daily rhythms might be registered.

One of the reasons that Agee spends far longer describing surfaces than narrating actions is that most of the tenants’ waking hours are devoted to the wide array of repetitive tasks known as work, an activity Agee finds particularly recalcitrant to representation: “The plainness and iterativeness of work must be one of the things which make it so extraordinarily difficult to write of” (282). In describing the wearying day-in-day-out work of a housewife, he asks, “how is it to be calculated, the number of times she has done these things, the number of times she is still to do them; how conceivably in words is it to be given as it is in actuality, the accumulated weight of these actions upon her [. . .]” (283). One of the ways Agee attempts to communicate the cumulative weight of repeated actions is by registering the wear they leave on surfaces that receive daily use: the thinning enamel of the kitchen sink, the frayed and repeatedly mended rope of the well bucket, the softened and faded denim of old work overalls.

Agee’s famous description of George Gudger’s overalls is offered as an apology for all he cannot put into words: the man who wears them, the daily cycles of work that have left their visible traces on the material of the overalls, and the visceral feeling of wearing such a garment. The first thing he says of the overalls (other than that they are pronounced “overhauls”) is that it will be up to the reader’s imagination to close the gap between his own insufficient descriptions and the actual experience of the garment: the reader must try “to imagine and to know” the elusive tactile experience of the overalls (234). Having thus protested, Agee goes on to describe the sensuality of how they touch the naked body and gradually take on its shape: “the coldness of sweat when they are young, and their stiffness; their sweetness to the skin and pleasure of sweating when they are old” (235). In this passage, he also intermittently draws comparisons to the harnesses of work animals, to remind us of the function of the overalls as well as of their form, and he attributes to new overalls the beauty of a “blueprint”: “they are a map of a working man” (235). The myriad of approaches Agee takes to representing the overalls seems to speak to the inadequacy of any one of these.

Agee ultimately turns back to surface descriptions, as if resigned to the fact that no map or metaphor can convey the living rhythms of a working man; it is only through contemplation of the material surface of old, worn overalls that one might come close. Agee’s poetic tribute to overalls culminates in a lyrical account of “The changes that age, use, weather, work upon these”:

The texture and the color change in union, by sweat, sun, laundering, between the steady pressures of its use and age: both, at length, into realms of fine softness and marvel of draping and velvet plays of light which chamois and silk can only suggest, not touch; and into a region and scale of blues, subtle, delicious, and deft beyond what I have ever seen elsewhere approached except in rare skies, the smoky light some days are filmed with, and some of the blues of Cezanne: one could watch and touch one such garment, study it, with the eyes, the fingers, and the subtlest lips, almost illimitably long, and never fully learn it . . . (236)

Even as Agee imagines erotically exploring this garment with all of his senses, he insists that it remains out of reach, unlearnable. Comparisons with luxury fabrics and famous works of art can only suggest but never “touch” the beauty and sensuality of these overalls. This beauty cannot be separated from the time, use, age, and weather that continuously work this surface, infusing it not only with sweat but also with the ineffable rhythms and inflections characteristic of the iterative temporality of working life.

Agee admits that “actuality” will always escape his descriptive capacities, but he hopes that if he furnishes the material objects and surfaces the reader will take on the burden of perceiving the singularity and weight of each one: “The most I can do – the most I can hope to do – is to make a number of physical entities as plain and vivid as possible [. . .] and to leave to you much of the burden of realizing in each of them what I have wanted to make clear of them as a whole: how each is itself” (97). By rendering opaque surfaces visible and “vivid” before our eyes, Agee hopes to induce in the reader the tautological recognition that “each is itself.” Thus, in Agee’s text, mute objects become our points of access to an “actuality” whose entirety always eludes representation *and* our reminders of the limited nature of the access they offer: that each one “is itself” is both a revelation and a dead-end.

The ethos of surface reading

Agee’s preference for description over narration and, in fact, his devotion of entire chapters to “still-life’s” of empty houses, pieces of clothing, contents of drawers, and the like imbue much of his text with the same extreme stillness and placidity characteristic of Evans’s photographs. With this photographic stillness comes a humbling form of opacity: we are given the traces of life but not life itself; all we have to contemplate are opaque surfaces. We may try to imaginatively animate these scenes, to project the interiority behind the surface, or to read surface details symptomatically as signifiers of social or psychological ills, but Agee’s text reminds us that such endeavors are ultimately speculative, untenable, and ethically dangerous.

“A Country Letter” trains us in the ethical efficacy of the literal reading of surfaces through a gaze that alternately pierces walls to imagine unseen depths and allows itself to be arrested by them to erotically explore their surfaces. In other words, Agee warns us of the dangers of violating the ethos of surface reading by doing so himself. Recall that this section of the text takes place at night, as Agee sits awake, contemplating the wall that separates him from the sleeping tenants and longing to know them more fully. Agee’s nocturnal attempts to imaginatively inhabit and animate the sleeping bodies of the family members lead to far greater ethical violations than do his subsequent attempts to look upon them in the light of day. For example, his descriptions of the sleeping women are highly sexualized: Agee describes the size and shapes of Emma’s breasts and her “thighs long, clean and light in their line from hip to knee” (52). This incisive form of “vision,” which refuses to be detained on the opaque surfaces between him and Emma, overreaches and sees too much. At one point Agee “sees” the women modestly undressing and unfavorably compares the body of Annie Mae to that of her younger sister, Emma: “the mother, whose body already at twenty-seven is so wrung and drained and old, a scrawny, infinitely tired, delicate animal, the poor emblems of delight no longer practicable to any but the most weary and grunting use” (64). While elsewhere, Agee seems determined to protect the tenants by keeping his distance and by deflecting our voyeuristic gaze, all efforts to leave their privacy and dignity intact appear to be inexplicably abandoned here.

Perhaps more disturbing yet, Agee voyeuristically peers into the characters’ interiority. Consider, for example, the way Agee uses Annie Mae’s wedding hat – an object he discovered

during his exploration of the empty house – as a sort of fetish object to conjure her past and her dreams:

And Annie Mae, that hat; which still, so broken, the death odor of feathers and silk in menthol, is crumpled in a drawer; and those weeks when she was happy, and to her husband and to her heart it was pleasing to be alive:

She is dreaming now, with fear, of a shotgun: George has directed it upon her; and there is no trigger: (69)

The delicate and once-beautiful hat of silk and feathers, so out-of-keeping with Annie Mae's working life, is easily converted into a symbol of broken dreams: "crumpled in a drawer," it is a faded and repressed reminder of now-abandoned youthful happiness. Agee's abundant use of colons allows him to imply continuity between this poetic diagnosis and the next line, where he imagines the dream Annie Mae is having in this moment: it is as if "reading" the hat in this way has unlocked Annie Mae's interiority, allowing us to enter the dreams of the woman sleeping silently in the next room. This access is hard to unambivalently celebrate, in part because it does not appear to be granted with Annie Mae's consent.

Extracting the tenants' most intimate fears and dreams from still surfaces and mute objects seems to allow Agee to ventriloquize through these characters, attributing first-person speech to them through free indirect discourse. This technique is most upsetting when Agee attempts to voice the female characters' feelings about their sexuality, such as when we hear Louise contemplating her dawning womanhood as she undresses with the other women (64), or when we hear Annie Mae's estimation of her husband's desire for her: "He no longer cares for me, he just takes me when he wants me" (72). Critic William Stott finds this treatment of the tenants "incomprehensible" given that "Agee elsewhere took such care to dignify the tenants" (304).

In an attempt to make sense of this thoroughly strange and anomalous section of *Famous Men*, I read "A Country Letter" as a cautionary tale in which Agee succumbs to the desire to imaginatively pierce the surface – literally that of the wall that separates him from the tenants and figuratively that of their interior lives – in order to impress on the reader the problematic nature of this gesture, a gesture upon which his project, and for that matter, most journalistic and fictional representation depend. This chapter of Agee's text repeatedly performs this act of slippage – from "innocent" description of objects and surfaces, to projection, to the inevitable humiliation and degradation of the characters animated by his imagination – in order to sensitize the reader to the ethically perilous nature of the project in which she becomes complicit when she endeavors to know the tenant farmers through Agee's book.

It would seem that the best Agee can do is to attempt to mitigate this inevitable betrayal by emulating the camera and treating objects and surfaces as opaque. Agee chooses to describe the surfaces of the tenants' lives in photographic detail, as if by doing so he could detain us there, foregoing any ambition – on the part of himself, the text, or the reader – to push past the surface and gain access to interior lives to which we have no right. Agee's reverential treatment of everyday objects and surfaces thus represents Agee's solution – imperfect and contradictory as it may be – to the paradox of how to bring his text into intimate proximity with these lives while still maintaining an ethics of distance.

It would certainly be too reductive to say that lingering on the surface is always a more ethical mode of representation, or that any penetration of the surface necessarily amounts to a violation. What I am arguing, however, is that "A County Letter," and to some extent the introductory materials that precede it, prime us to feel the continuity between the love-fueled

desire to peel back the surface and know the interior and the unethical “pry[ing] intimately” and “parading the nakedness” of which Agee famously accuses New Deal journalism (5). Rather than simply upholding surface-level aesthetic appreciation as morally superior to more obviously troublesome modes of voyeurism and intrusion, however, Agee’s text reminds us of the slippery continuity between the one and the other.

This slippage becomes glaring apparent in one of the most frequently commented-upon vignettes with which Agee prefaces our first encounter with the tenant families: in “Near a Church,” Agee and Evans are so awestruck by the way the afternoon light hits a local church that they contemplate breaking in to take photographs. It is worth noting that no compelling explanation for this desire to break and enter is ever offered: in fact, given that Agee and Evans are enraptured by *the façade* of the church, which could be photographed from where they stand, the urge to enter the church appears completely irrational. The only clues we are given as to the source of this seemingly inexplicable urge, which causes Agee considerable guilt and shame, lie in his description of the exterior of the church as a container or mask protecting sacred contents from being known: “empty, shut, bolted [. . .] God’s mask and wooden skull and home stood empty in the meditation of the sun” (35-36). The sacrosanct and forbidden nature of the church’s sealed interior tempts Agee’s gaze to wander from what he can plainly see on the outside of the church, through a window pane, to what he can only imagine, or perhaps voyeuristically peer in at on the inside: “the old hasp and the new padlock, the randomshuttered windowglass whose panes were like the surfaces of springs, the fat gold fly who sat and botched against a bright pane within, and within, the rigid benches, box organ, bright stops, hung charts, wrecked hymnals [. . .] a button in sun, a flur of lint [. . .]” (36). Immediately before crossing the windowpane to the interior of the church, Agee’s gaze lingers on those devices intended to ensure the inviolability of this interior space: the padlock, the shutters, the glass of the windows. It is the sight of a fly on the interior surface of the glass that “invites” his gaze in to examine the most minute details (real or imagined) of the church’s interior: the state of the hymn books, a lost button, a piece of lint. While Agee indirectly attributes the need to enter the church to Evans’s desire to take photographs, it is obvious that Agee’s gaze also compulsively longs to discover the contents from which he is shielded by the very façade that has captivated him.

Upon spotting a young black couple walking by, Agee suddenly feels ashamed of his urge to force an entry and decides instead to ask them how he and Evans might gain access to the interior of the church:

While we were wondering whether to force a window, a young negro couple came past up the road [. . .] They made us, in spite of our knowledge of our own meanings, ashamed and insecure in our wish to break into and possess their church, and after a minute or two I decided to go after them and speak to them, and ask them if they knew where we might find a minister or some other person who might let us in, if it would be alright. (36-37)

Having just admitted their intention to break and enter, Agee and Evans’s supposedly innocent intentions fail to deflect the unspoken accusation that they have come to violate, desecrate, and possess something sacred. Yet Agee insists he knows his and Evans’s “meanings” and implies that such transgressive acts are not among them. It would seem that he conceives of his and Evans’s good intentions in terms of the artist’s reverential love of a beautiful object. As we have already seen in Agee’s descriptions of the church, however, aesthetic worship does not necessarily stop reverentially at the threshold; it too desires to enter and to possess.

The potentially violent, possessive nature of visually beholding a beautiful sight becomes more apparent as Agee compares his own gaze to that of the camera. As he helps Evans ready the camera, Agee acts as a kind of camera himself, taking in the aesthetic splendor that the camera will immortalize and, in fact, refers to the church as a love object: “[. . .] we stood away and I watched what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized, in the leisures and shyness which are a phase of all love for any object: searching out and registering in myself all its lines, panes, stresses of relationship [. . .]” (36). Like the camera, Agee internalizes and records the lines and proportions that make up the church’s formal beauty. He conceives of the as-of-yet unconsummated work of the camera in the violent but also amorous terms of trapping, possessing, and fertilizing. While his words necessarily fail to do what the camera might – to deliver the impact of seeing the church as it is in this moment, in this lighting – this verbal account succeeds in capturing Agee’s longing, Agee’s shyness, and Agee’s remorse over the unavoidably intrusive nature of the seemingly innocent act of admiring a church. Although Agee has not broken into the church, his overpowering love of its surface already makes him guilty, in his own eyes if not necessarily in those of the young couple, of the aggressive desire to force an entry.

When Agee introduces the young black couple to the scene, their shock and fear and suspicion reveal as ethically useless all of Agee’s well-meaning love. When he follows them, in hopes of asking them about the church, he startles the woman, causing her to flee and stumble like “a suddenly terrified wild animal” (38). This unintended affront in turn furthers Agee’s feelings of shame, impotence, and self-hatred for the “crime against nature” his presence and love have unintentionally perpetrated: “[. . .] I could not bear that they should receive from me any added reflection of the shattering of their grace and dignity, and of the nakedness and depth and meaning of their fear, and my horror and pity and self-hatred” (38). This episode serves as a preface to every encounter Agee will have with the tenants. It configures the love that inspires Agee’s commitment to representing Hale County, Alabama “exactly as it is” as inescapably continuous with a drive to “trap” and “possess” that can only end in violation. In fact, at one point, Agee explicitly likens his presence in the Gudgers’ home to the desecration of a holy place, referring to the house as “this tabernacle upon whose desecration I so reverentially proceed” (121). To reverentially desecrate, to delicately ruin, to mutually wound: these become the paradoxical terms in which Agee conceives of his best hopes for his project.

I read “A Country Letter,” which directly follows “Near a Church,” as training the reader to seek intimate contact through the seemingly gentler mode of surface reading even as it warns us of the slippery continuity between the erotic description of opaque surfaces and more manifestly invasive and voyeuristic modes of looking. “A Country Letter” continues the project of educating and sensitizing the reader in preparation for our first encounter with the tenants, which will not take place until we are more than fifty pages into the book. As a threshold chapter that tentatively, slowly brings the tenants into view, “A Country Letter” endeavors to transmit to the reader the anguish of Agee’s ethical dilemmas: the love and awe and reverence the tenant lives inspire in him cannot ever be expressed or communicated without being tainted by asymmetrical power relations that color all of his interactions with this world, and his presence inevitably shames and humiliates the tenants; no amount of pureness of intentions can prevent his interest in them from being perceived as, and in fact, being intrusive. Agee’s powerlessness to mitigate this damage casts a tragic shadow over the text, as it becomes increasingly apparent to the reader that Agee cannot possibly complete this assignment without

inflicting upon the tenants the very harm he most desperately wishes to spare them: the violation, exposure, and humiliation of which he has accused journalistic representation.

The partition wall as tragic poem

No surface receives as much treatment from Agee as the pine walls of the tenants' houses and the "partition wall" of the Gudgers' house in particular⁴⁷. Near the end of the chapter entitled, "Shelter," Agee writes, "the partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom IS importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem" (179). Coming at the end of a chapter in which Agee describes the pine walls of the tenant houses at great length and in great detail, this statement is presented as the affirmative answer to the question of whether or not 'art' encompasses 'beautiful' things "which are not intended as such, but which are created in convergences of chance, need, innocence or ignorance, and for entirely irrelevant purposes?" (178). Given that the aestheticization of suffering and poverty is often considered a hallmark of exploitative representation, and, especially, given Agee's own wariness of the label of "art", it is worth interrogating the ethical and political stakes of the position Agee takes here.⁴⁸ Is it not callous and supremely out-of-touch with the lives of the Gudgers to insist that a roughly hewn pine wall, inadequate to the task for which it is intended (sheltering a family from the elements) is an art object? Doesn't treating such a wall not only as a symptom of social ills but also as a beautiful object in its own right distract from the political message of Agee's text or permit complacency with the circumstances that cause the Gudgers to live in poverty? In other words, doesn't reading these mean walls as poetry constitute the aestheticization of poverty against which we are warned?

These questions haunt Agee's struggles to represent the beauty of the tenants' homes, but Agee emphatically refuses to ignore this beauty or call it by another name. He insists that the stark formal beauty of "a house of simple people which stands empty in the vast Southern country morning sunlight" does not need to be *made* beautiful by an artist such as himself, for it already is "not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence" (117). For Agee, it is the beauty of the tenants' world, rather than its squalor, that has the most power to wound the beholder. As Glenway Wescott once remarked of Walker Evans' dignified treatment of "squalid scenes," beautiful images have a powerful political effect on the viewer: "For me this is better propaganda than it would be if it were not aesthetically enjoyable. It is because I enjoy looking that I go on looking until the pity and the shame are impressed upon

⁴⁷ According to Agee's detailed description of the floor plan of this house (121-123), there are several partition walls (which are distinguished from the exterior walls of the house) separating the bedrooms from one another, from the kitchen, from the porch, and from the internal corridor that runs the length of the house. As John Dorst observes, the porch and the hallway, where Agee spends most of his time, are exterior spaces, which are separated from the interior spaces of the rooms, where the family sleeps, by the partition walls. I am indebted to Dorst's reading of these "threshold spaces" as importantly marking Agee's outsider status and the impossibility, but also the ethical undesirability, of Agee gaining full access to the interiors of these lives: "Doing full justice to the documentary task, as he so uncompromisingly sees it, means gaining complete access to the interiors of other beings, but this is both ultimately impossible and ethically tainted. The paradox is that such entry always entails a degree of transgression, and Agee's tortured awareness of his violation leaves him always with one foot outside, trapped in his own exteriority" (59). This peculiar formulation, of being "trapped" in exteriority suggests how Agee's unrelenting introspection (self-interrogation, guilt, self-consciousness, etc.) both traps him in his own interiority and excludes him from full participation in the lives of the tenants.

⁴⁸ Agee writes that experience – especially casual daily experience – carries a "value, joy, strength, validity, beauty, wholeness, radiance" which even the best works of art manage to "distort, falsify and even to obliterate" "in the very process of digesting them into art" (204).

me, unforgettably” (qtd. in Newhall, 148). Once again, we see that the affective poignancy of the aesthetic has to do with the temporality of looking: beauty compels us to linger, which in turn compels us to feel more deeply. Because it is the beauty of this world that gives it its tragedy and staying power, transmitting this beauty to the reader is indispensable to the ethical and political work of *Famous Men*.

But why does Agee choose to liken the wall to poetry rather than to visual art, as with the overalls, or even to music, which has been his metaphor of choice throughout preceding descriptions of the walls? The first possibility for how we might understand this strong and perplexing statement that the wall IS a poem is that the material surface of the wall contains sufficient beauty, rhythm, and imprints of life that it can be “read” as poetry. Agee advances this reading in “Shelter,” where he lavishes his attention on the texture of the wood grain of the walls of the Gudger house, calling it “as lovely a music as a contour map and unique as a thumbprint, its grain which was its living strength, and these wild creeks cut stiff across by saws [. . .] more rich and more variant than watered silk” (125). In contrast to the stillness characteristic of Evans’s photographs, in which wood grain also features prominently, the wood grain here is the “living” continuation of the landscape: the boards that make up the house are none other than “these wild creeks cut stiff across by saws.” Animated by the variations caused by nature, chance, and weather and by the passing of light over its surface, the wood grain swirls and undulates before Agee’s reverent eyes:

. . . all these in rectilinear ribbons caught into one squared, angled, and curled music, compounding a chord of four chambers upon a soul and center of clean air: and upon all these masses and edges and chances and flowerings of grain, the changes of colorings of all weathers, and the slow complexions and marchings of pure light. (126)

Not entirely unlike a photographic plate, the surface of the pine walls receives the imprint of the living world around it: the wild creeks where the pine trees once grew, the years of weather these walls have withstood, and the daily movement of light across their variegated surface are all to be seen by the eye that knows how to look.⁴⁹ Unlike the photograph, however, this visual surface is never fixed but always shifting. Walls, whose texture was formed over the years it took the trees to grow, and which are continuously being weathered and touched by the “marchings of pure light,” become a living document of growth, chance, and the yearly and daily cycles of the natural world.

For the second way in which the partition wall might be considered a form of tragic poetry, we must turn back to the earlier chapter, “A Country Letter,” in which this specific wall – the partition wall of the Gudgers’ house – serves an important structural, ethical, and poetic function. This wall separates the space where Agee writes at night from the space where the Gudgers sleep. It reappears periodically throughout the chapter, serving the formal function of a poetic refrain that punctuates Agee’s musings on the family who lie sleeping on its far side. If the repetition of the wall makes it a refrain in the sense of a chorus or repeated line, it is also a “breaking off” from the reveries it interrupts and a force of restraint, in the etymological sense of refrain related to braking and bridling⁵⁰. These recurrent reminders of the necessary and

⁴⁹ See Brian Winston (130-137) on photography as inscription of the natural world.

⁵⁰Note that “refrain” is etymologically related to the Latin *refrenare*: “to bridle, hold in with a bit, check, curb” and the modern French *fréner*: to brake. Interestingly, the etymology of “burden” also encompasses the French “bourdon,” a musical term often used to mean chorus or refrain (Oxford English Dictionary). In Agee’s text, the wall both restrains the most problematic urges expressed in the text and is load-bearing, in both the senses of providing structure and reminding us of the overwhelming ethical burden of this text.

excruciating distance between subjects serve an ethical function, checking the text's voyeuristic and empathetic urges to peel back this wall and imaginatively inhabit the space, the bodies and the lives on the other side. The wall thus forms a protective barrier: Agee's prolonged descriptions of its surface arrest a gaze (his and ours) that seeks interiority to which it has no right.

The inevitable failure of the partition wall to fully protect the Gudgers from the violence of exposure and the violation of projection imbues this "poem" with its tragedy. In fact, the tragic paradox of Agee's entire project lies in the fact that the opacity and inviolability of this wall must be at least partially dissolved in order for Agee to embark on the task he has set for himself: bringing the Gudgers, the Woods and the Ricketts to life in writing. Throughout this chapter, Agee seeks to make the reader feel this tragedy by narrating the dissolution of this protective wall through a scintillating and recursive narrative structure: the wall is opaque one moment, alarmingly transparent the next, inviolable once again, and then disconcertingly permeable once more. Because the moments when Agee's words render the tenants most knowable are also the most uncomfortable, however, we are forced to confront the invasiveness of the text's aims, which are rendered no less violent by virtue of the impossibility of their being realized. In short, the tragedy of this "poem" lies in the impossibility of ever reaching the desired object *and* in the inevitability of violating it in the doomed attempt.

"A Country Letter", the first chapter to take on the challenge of representing the tenants, undertakes the delicate task of transforming the partition wall from an impermeable barrier into a medium through which knowledge and understanding of another's life might be transmitted. Agee effects this transformation by narrating through a strangely recursive temporal structure the transition from night to day. The gradual, halting, and iterative narration of the breaking of dawn marks a transition from stillness to animation and from impenetrable darkness to sight. Initially, Agee feels that the stillness and silence of the night, which he compares to "that brief paralysis which enchants a city while wreaths are laid to a cenotaph" facilitates a truer form of communication than is possible at any other time: "And it is in these terms I would tell you, at all leisure, and in all detail, whatever there is to tell: of where I am; of what I perceive" (47). Agee begins by describing the scene in which he writes by lamplight and the families sleep, undisturbed, on the other side of the wall:

The light in this room is of a lamp. Its flame in the glass is of the dry, silent and famished delicateness of the latest lateness of the night, and of such ultimate, such holiness of silence and peace that all on earth and within extremest remembrance seems suspended upon it in perfection as upon reflective water: and I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in not so much as touching this plain of water, I can tell you anything within realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you, and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it. (46)

The lives Agee would represent lie reflected on a glassy surface, which is figured not only as the glass of the lamp but as the placid and watery surface of the night and of silence itself. This delicate surface must not be touched or broken if he is to succeed in communicating this world to us. The challenge thus lies in how to communicate this world without violating its eloquent silence. Yet, just as Agee finds himself compelled to make visible what can only be heard and intuited in the night, he finds it necessary to break this spell of stillness and silence in order to

reanimate the world whose motion has been suspended in the “held breath” of a mid-summer night.⁵¹

In “A Country Letter,” Agee repeatedly re-animates the sleeping bodies on the other side of the wall by imagining their dreams, remembering things they have said, summoning their voices to express things they might say, and proleptically looking ahead into the next day. As many readers have noted, these pages contain some of the most ethically problematic passages in *Famous Men*; Agee projects onto (the sleeping bodies of) the tenants thoughts and feelings and words that, as far as we know, they have never directly expressed. Yet, whatever animation of the tenants becomes possible in the mind’s eye will be checked, again and again by the stillness and opacity of the wall in front of Agee’s eyes. Agee persistently returns to the scene of the writer keeping vigil while the family sleeps: again and again we find Agee sitting in near darkness contemplating the thin wall that separates him from the families. Here is a sampling of such moments:

It is late in a summer night, in a room of a house set deep and solitary in the country; all in this house save myself are sleeping; I sit at a table, facing a partition wall; and I am looking at a lighted coal-oil lamp, which stands on the table close to the wall [. . .] (44)

Just a half-inch beyond the surface of this wall I face is another surface, on of the four walls which square and collaborate against the air another room, and there lie sleeping, on two iron beds and on pallets on the floor, a man and his wife and her sister, and four children, a girl, and three harmed boys (51)

But as yet this has not happened, and now she [Emma] sleeps, here in this next room, among six others dear in their lives to me, and if I were but to section and lift away a part of this so thin shell and protection of wall, there they would be as in a surgery, or a medical drawing, the brain beneath the lifted, so light helmet of the skull, the deep-chambered, powerful and so vulnerable, so delicately ruined, emboweled, most vital organs, behind the placid lovedelighting skin (62)

This refrain periodically punctuates Agee’s aborted attempts at inhabiting the lives that lie dormant in the next room and reminding us of the presence of the wall which separates Agee and his musings from the real people he longs to reach, confronting us with the reality that, much like the page in front of our eyes, the wall is an impenetrable surface rather than a window into the lives as others. By alternately indulging in transgressive fantasies and then, once again, fixing its gaze on the wall, the text draws attention to its ethical bind. With every imaginative transgression of the wall, we are reminded of the inevitable tragedy towards which Agee’s text is leading us: the violent exposure of the tenants to our gaze. With every recurrence of the refrain of the wall, Agee attempts to apply the brakes.

The third and final passage cited above suggests yet another way in which the partition wall might be likened to poetry: Agee’s description of the surface of the partition wall, figured as “placid lovedelighting skin” protecting the organs underneath, evokes his ideal of an

⁵¹ As Caroline Blinder argues, Agee’s poetic task of *Famous Men* might be conceived of as a form of lyrical reanimation of still people (in Evans’s photographs) and still objects (in Agee’s descriptions) (156). This form of animation has both cinematic and religious connotations: using poetic language to bring movement and life to scenes that have been rendered deathly still by Evans’s camera or by photographic description is Agee’s way of emulating the moving camera, but the challenge of visually representing movement on the page is also a stand-in for the larger challenge of bringing this world to life “in a spiritual and sacred sense” (Blinder 146), of making us recognize the aliveness, the actuality and the “human divinity”(Agee 10) of the tenants.

“amphibious language” or “poetic diction” that could “cover the whole range of events as perfectly and evenly as a skin covers every organ” (1962, 42). Elsewhere in *Famous Men* as well, the pine walls of the Gudgers’ home are depicted as skin-like: Agee compares the swirling variegation of the wood grain to the uniqueness of a thumbprint (125) and describes the thinness and tautness of these walls “as if a hard thin hide of wood stretched to its utmost to cover exactly once, or a little less than once, in all six planes the skeletal beams” (126). The conflation of skin, wall, and poetry rests on the multiple valences of the verb “to cover”: for language to “cover a whole range of events” is to be comprehensive in its representation and malleable or versatile enough to fit a diverse set of experiences; whereas, for skin to cover organs is to conceal and protect them the way the “so thin shell and protection of wall” serves as a barrier between Agee and the lives that lie sleeping on its far side.⁵² Though the thin walls of the Gudgers’ home are barely adequate to cover (reach all of) the body of the house or to cover (shield and protect) its occupants, the ideal of skin-like language towards which Agee aspires would cover in both senses and would have the additional benefit of being “lovedelighting,” of being a sensory organ and a locus of sensuality.

Agee’s language in *Famous Men* clearly aspires towards these skin-like qualities: it is expansive in volume, exhaustive in its descriptive coverage, protean in style, and even as its density and self-reflexivity render it opaque, blocking our access to the world it purportedly represents, it seeks to transmit pleasure and pain through its sensuality and its abrasiveness respectively. As we see in “A Country Letter,” imaginatively violating the opacity of the partition wall to describe the people sleeping on the other side is hardly distinguishable from the uncomfortable and unethical bodily violations towards which this chapter hints.⁵³ If Agee’s language enables such transgressions by granting us contact with this world, it must also buffer against them by perennially returning us to the inviolability of opaque surfaces, blocking our access to the world they conceal, and leaving us to contemplate instead the sensuality of wood grain, the pleasurable surface of poetic language. Yet, the opaque surfaces with which Agee furnishes his representation of the tenant world are never inviolable enough to fully protect. The metaphor of skin, which is tragically but necessarily porous, reminds us of the continuity between connection and harm, between erotics and violation. To touch skin is to feel the limits that separate one body from another, *and* to transgress them: that which blocks us and detains us on the outside of the other also puts us in intimate contact with the other. Similarly, the partition wall is both a reminder of the distance and unknowability of the tenant families and a sensual surface that invites erotic exploration and promises to yield intimate contact.

The transgression of “walking through walls”

Part of what makes this section so disconcerting to read is that intimate details about the tenants are revealed *before* we have been “properly” introduced: before we know the names of Gudger’s sons, George Junior, Burt, and Valley Few, they are introduced as the “three harmed boys” upon whose slumber our gaze is allowed to rest; before we meet Annie Mae Gudger as a proud mother who refuses to let her children be photographed in their work clothes in the much later chapter, “Inductions,” we are made privy to the shape of her shriveled naked body and to

⁵² Agee’s language here plays with the dual senses of representation: *darstellen* (to re-present by showing, depicting, portraying) and *vertreten* (to stand in for, serve as a proxy for, *cover up*, or replace). Language both mimetically represents, taking the shape of its referents like skin conforms to the shape of the organs, and stands in for its referents, displacing and shielding them, like skin covers the organs.

⁵³ This chapter infamously includes Agee’s sexual fantasies about Emma.

her most intimate feelings about her marriage. In “A Country Letter,” we “see” vulnerabilities that will be carefully guarded later on in Agee’s book. Rendering these visible and knowable in the middle of the night, from the far side of an opaque wall, when we might expect the tenants to be most unreachable and unknowable, requires dexterously weaving other temporalities into the present of narration: as we have seen, Agee uses the memory of a hat he found during a previous day’s exploration of the house to conjure Annie Mae’s dreams; as we will see, he narrates the breaking of dawn from a moment “much earlier, while it was not yet light” (78). Similarly, Agee proleptically narrates Emma’s departure from within the night *before* she leaves⁵⁴.

One of the most moving “verses” of the tragic poem of the partition wall is Agee’s proleptic narration of the breaking of dawn, in which daylight penetrates the darkness of the night and “walks through” the walls themselves, and in which the silence of the night is pierced by sounds that have not yet been uttered. Agee’s ability to narrate the dawn from within the stillness of the night is a product of his continuous writing but also of the repetitive nature of this event: because Agee has witnessed many dawns from the porch of the Gudgers’ house, he can anticipate what it will look and sound like before it has even arrived.⁵⁵

When Agee describes the dawn, he describes it as a gradual visual transition punctuated by the repeated calls of roosters and whippoorwills, or, more properly, a lyrical call-and-response of birds that ushers in the possibility of vision:

and it is heard: and distant though it is, it cleaves in its full fortissimo: so valiant a noise
as rescuing bugle, or tenor broke his throat for: and no answer:

and then the answer: deep, steep back behind my prostrated head:

(the violet grays; the gray walks through the walls)

silence: the whippoorwill; pleading; deploring:

the first again, much fiercer:

and, almost interrupting him, a third, beyond the woods:

(‘*whip-pawill! whipp-awill!*)

The second again; at last, our blond, his androgynous [rooster] voice chortling with face confidence: a fourth: the first (the country is taking shape): another: now a third (it is emerging like a print in a tank; I see distinctly the walls of the room, and on the earth the medallioned cities): three new ones now: another: now another: strain on their horn toes and shout. (77-78)

Light and vision enter this chorus in the parenthetical insertions. The rhythmic calling of the birds separates these glimpses of vision, building the temporality of waiting into our experience of reading (and seeing). The visual structure of these lines on the page mirrors the short, staccato

⁵⁴ Agee interrupts the narration of Emma’s departure in order to explain how he is able to narrate this moment before it arrives: “But here I am going to shift ahead of where I am writing to a thing which is to happen, or which happened, the next morning (you mustn’ be puzzled by this, I’m writing in a continuum)” (56).

⁵⁵ This intimate, predictive knowledge born of the iteration will be central to my discussion of Saer’s poetics of vision in the next chapter as well.

rhythm of the bird calls punctuated by silences, which are, eventually, followed by a crescendo of sound, which is visually represented in the longer, flowing paragraph at the end of this passage. Vision also emerges slowly at first, as the violets of the night give way to the grays of the dawn. It is only after we wait for several more calls and responses from the birds that the country begins to take shape “like a print in a tank,” shortly followed by an explosion of visibility, as the speaker claims to “see distinctly” not only the walls of the room in which he lies but the “medallioned cities” that cover the surface of the earth. Of course, Agee cannot possibly literally see all of this, but we witness the constraints of literal vision giving way to a vaster metaphorical vision as the walls fall away to reveal the country beyond them. The breaking of dawn, which produces grays of purples and allows these grays to “*walk through the walls*” is figured as the time-dependent metamorphosis, much like the developing of a photographic print, that melts away the opacity of walls to make vision possible.

Knowing that these walls play an important ethical function in buffering vulnerable subjects from our gaze, and having already experienced at this point the terrible discomfort of Agee’s imaginative transgressions of these walls, we have great reason to be wary of this metamorphosis and to appreciate the need for it to unfold delicately and slowly *in time*. In fact, as if regretting having broken the spell of the night, Agee immediately takes us backwards in time from the “full glass light, clean, whitening gray” of early morning to the pre-dawn darkness, when the sleeping bodies in the next room first come to life: “But much earlier, while it was not yet light, at about the crowing of the second cock, Annie Mae woke, on her back” (76). From here, Agee describes the sights and sounds and smells of the family rising, making and eating breakfast, leaving for work in the fields, etc..

We might say that “A Country Letter” attempts to temper the violence inherent in its representational project by preparing us to read the world that will be divulged aesthetically rather than hermeneutically, which is to say to read it for the beauty and texture of its surfaces, for the tempo and tenor of its voices, for the rhythm and shape of its daily patterns, rather than for the psychological depths or social symptoms these surfaces might conceal. The text repeatedly performs the invasive gesture of peeling back surfaces to reveal squalid living conditions, naked bodies, and untold dreams and fears *and* repeatedly juxtaposes this act of desecration with a gentler mode of “surface reading.” “A Country Letter” thus impresses on the reader the acute moral discomfort of witnessing such violations and, in so doing, trains us to prefer the less intrusive mode of reading this world *as poetry*, which is to say of experiencing the materiality of the medium that both puts us in contact with and separates us from the world of the tenants. We do not come into an ethical relationship with the tenants by ignoring or dissolving the opacity of this surface, however; it is through repeated, prolonged contact with opaque surfaces, rather than through hermeneutic delving, that we might learn to read such surfaces themselves as poetry.

The recursive temporal structure of this section and of Agee’s text more generally is indispensable to educating us in this intimate yet respectful way of looking and reading. On a larger scale, Agee’s text as a whole also returns periodically to the scene of the lone author sitting awake at night in the “*On the Porch*” sections. These three sections, intermittently inserted among the more descriptive sections of the book, offer the most concentrated meta-commentary on Agee’s project, its ethical perils, and its unlikelihood of succeeding. Critic Alan Spiegel calls the technique of continually interrupting the representational project with meta-commentary that anticipates its failure “Jamming” and counts this among the strategies Agee uses to mitigate the inevitable betrayal of words (59-65). Periodically drawing our attention back

to the author, his impossible project, and his impossible longings is one way of disabusing us of the hope that we are imminently about to “close in” on the elusive subjects of this book and come to know them once and for all. These nocturnal sections and the lucidity they bring continually recur so that we never lose sight of the literal and figurative walls with which they confront us. They also imbue the text with the cyclical rhythms of living together; it is impossible to know if these sections represent one night or many nights, but they punctuate the daytime narration with such regularity that we learn to recognize them as forming part of the rhythm of Agee’s cohabitation with the tenants.

In addition to checking our desire for intimacy and knowledge, this recursive pattern extends the time of reading and invites us to look again, and again, at the seemingly simple and recalcitrant surfaces we may have overlooked the first time(s) in our eagerness to get at the “truth” behind them. We learn to know and love and care for the Gudgers, the Woods, and the Ricketts not because they open up to us and not because Agee grants us privileged access to their interiority (the moments when he tries are more likely to abash us into averting our gaze), but because we become familiar with them through repeated contact. Looking again does not make their faces any less demure, distrustful, recalcitrant, and withholding, but, it does make me care more. As Susan Sontag hypothesizes in efforts to explain why “a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image” in reaching an audience and activating its political conscience, “Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel” (122). In what follows of this chapter, I will be attempting to unpack this connection between caring and the amount of time that we spend looking, as well as the number of times that we are obliged to look.

III. Looking for belonging: Beyond the photographic gaze

We receive the most direct guidance on how to look at Walker Evans’s photographs of the tenant farmers in the section called “Inductions,” which occurs roughly three-quarters of the way into *Famous Men*. In the section, Agee takes us back to the beginning, to the moment of his and Evans’s first encounter with the tenant families. As the title of this section suggests, it is here that Agee finally gains entrance into the lives the Ricketts, the Woods, and particularly the Gudgers: this section culminates in the first night Agee spends under the Gudgers’ roof. I say “finally” because over three-hundred pages have already been devoted to Agee’s fraught attempts to bring us into contact with lives that he insists cannot be captured in writing, but he has withheld, up until now, the story of how he and Evans first came to be acquainted with the elusive subjects of the book: these three families and their homes.

“Inductions” tells of how Evans and Agee met Fred Ricketts by the courthouse in town, how Ricketts led them back to his farm and allowed them to photograph his family, and how the neighboring families (the Woods and the Gudgers) caught word and came to have their portraits taken as well. Later, after a stint in the city with Evans, Agee returns alone in hopes of approaching Gudger about the possibility of taking up residence in his home. Though he still feels himself to be an intruder, Agee is also now a supplicant, especially after he and Ricketts are caught in the storm and must take shelter with the Gudger family in their home. It is during the storm that Agee first experiences a transformative moment of intimacy with them (349-359). After attempting to leave but getting his car stuck in the mud, he is forced to wake the Gudgers and ask to be put up for the night. Against Agee’s protestations, Annie-Mae Gudger fixes him the first meal he would eat under her roof, and Agee, feeling guilty for putting her out and

thrilled to be inducted into the family, spends a restless but ecstatic night under the “curable delusion” “that this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right” (365). To the degree that *Famous Men* has a plot, this much-commented upon section serves as its dramatic climax; it is here that the character Agee, though still undeserving, is granted, by chance, acts of God (i.e. the storm), and his own state of helplessness the intimate contact with the Gudgers that the narrator Agee has been tentatively pursuing throughout three-hundred pages.

If Agee’s induction into this world took place before the sun had risen on the first morning he would wake in the Gudgers’ house, then why, we might ask, has its narration been deferred for so long? How have the preceding three-hundred pages of indirection, lacerating self-indictment, and aborted attempts to bring this family to life in language served to prepare us for this moment? Alan Spiegel has read this section as representing the “after” stage of the transformation of the author, who started out pursuing a political project and eventually finds himself instead on a personal and spiritual quest for intimacy with the purer order represented by the tenant families. In this reading, the emphasis on Agee’s awkwardness and offensiveness in the scenes presented earlier in the book (many of which chronologically occur after the “Inductions” scenes) eventually gives way to real intimacy and trust, but only after the author has admitted the personal nature of his interest in the tenant families.⁵⁶ I find this reading compelling, although the nostalgic light into which Spiegel throws the “purer order” Agee is pursuing is problematic (I will return to this point shortly). Even more fundamentally, it seems that Agee’s newfound vulnerability, even helplessness, is what gains him access into the world of the tenant farmers, a world he was unable to penetrate in his role as self-sufficient city journalist.

I would add, moreover, that Agee is not the only one to have undergone a transformation in the first three-hundred pages of the book. I am interested in how the indirection, tedium, and ethical discomfort of these pages have trained us to read and look upon this scene of first encounters. Have we too been humbled, purified, and rendered capable of looking anew, or is the point that we are looking *again* at characters and relationships we thought we knew? Whereas the title to Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s photo book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, with which Agee and Evans’s is often contrasted, gives us the satisfaction of having accomplished what can be accomplished in the act of looking – we walk away from the impoverished subjects of the book feeling like we have in fact seen their faces – Agee seems determined to withhold this sense completion.⁵⁷ Upon meeting the tenant farmers again, this time for the first time, in “Inductions,” we are forced to ask ourselves, *have* we seen their faces? Have we seen in their faces everything that Agee notices in this slow, detailed scene?

⁵⁶ Spiegel sees the “Intermission” chapter as serving as a declaration of independence “from all his former allegiances and commitments on both the left and the right of the political and moral spectrum: to wit, Communism and Catholicism” (136). It allows him to proceed to relate to the families on a personal level.

⁵⁷ Of contemporary photo book projects, Bourke-White and Caldwell’s collaboration invites the most direct comparison with *Famous Men*, owing to its subject matter (poor southern farmers) and its date of publication (only months after Agee and Evans returned from Hale County, Alabama, notebooks and negatives in hand). It also offers the starkest contrast in its approach: Bourke-White’s images are as dramatic and sensationalized as Evans’s are restrained, and Caldwell’s prose is as assertive as Agee’s is riddled with doubt. Whereas Evans prefers posed pictures over candid and manages to make “the lives of the lower classes aesthetically respectable” (Stott 277), Bourke-White likens her method of capturing candid shots with her flashbulb to hunting and renders her subjects “miserable, alien and threatening” (Kidd 95); whereas Agee’s narrative voice is personal, subjective, and reverential of the fundamental humanity of his subjects, Caldwell’s is impersonal, sociological, and condemnatory of the backwards and reactionary South for perpetuating its own misery and underdevelopment.

This “final” section of the book is also a return to the beginning in the sense that it, more than any of the previous sections, directs our attention back to Evans’s photographs, which are the first thing we encounter when we open the cover of *Famous Men*.⁵⁸ Presumably the reader would have been referring back to these photographs throughout, trying to identify the portraits of the “characters” in the book based on the descriptions of their clothing, etc. (there are no identifying captions accompanying the photographs), but the scene in which Agee describes the staging and taking of the first set of family portraits invites direct comparison between the scenes described and the photographic images produced.

Turning back the pages in an attempt to visually locate these scenes in Evans’s photographs is rarely fruitful; by and large, the images painted by Agee in this photo-taking scene do not refer to specific photographs included in the book. This is in part because Agee focuses largely on the way the families prepare to have their pictures taken, and while Evans did snap many candid photos of this process, only the more deliberately posed portraits are included in *Famous Men*.⁵⁹ As many critics have noted, Evans’s preference for carefully staged portraits over candid photos grants the photographic subjects more composure and poise than they might otherwise be afforded⁶⁰.

One notable exception to this rule – that Agee’s descriptions do not redundantly produce the images captured in Evans’s photographs, but also perhaps to Evans’s rule of not including photographs in which his subjects are caught off guard – is Evans’s photograph of Mrs. Ricketts standing in front of the porch with several of her children in the background. While this image still reads as a portrait – Mrs. Ricketts faces the camera almost squarely and looks straight into it – it stands out from Evans’s other portraits (particularly his portraits of adults), in that it is dramatically cropped to isolate Mrs. Ricketts from the surrounding scene but still includes her entire body in the frame (the other portraits of adults from this series are cropped at the shoulders or above the knees in one case – a decision that gives us full view of Fred Ricketts’s overalls). This presentation arguably robs Mrs. Ricketts of some of the dignity granted to the other subjects since it allows us to view her dress where it is dirtiest and most torn and to observe that she is barefoot. The close cropping of the photograph around Mrs. Ricketts has the effect of making her look claustrophobically trapped within the frame. It also allows us to observe that there are children on the porch behind her, although most of their bodies are cropped out of the frame. Mrs. Ricketts appears to be protectively shielding them with her body. Moreover, the positioning of Mrs. Ricketts’s hands suggest that this is not a fully posed photograph: her left hand is held back out of view behind her skirt, and her right hand, with the index finger extended and the veins on the back of the hand pronounced, appears to be arrested mid-way through the gesture of

⁵⁸ There are thirty-three more pages of *Famous Men* after “Inductions” ends, but the first of these begins, “The last words of this book have been spoken . . .” (389). What follows are images wrought in words.

⁵⁹ Orvell notes that this attitude is not characteristic of all of Evans’s FSA photographs and, rather, seems to reflect Agee’s influence on Evans in this collaboration: “One way to judge the influence of Agee on Evans, is to compare Evans’s work outside the Alabama project with the photographs that went into *Famous Men*. *American Photographs*, for example, has material that overlaps with the southern work, but the overall tone of the photographs in that volume, which had no other creative force to accommodate, was witty and ironical”, whereas Evans’s treatment in *Famous Men* “accords his subject the utmost dignity: they are pictured as serious, sad, but profound. Their lives have a kind of heroic stature” (283). Orvell notes that Evans rejected for inclusion in *Famous Men* images that “show their subjects as too happy, or else as somewhat undignified—surrounded by watermelons, for example.” (ibid). He goes on to conclude, “We are so used to the portraits in *Famous Men*, with their respectful presentations of a subject who is looking directly into the camera, that we forget that Evans was given to taking a side range of quite different images” (283-284).

⁶⁰ See, for example, the way William Stott contrasts Evans’s technique with that of Bourke-White (267-275).

being drawn up and out of sight. Taken in the context of other images in Evans's FSA archives (which did not make it into *Famous Men*), it is clear that this photograph comes from the series Evans shot while the families were readying themselves to be photographed. This is the only solo portrait of Mrs. Ricketts to be included in either the 1941 or the 1960 edition of *Famous Men* (she appears in only one other photograph, a portrait taken with her seven children).

Agee's text, which describes Mrs. Ricketts in very nearly this exact posture, suggests one possible reason for the inclusion of this otherwise anomalous photograph: this image captures the anxiety and humiliation that Agee attributes to Mrs. Ricketts in this scene, as she awaits having her disheveled family photographed. Agee lingers at painful length on her discomfort and helplessness before the camera and the shame and remorse these cause him. He addresses Mrs. Ricketts in the second person, and, at moments, it seems almost as if he is addressing himself directly to this photograph:

You realized what poor foolishness of your husband had let you all in for, shouting to you all to come out, children sent skinning barefooted and slaver-mouthed down the road [. . .] all to stand there on the porch as you were in the average sorrow of your working dirt and get your pictures made; and to you it was as if you and your children and your husband and these others were stood there naked in front of the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitiableness to be pried into and laughed at; and your eyes were wild with fury and shame and fear, and the tendons of your little neck were tight, the whole time, and one hand continually twitched and tore in the rotted folds of your skirt like the hand of a little girl who must recite before adults, and there was not a thing you could do, nothing, not a word of remonstrance you could make, my dear, my love, my little crazy, terrified child. (321)

As if the helpless image of Mrs. Ricketts that Agee paints here were not enough to make the reader uncomfortable, he ratchets up the shame and guilt borne by the text by infantilizing her and using terms of endearment that we cannot imagine she would have welcomed. Agee's description of the tendons on Mrs. Ricketts's neck and the hand nervously touching "the rotted folds" of her skirt match the image so exactly that they read as if written from the photograph. However, his insistence on nervous motions – the "continual twitch[ing]" of her hand – and uncomfortable duration – the tendons that "were tight, *the whole time*" – remind us that he is writing from life and describing an episode of which this photograph captures only a momentary fragment. While Mrs. Ricketts's discomfort is clearly visible in Evans's photograph, it is further amplified in Agee's prose, not only because Agee names it ("shame," "pitiableness to be pried into," "fury," "fear," etc.), but also, arguably more impactfully, because Agee confronts us with its duration⁶¹. In contradistinction to the typical photo book format, where the text provides captions as interpretive aids to the images, Agee's text ultimately serves to shame us with our voyeurism and complicity in shattering the dignity of a defenseless woman.

Furthermore, while it is easy enough to escape from our uncomfortable relationality to Mrs. Ricketts in the photograph – we need only look away or turn the page – Agee does not allow us to move on so easily: he returns to this image of Mrs. Ricketts twice more during this episode. The first of these returns or refrains is once more in direct address, this time imploring her for understanding and trust: "Mrs. Ricketts; you can have no idea with what care for you, what need to let you know, oh, not to fear us, not to fear, nor to hate us, that we are your friends, that however it must seem it is all right [. . .]" (322). He also concludes this episode with the

⁶¹ Ariella Azoulay suggests that it is in this duration that the gaze of the photographed subject can return that of the camera. See my discussion of *The Civil Contract of Photography* in my next chapter.

haunting image of “the unforgiving face, the eyes, of Mrs. Ricketts at her door: which has since stayed as a torn wound and sickness at the center of my chest” (327). It is this staying power, this ability to wound and penetrate us, that Agee attempts to bestow on the photographic image by invoking it again and again. With each return to this image, which is arguably the most devastating image included in *Famous Men*, Agee asks us to look again. He challenges us to look earnestly, to return the untrusting gaze issuing from this photograph, to feel ourselves the objects of its hatred, and to own our complicity in producing this distrust and hatred.

The recursivity of the text, which returns again and again to this painful image, thus expresses the magnetic pull that draws Agee and Evans “back and back” to the homes of the Ricketts, the Woods, and the Gudgers, eventually compelling Agee to take up residence there:

And so it was that during the next days, the next weeks, we found ourselves coming back and back while we worked: it was so that we could not drive along the highway past those wandlike posts between which your road leads off along the hill without during the next mile feeling in our chests a pulling eastward alongside behind us where you were . . . (327)

The “you” here seems to refer back to Mrs. Ricketts. Agee states that it is the “unforgiving face” of Mrs. Ricketts specifically that will instill in him this masochistic compulsion to return: “[this image] perhaps more than any other thing has insured what I do not yet know: that we shall have to return, even in the face of causing further pain, until that mutual wounding shall have been won and healed, until she shall fear us no further, yet not in forgetfulness but through ultimate trust, through love” (327). For Agee, any hope of gaining the trust and love of the tenants depends upon courting, rather than allaying, forgetting, or fleeing the pain caused to both parties by Mrs. Ricketts’s shame and humiliation upon their first encounter.

In addition to dragging out this scene over sufficient time for the reader to begin to squirm in discomfort at her own voyeuristic position (all told, this scene takes up more than six pages), Agee draws our attention to all of the shuffling, posing, and fidgeting that goes on as one awaits the click of the shutter. Agee underscores this unease by re-inserting into his narrative the uncomfortable waiting time – while the camera is set up, while clothes are straightened and hair tidied – that is elided by the photographic image. It is in this duration that the invasiveness of this encounter is most apparent. Agee is heavy-handed in making this point, evoking every metaphor of the camera as weapon and agent of dark magic. He describes Mrs. Ricketts, who is captured in a few candid shots (including the one just examined) while readying her children as, “as before a firing squad” (322). The set-up of the camera, as perceived by the tenant families, becomes a monstrous and evil figure, described as “the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of hunchback,” covered in by a “cloak and cloud of wicked cloth,” and characterized as “witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel” (322). These descriptions, when attributed to the perception of the tenant families as they presumably are here, have the unfortunate effect of primitivizing the “natives” who cower before a technological monster. This is yet another instance when the forcefulness with which Agee feels the need to pry his reader’s eyes open comes at the expense of the careful and respectful treatment of his subjects.

Learning to see ourselves as part of the human sphere”

Agee’s insistence on including himself, and by extension implicating his reader in the world he depicts marks a radical departure from the standard practices of classical journalism,

documentary, and ethnographic literature. In this move, Agee anticipates the turn towards intersubjective experience taken by New Journalism, *cinéma vérité*, and critical anthropology in the 1960's and 1970's. By drawing our attention to the fraught intersubjective dynamics of looking at another, especially across class lines, Agee foregrounds the morally complicated task of navigating this position. No longer able to survey the scene from a magisterially distant position and no longer able to claim objectivity, the viewer becomes a participant; even more importantly, the relationship between viewer and photographic subject becomes an object of scrutiny. In this way, Agee reveals the relationships – the “dialectical interconnection” of class relations specifically – that Lukács fears are occluded in classical reportage.⁶² By focusing, at times obsessively and uncomfortably, on these relationships, Agee precludes the reification of the tenants as objects of study. In fact, as we have seen in Section I of this chapter, even material objects and surfaces resist “thingification” and are rendered as dynamic parts of a living whole: we are asked to see the tools, clothing, and architecture of tenant life not simply as static functional or even aesthetic objects but as “living” documents, constantly being worked upon by time, wear, weather, and human use.

As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, Lukács's terminology may help us understand the drive, present throughout *Famous Men*, to integrate local details into a global whole. Agee, who is himself prone to lingering at great length on seemingly trivial details, insists that we not lose track of the whole in our explorations of the particular:

let this be borne in mind, in order that, when we descend among its windings and blockades, into examination of slender particulars, this its wholeness and simultaneous living map may not be neglected, however lost the breadth of the country may be in the winding walk of each sentence. (98)

Neither in the specificity of his descriptions nor in the meandering paths of his prose are we to lose sight of the organic whole, this “simultaneous living map,” in which we and the tenants and their objects all coexist. This drive accounts for the way Agee's gaze repeatedly zooms out from the particular lives in front of him to try to encompass the vastness of humanity. This is why the four walls of a room give way to “medallioned cities” (78) when the sun rises, why dawn is described as breaking not only on the tenant's farms but also, simultaneously, on New Orleans and Birmingham, Canada and the Andes, drawing attention to the synchronicity of a time zone that spans the hemispheric Americas (76-77). Even more ambitiously, the gaze of the text seeks to encapsulate “the whole memory of the South in its six-thousand-mile parade and flowering outlay of the façades of cities” (7), “the whole round earth and in the settlements, the towns, and the great iron stones of cities” (49), and even the stars beyond the rafters of the tenants' homes (48). Agee is particularly insistent on the temporal simultaneity that unites these vast spaces: all form part of the present moment.

Frustrated with the inability of words to capture the simultaneity of experience, Agee yearns for the structure of his account to be “globular:” he describes his subjects as “eighteen or

⁶² Lukács sees reportage, the journalistic literature of the kind pioneered by Ottwalt and Sinclair, as a well-intentioned attempt by leftist writers to forge a literature capable of tackling “the great and general questions of our time,” a task to which the bourgeois novel and its “psychological depiction of private fates and feelings” had proven itself inadequate (“Reportage or Portrayal?” 46). Unfortunately, according to Lukács, most of these attempts have failed because they are authored by members of the petty-bourgeois who, blinded by their class ideology, can see only isolated facts and not the whole picture. Genuine reportage, which Lukács feels has yet to be realized at the time of his writing in 1932, must *portray* “the overall process” through which social and economic relations are constructed so that the “dialectical interconnection” of the parts becomes visible and so that no single, isolated surfaces becomes fetishized, hardened and reified as “an illusory reality” (ibid 53-54).

twenty intersecting spheres, the interlockings of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you” (89).⁶³ This image for Agee’s ideal mode of representation aspires to capture not only the three-dimensionality of the sphere but also the dynamic and temporally animated relationships between individuals: isolated as the individual may seem within his bubble, all of the bubbles intersect and move together with the current of the stream. In a characteristic gesture of zooming out from the particular to the global, Agee moves from considering eighteen or twenty interconnected lives to the ten million encompassed by the greater “human sphere” in which we are all equally “interlocked”: “for this human sphere is all one such interlocked and marvelously variegated and prehensile a disease and madness, what man in ten million shall dare to presume he is cleansed of it or more so than another [. . .]?” (95). While there are undeniably Marxist sentiments behind such imagery, Agee’s poetic imagery is a far cry from the language of Lukács. Take for example, this moment from “A Country Letter”:

these flexions are taking place every where, like a simultaneous motion of all the waves of the water of the world: and these are the classic patterns, and this is the weaving, of human living: of whose fabric each individual is a part: and of all parts of this fabric let this be borne in mind:

Each is intimately connected with the bottom and the extremist reach of time:

Each is composed of substances identical with the substance of all that surround him, both the common objects of his disregard, and the hot centers of stars (50)

What makes this passage more interesting than the clichéd if still profound assertion that we are all stardust is the emphasis Agee puts on the temporality of our interconnectedness. The fabric of “human living” is depicted as fluid, like waves or the earlier metaphor of “bubbles on the face of a stream.” It is the “simultaneous motion” of all of the parts that weaves them together as a fabric. In other words, the inescapable and intimate connection that binds us to the tenants, to their “common objects of [. . .] disregard,” and to the stars that shine above them is not only that we are all made of the same matter but also that we are all caught in the same flux of time. In contradistinction to nostalgic regionalist projects that displace rural subjects into a lost past, Agee insists on the contemporaneity and interdependent movement of his world, our world, and the tenants’ world.

This line of inquiry brings us back to Alan’s Spiegel’s reading of “Inductions” as a nostalgic return or homecoming for the author. Spiegel claims that Agee attributes to the tenants a “purity” from which he is irrevocably estranged and “a sealed-off quality of lost time” that he cannot represent without desecrating.⁶⁴ While this reading successfully accounts for the paradox that leads Agee to “calculated reticence” and “respectful hush” as strategies of keeping the tenants “at a tactful distance” (121-123), it does so at the expense of expelling the tenants from

⁶³ The “you” in this passage refers to the tenant farmers, of whom there are 22 after Emma’s departure, including the infants. On the previous page, Agee writes, “how am I to speak of you as ‘tenant’ ‘farmers,’ as ‘representatives’ of your ‘class,’ as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I ‘know’ you?” (88).

⁶⁴ According to Spiegel, Agee longs to be close to Gudger, to approximate his purity, but “this need is never to be satisfied: the discovery of purity by consciousness only brings consciousness close enough to purity to fully appreciate just how far away it really is” (120) In other words, to consciously approach purity would compromise the purity of purity: “Consciousness can gain full knowledge – incorporation and possession – of purity only at the risk of losing it forever” (121).

our time and inscribing them in archaic time.⁶⁵ It is certainly true that Agee's high regard for his tenant-subjects and his unfortunate tendency to primitivize them in moments leaves *Famous Men* open to being read as expressing nostalgic longing for simpler times, and an impossible longing for a less corrupt model of social, political, and economic relations is certainly one of the major chords that resonates throughout *Famous Men*; however, I believe we would be mistaken to subsume this longing entirely to the category of nostalgia for a lost time. To displace these families and their rural existence into an ahistorical, pre-fall state of innocence, "purity," and autochthony that has become inaccessible to the rest of us would be to obfuscate the one thing Agee most direly wants his readers to realize and feel about these families: that they exist, in our world *and in our time*, not merely as literary or political symbols, but as real human beings who can hurt, shame and love us, and be hurt, shamed and loved by us.⁶⁶

This assertion runs contrary to the predominant trend of reading *Famous Men* as isolating the tenants from the corrupt modern world the rest of us inhabit. For example, taking a similar approach to that of Alan Spiegel, Hugh Davis claims that Agee relegates "virtually everyone he will encounter in Hale County to 'another order of existence': "Though Agee admits that rural southerners somehow exist contemporaneous with the present, he is obviously more interested in their timeless, primordial qualities" (133). In support of this reading, Davis cites an earlier draft of *Famous Men* in which Agee writes of the tenants: "they simply do not belong to time, though they must take part in it; they belong to some other order of existence: just as animals, or uninhabited parts of the earth, do not belong to time in the sense of the word" (qtd. in Davis 133). These lines, when taken on their own, would seem to directly contradict my reading of *Famous Men* as trying to confront us with the shared time of experience through which we might come to know the tenant farmers; however, in addition to considering that Agee presumably excised these lines from his final draft for a reason, it is necessary to read them in the context of Agee's struggle to make sense of how remote rural regions can simultaneously seem part of our time and atemporal. In the same passage Davis cites, Agee characterizes the "special quality" that "is much stronger in the South" in dialectical terms:

For these people and this country, though they are of our century, and represent a great and ill-recognized weight not only in human existence but in history, do not belong to time as most cities and people do. It would be no more correct to call them primitive, or medieval, or old-fashioned, than to call them modern [. . .] The South is generic, basic, primal [. . .] And yet in every detail it has edge, and participation and involvement in what we think of as the present. (133)

⁶⁵ Spiegel writes: "This calculated reticence in offering his subject to the reader, this strange tact and respectful hush, becomes Agee's ultimate tribute to, and reverence for, the sealed-off quality of lost time; his way of accepting his estrangement from his origins in purity, as well as whatever remnant of those origins are to be found in the farmer and in his world" (123). I find the melancholy for the lost past out of place here – to me, Agee seems more preoccupied how we relate to the farmers in the present, how do we look at them, how do we call them our compatriots, how do we recognize them as fellow human beings with respectful distance, with tact. Here perhaps is where idiorrhymy needs to replace nostalgia as the temporal framework for understanding this work. Of course, the fantasy of rural life as the uncorrupted garden from which the rest of us have been expelled into modernity is as old as the pastoral genre. See Leo Marx for how this cliché has taken on new life and been complicated in the American Pastoral and William Empson for how this fantasy elides class conflicts, thus providing fodder for conservative ideologies.

⁶⁶ Recall Agee's oft-cited words on the importance of George Gudger: "The one deeply exciting thing to me about Gudger is that he is actual, he is living, at this instant. He is not some artist's or journalist's or propagandist's invention: he is a human being; and to what degree I am able it is my business to reproduce him as the human being he is; not just to amalgamate him into some invented, literary imitation of a human being" (212).

Far from representing a “sealed off” or archaic time, this “other order of existence,” which is shared by animals and uninhabited places, still exists in our midst. It is contemporaneous with and relevant to modern life, although it remains apart. Neither modern nor primitive, neither of time nor removed from history, the South is “primal” in a way that does not preclude it from bearing on the and participating in the present.

Agee is intent on teaching us how to *experience* and corporally inhabit this “other order”; in fact, I would argue that his primary objective is to make his readers to feel the full impact of what it means to share time and space with the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woods. He tries to make us feel our shared humanity by asking us to experience their world with all of our senses. In addition to taking in the images provided by Evans’s photographs, we are asked to linger over Agee’s detailed close-ups of swirling wood grain or oily lamp glass, to feel the slightly slimy consistency of loose cotton coming through the pillow or the pinch of a bedbug bite, to hear the murmuring of voices through thin walls or the symphony of pre-dawn sounds that anticipate the crowing of the rooster, to smell the dampness of the storeroom or the thick odor of sleep in a room where many bodies have lain. We are asked, above all, to feel the temporality of this world: the wearying repetitiveness of daily cycles of work and rest as well as the hopeless probability of generational cycles of poverty and ignorance.

Thus, the challenge of transmitting the experience of living together is emphatically not an operation of rescuing experience from a lost past or of nostalgically remembering what once was; it is an exercise in learning how to feel the shared time of experience that links us to the Gudgers, the Woods, and the Ricketts. It is in this experience that the ethical and political potency of Agee’s text lies. The highly personal, subjective, and sensorial nature of the experiences Agee attempts to transmit to the reader may be read as a corrective to the objectivist bias in proletarian realism and classical reportage of the kind promoted by hardline Marxist intellectuals like Michael Gold in the 1930’s.⁶⁷ Agee saw himself as writing in an age where the moral and political response demanded by documentary photographs of the poor was becoming codified, automatic, and in fact alienating us from experience, and by extension, from our shared humanity with the subjects of the photographs. Agee hopes, though not necessarily with optimism, that this experience might be recovered so that it might inform our moral response.

The reader’s experience of Agee’s text is thus critical to its moral efficacy. In spite of all of Agee’s professed distrust of and condescension towards his readers, *Famous Men* needs the reader because only the reader’s experience of the whole text can compensate for the impotence of Agee’s individual words to capture the fullness and interconnectedness of the world he seeks to represent:

it is this which so paralyzes me: yet one can write only one word at a time, and if these seem lists and inventories merely, things dead unto themselves, devoid of mutual magnetisms, and if they sink, lose impetus, meter, intension, then bear in mind at least my wish, and perceive in them and restore them what strength you can of yourself: for I must say to you, this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human co-operation. (98)

⁶⁷ Note that Agee was explicitly responding to Gold in his 1936 *New Masses* article on the political potential of avant-garde form. Critics of Gold’s model, such as Robert Warshaw, “would complain that reportage, in fact virtually the entire culture of the Left in the 1930’s, tended ‘to distort and eventually destroy the emotional and moral content of experience, putting in its place a system of conventionalized ‘responses;’” (Rabinowitz 45).

The greatest handicap of language may be that it relies on a necessarily linear form that is incapable of capturing the simultaneity and “globular” interconnectedness of experience. Agee fears that words by their very nature isolate and reify, producing only lists and inventories, “things dead unto themselves.” The reader is asked to undertake the work of reanimating these dead objects by experiencing them in time, by drawing non-linear connections between them, by drawing on her own corporeal experience to feel their rhythms and textures.⁶⁸ Only when the reader experiences all of this might Agee’s efforts amount to more than art or entertainment.

Conclusions

The obvious answer to the principal problem animating this text – why represent these families at all if Agee believes representing them can only do them violence? – is that Agee, like Evans and Lewis Hine before him, does believe that collectivity, solidarity, and community can be built on seeing one another.⁶⁹ We need to look in the right way, however, in order to see and feel our interconnectedness to one another. Sight must be integrated into a broader array of sensations, experiences, and ethical responses in order for us to “see” not only the objectified face of the other but the relationships – social, economic and affective – that bind us together. Additionally, the act of looking must be extended over a long enough duration for this full impact of looking to be felt. Only once it is felt can we escape from the insularity of our own lives and begin to care for people whose lives seem remote from ours.

Given what he considers the overwhelming unlikelihood of succeeding in this endeavor, Agee persists because he finds unbearable the thought of abandoning the world of the tenant farmers to its loneliness and obscurity. For Agee, there seems to be comfort in the smallness and marginality of a “little country settlement so deep, so lost in shelve and shade of dew, no one so much as laughs at us”, but there is also sorrow in the remoteness of one human life from another (48). After invoking this “little country settlement,” whose isolation mercifully protects it from humiliation, Agee goes on to describe the insularity of the human condition, as each life or set of lives unfolds within the confines of individual domestic space:

And thus too, these families, not otherwise than with every family in the earth, how each, apart, how inconceivably lonely, sorrowful, and remote! Not one other on earth, nor in any dream, that can care so much what comes to them, so that even as they sit at the lamp and eat their supper, the joke they are laughing at could not be so funny to anyone else; and the littlest child who stands on the bench solemnly, with food glittering all over his cheeks in the lamplight, this littlest child I speak of is not there, he is of another family, and it is a different woman who wipes the food from his cheeks and takes his weight upon her thighs and against her body and who feeds him, and lets his weight slacken

⁶⁸ As Francine Masiello writes in *El cuerpo de la voz*, it may be the embodied experience of reading poetry, of experiencing its rhythm, tempo, and voice in our own bodies, that grants poetry the ethical potential of creating “una continuidad entre un “yo” y un “nosotros” (27).

⁶⁹ Trachtenberg sees Evans’s work as one of the few authentic heirs to Hine’s aesthetic of sociality. In opposition to Roy Stryker, who insisted that FSA photographers ought to produce reports rather than art, Evans took from Hine’s work an insistence on the aesthetic as the ethical agency of photography. For Evans, as for Hine, looking at photographs is understood as a political act in itself. Regardless of whether the viewer is moved to vote for or give money to reform campaigns, the act of looking constitutes an experience of relationality with the people and places in the photographs (Trachtenberg 285). The viewer’s participation in constructing the world she beholds in the photographs is instrumental in engendering this experience of community, which is a radical political act in its own right.

against hers in his heavying sleep; and the man who puts another soaked cloth to the skin cancer on his shoulder; it is his wife who is looking on, and his child who lies sunken along the floor with his soft mouth broad open and his nakedness up like a rolling dog, asleep: and the people next up the road cannot care in the same way, not for any of it: for they are absorbed upon themselves: and the negroes down beyond the spring have drawn their shutters tight, the lamplight pulses like wounded honey through the seams into the soft night, and there is laughter: but nobody else cares. (48-49)

Agee's words here both evoke the experience of flipping through a photo book and editorialize this experience. The series of images conjured in the middle of this passage, separated by semicolons, reproduces the fragmentary and paratactic logic of the photo book, which typically juxtaposes images of many different individuals and families in order to produce the "whole" – the destitute classes, the "Oakies", the nation – from representative examples.⁷⁰ Such arrangements encourage us to generalize the plight of a people from individual examples and may, as an unintended side-effect, also lead us to conflate the individuals and families we have seen, as this passage does, requiring the correction: "this littlest child I speak of is not there, he is of another family, and it is a different woman who wipes the food from his cheeks [. . .]".

Additionally, the way that multiple images of multiple moments in multiple families momentarily intermingle here, requiring Agee to set the record straight, serves as a reminder that memory does not record images as discreetly as the camera does. While we can flip back to the photographs in the beginning of the book to remind ourselves which posture and expression of which child belongs to which image and to which family, it becomes apparent here that Agee is referencing a much larger archive of images, the vast majority of which were never captured on film. In fact, the reader who tries to locate any of the scenes described above in the photographic portion of the book will fail, but this does not make the figures Agee describes any less recognizable.⁷¹ As such, it would seem that this flip-book-like tour is presented as an extension of the visual record provided by Evans's photographs. Beyond avoiding redundancy – why waste a thousand words on what Evans has already shown us? – Agee's choice to describe scenes that supplement rather than exactly duplicate Evans's images underscores just how much the camera was unable to capture⁷². We realize that, by virtue of living with these families, Agee must have

⁷⁰ As Orvell points out, in addition to furnishing evidence, photography has, since the nineteenth century, practiced a kind of "typology" that is less scientific than poetic: "the typology of nineteenth-century photography is – to borrow a word from poetic terminology – metonymic, whereby the pictured subject, with all its concrete particularity stands for a more general class of like subjects. The individuality of the subject is thus presented on its own terms while it simultaneously serves the larger purpose of representing a general category" (88). Orvell sees depression-era documentary photographers as cultivating a style that returned to this 19th century mode of "typological representation, where the particular stands for the larger category of experience" (230).

⁷¹ The littlest child eating messily while standing on the bench is easily recognizable from Agee's vivid description in *Cotton Tenants* as the youngest of the Gudgers' children, Valley Few or "Squinchy." In his description of the Burroughs/ Gudgers at mealtime, Agee writes: "The baby meanwhile has had food prepared for him a miniature edition of this and a bowl of bread broken in buttermilk. He stands up to it on the bench the three boys use, hanging his round paunch over the china like a Jefferson Day banquet speaker, revolving his bright glance, and going through the seldom completed gestures of eating, jerkily yet gracefully, like a faulty clockwork doll unwinding. What he actually lives on he gets of his mother, many times during the day" (*Cotton Tenants* 86-87). The man with the soaked cloth on his skin cancer is recognizable from Evans's photographs as Bud Woods, although the scene Agee describes here is not one captured in the photographs.

⁷² Rancière claims that Agee and Evans went as far as to make a pact vowing not to duplicate on another's subject matter: "But the two friends soon took a decision that lent their cooperation unique allure: each one of them would work alone. Text and photographs would be independent. No photograph, indeed, would show the reader the cracks in the bureau or the family of china dogs. Photos would bear no captions. And no reporter's text would explain the

witnessed small children being nursed to sleep and sleeping on the floor many times over, so many that these images begin to merge in his memory.

It is only through following the iterative movements of the text that we can approximate the intimate, rhythmic experience of living together. Implicit in Agee's adoption of this model of narration is the belief that it is not the shock of a sensationalist or sentimental image of suffering, at which we glance once and then turn away in horror, that will stay with us and change the way we think about others; instead it is repeated exposure to the undeniable humanity of these others that will come to haunt us most powerfully. Towards this end, Agee's text produces moments of slippage from iconic, singular images of the kind Evans captures on film, monumentalizing the everyday, to a multiplicity of nearly identical images that return the monumental to the quotidian.

This temporal merging, in which the many sleepless nights spent on the Gudgers's porch coalesce in the narration of one night and many images of women nursing children to sleep form the one supremely vivid image with which the book ends, must be distinguished from the "leveling off of faces" through which individuals appear to coalesce into a class, a race, or a nation.⁷³ It is this latter form of merging that is encouraged by Roosevelt's rhetoric in his "I see Millions . . ." speech and by certain uses of photography, including most Depression-era photo documentary books, which seek to make an individual image representative of a global whole. Agee attempts to counter the inevitable erasure of individuality that accompanies this gesture by returning again and again to the *same* faces, the *same* walls, the *same* objects insisting on the uniqueness of each through repeated contact.

In this way, Agee reanimates the stillness imposed by the camera by reminding us of the iterative nature of domestic life, and, I would argue, suggests a way in which the reader might be cured of her lamentable inability to care: it is through repetition and not through vision alone that we might be drawn into an affective community with those whose lives we contemplate. As we have seen in the earlier-cited passage from "A Country Letter," in which Agee laments "how inconceivably lonely, sorrowful, and remote" our lives are from one another, visual access alone does not seem to make much difference: the photo book-like images Agee enumerates (48-49) are as inaccessible as the unseen scenes producing the laughter beyond the closed shutters of "the negroes down beyond the spring;" either way, "nobody cares."

As Agee zooms out from this particular "little country settlement" to "the whole round earth and in the settlements," we learn just how universal is the viewer's inability to share in the intimate laughter, sorrow, and caring of other families. In other words, the unlikelihood of visual access alone producing care is not merely a product of the socioeconomic divides that separate us (the viewers/readers of *Famous Men*) from the tenant farmers. As if to back up his claim that

circumstances in which the photographer gathered certain members of one of the three families" (247). While the independent nature of the photographic and textual sections of the book is generally bourn out in *Famous Men*, Agee has obviously violated the terms of this agreement by narrating the scene in which Evans takes the family portraits and by describing in very similar terms several of the images Evans includes (the portraits of Annie Mae Gudger and Mrs. Ricketts for example).

⁷³ In the introduction to August Sander's *Face of Our Time*, Alfred Döblin writes, "Each of us knows a number of people, and we recognize them when we meet by specific, entirely personal characteristics that they have. All the people we encounter are only individuals, and each person has a name, as well as specific, unrepeatable, and characteristic tokens of identification [. . .] But what can we say about an ant-heap? [. . .] What I am trying to say here is something that is widely known, although is seldom applied to human beings – the fact that, viewed from a certain distance, distinctions vanish; viewed from a certain distance, individuals cease to exist and only universals persist" (10-11). Döblin claims that there are great advantages to looking at ourselves from this distance, and that this manner of "expanding our field of vision" is what is afforded by Sander's portraits of social types.

the lives of these families unfold “not otherwise than with every family on earth,” Agee goes on to expand his vision to encompass the urban as well as the rural, the middle and upper classes as well as the destitute:

All over the whole round earth and in the settlements, the towns, and the great iron stones of cities, people are drawn inward within their little shells of rooms, and are to be seen in their wondrous and pitiful actions through the surfaces of their lighted windows by thousands, by millions, little golden aquariums, in chairs, reading, setting tables, sewing, playing cards, not talking, talking, laughing inaudibly, mixing drinks, at radio dials, eating in shirtsleeves, carefully dressed, courting, teasing, loving, seducing, undressing urgently, in couples married, in separate chairs, in family parties, in gay parties, preparing for bed, preparing for sleep: and none can care, beyond that room; and none can be cared for, by any beyond that room: and it is small wonder they are drawn together so cowardly close [. . .] (49)

As Agee’s gaze pans out from the tenant families to the rest of humanity, he shows us that the uncoupling of the voyeuristic gaze of the camera from the intimacy and compassion that allows us to care is a universal predicament. Whether this gaze penetrates cheerfully appointed middle class domestic spaces or the spare and poverty stricken homes of the tenant farmers, the effect is the same: it is impossible to look in from the outside without reifying those we observe as objects of curiosity or pity. This objectifying gaze turns lit windows into “little golden aquariums” in which the inhabitants “are to be seen in their wondrous and pitiful actions through the surfaces of their lighted windows by thousands, by millions.” Agee’s syntax is ambiguous as to whether “by thousands, by millions” enumerates the viewers by whom these human actions “are to be seen” or the windows in which such scenes play out, as in the construction, “by the thousands/ millions.” This ambiguity furthers the slippage that has taken place in this passage, as the middle class readers, radio listeners, and gay party goers who may have presumed themselves to be the viewers of the images of tenant farmers in the first part of the passage have, by the second part, become the objects of another’s gaze. In an age of photojournalism, all of us can be seen yet none of us can be cared for. Visibility is not enough to save any of us from our alienated and isolated private existence.

These pitifully isolated domestic scenes that are, regardless of class distinctions, to be viewed by the millions by millions, evokes a radically different, and more optimistic model of how the nation might be constituted through vision: the famous “I see millions” speech presented by FDR in his 1933 inaugural address:

I see a great nation, upon a great continent, blessed with a great wealth of natural resources [. . .]

In this nation *I see* tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.
(“Second Inaugural Address”)

Roosevelt rhetorically positions himself as a viewer who can survey the whole as well as its component parts, the millions and the nation they make up as well as the individual families whose suffering he “sees.” In his analysis of this speech, Jeff Allred contends that this gesture allows Roosevelt to integrate the individual subjects of pathos into “a broader social landscape” (the millions, the nation) on the one hand, and to segment this communal entity on the other: “two-thirds do the looking and one-third passively awaits this gaze” (4). As Allred notes, Roosevelt’s middle-class auditors would all the more readily identify as the viewing two-thirds, having by this time quite literally seen the destitution of the “ill-housed, ill clad, ill nourished” bottom third of the nation in FSA photographs widely circulated in the press in the mid-thirties.

Whereas Roosevelt’s speech draws a clear line between those who see and those who are seen and suggests that it is the patriotic and moral duty of those who look upon their fellow countrymen to care for them and lift them up, Agee’s treatment of vision in this passage blurs this line, turning the ethnographer’s gaze back on himself and on the reader and suggests that all of our lives, when viewed through a sociological lens, are no more moving than those of fish in aquariums. Though Agee does not appear in any of the photographs in *Famous Men*, he does paint himself (often intrusively) into the scenes he describes, submitting his participation in these scenes to our scrutiny. His text insists, moreover, that there remains a painful chasm – a wound as it were – that separates seeing from caring. This distance can only be closed by dwelling in it, by painfully meditating on the ethical double-bind in which this text finds itself: to look at the tenants is to hurt and humiliate them and to risk objectifying them; not to look at them is to abandon them to their remote existence, to ignore their suffering, and to relinquish all attempts at feeling their pain.

The best solution Agee can offer is the flickering, iterative temporality of his text. He returns, again and again to variations on the same every-day images until we begin to experience them as familiar, not as reified snapshots of an exotic life but as the living, breathing, pulsing, rhythms of a life we know well. As such, repetition is one of the primary rhetorical tools with which Agee “pries open” the eyes of his readers. While his recurrent appeals to the reader instructing us on how to look and read and how not to look and read keep us from lapsing into complacency, the recursive structure of his narrative also increases the intimacy, the singularity, and the duration of our visual encounter with the world represented. While the reproducibility of the photographic image and the interrelated ubiquity of photographs is usually thought of as stripping visual experience of aura and diminishing its impact, Agee’s text suggests that certain forms of repeatability serve to jar us into consciousness rather than to dull our consciousness.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin describes the difference between “the reproduction (such as illustrated papers and weekly news round-ups always have to hand) and the image” as such: “Uniqueness and duration are as tightly intertwined in the latter as are transience and reiterability in the former. Stripping the object of its sheath, shattering the aura” (*Brief History* 184-185). This “shattering of the aura” is characteristic of the way we look when we see similarity even in the unique, contingent, irreproducible moment. But repeatability is not always such a bad thing even for Benjamin. Consider the “the slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layer which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” in the oral tradition (“The Storyteller” 93). The palimpsestic piling of non-identical retellings, slow and organic as it

In emulating the iterative temporality of living together, Agee tries to make us feel the company of those individuals from whom we are separated by the very barriers he loves to describe – the “little shells of rooms” upon whose surfaces he lavishes page upon page of detailed description. It would seem though that his refusal to let us forget (and thereby to let us violate) the sanctity and isolation of each of these little, hermetically sealed containers in which human life plays out is as critical to the ethical mission of his project as are his efforts to teach us how to see and feel the humanity of the lives they contain.

If just looking, without allowing ourselves to be personally impacted by what we see is no more than shameful voyeurism, then, conversely, over-identifying with subjects we cannot truly see and erasing the protective barriers that shield them from our sight, our pity, and our projection is equally dangerous. As we have seen in “A Country Letter,” it is all too easy to be carried away by empathetic projection when we conflate what we can actually see and know of others’ pain with our longing to share and heal this pain. Looking properly, then, requires that we not lose sight entirely of the opacity of the surfaces – walls, skin, paper – that separate us from the tenants. As we see in Evans’s photographs, such ethical buffers may be presented visually in the recalcitrant expressions with which photographic subjects return the gaze of the camera, in the muteness of inanimate objects, and in the pride and dignity expressed by simple and inexpensive objects arranged with care, as if to say “there is nothing to pity here.” Such images confront us with the opacity of surfaces we cannot violate out of any empathetic longing. If the ethical work of Evans’s photographs in this collaboration is to remind us that they themselves are but impenetrable surfaces, barring us from interiority rather than inviting projection, then the complementary work of Agee’s text is to make us look closer and harder and longer, again and again, until we cannot help but care, until we feel the helplessness of caring desperately from this side of the inviolate (but never inviolate enough) surface of the page or photographic image.

is, seems to imbue the tale with duration and uniqueness. It is singular because no two retellings are the same and each carries the living history of all of those that have come before.

Chapter Two

Algo más que mirar: the Temporality of Looking in Juan José Saer's El limonero real

Prácticamente todos mis relatos transcurren en el litoral argentino, la región que se encuentra en el límite este de la pampa y los grandes ríos Paraná y Uruguay [. . .] Pero el objetivo de mi literatura no es hablar de la región; prefiero dejarle esa tarea al discurso más pertinente de los geógrafos, sociólogos e historiadores

-- Juan José Saer⁷⁵

Juan José Saer and the critics who have championed his work have long refuted the reflexive equation of the author's predilection for rural settings with literary regionalism for fear that Saer's being labeled a regionalist writer would preclude his being read as a great modern writer or as a stylistic innovator. As María Teresa Gramuglio reminds us, early in Saer's career, he was systematically ignored in Argentina, and his work dismissed as anachronistic, traditional, and regionalist.⁷⁶ When Saer first emerged on the literary scene in the midst of the Perón years, to be read as a regionalist was, at best, to be read as a politically committed realist interested in the plight of the disenfranchised rural poor, and, at worst, to be dismissed for belatedly reproducing the naturalistic style associated with *costumbrismo*, *pintoresquismo*, and *color local*. Saer and his early champions rightly insisted that his work did not simply rehash these tired tropes. Today, however, with Saer's reputation as one of the most innovative Argentine writers of the last half-century firmly established, there is no longer any reason to disavow that Saer is, at least in one important sense, a regionalist writer: nearly all of his fiction is set in the same provincial space.⁷⁷

When referring to the rural setting of his fiction, Saer prefers the term *la zona* to *la región*. As the remarks cited above affirm, Saer considers *la región* the domain of the fact-based discourses of geography, sociology, and history. *La zona*, in contrast, is literary creation. Much as William Faulkner does with Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and as Juan Carlos Onetti does with Santa María de Buenos Aires, Saer creates around the rivers and plains of Argentina's Santa Fe Province a fictional world populated by a cast of recurring characters. Saer is quick to point out that the technique is not unique to rural settings: diverse literary places from Balzac's Paris to Joyce's Dublin are elaborated in much the same way (Saer and Piglia 16).

In fact, in public statements Saer has consistently resisted association with regionalism, calling it "una concepción pobre de la literatura" (ibid 65). Though Saer's cursory dismissal of regionalist literature risks making a strawman out of a complex and heterogeneous genre, his objections to the label are, nevertheless, grounded in an astute critique: Saer alleges that overreliance on the category of "rural literature" posits a false binary between the local and the cosmopolitan, implying that those on the geographic peripheries do not participate in universal lettered culture, and falsely suggesting that rural setting is aesthetically and thematically

⁷⁵ "Practically all of my stories take place in the Argentine littoral, the region that's found between the eastern edge of the pampa and the large rivers, the Paraná and the Uruguay [. . .] But the objective of my literature is not to speak about the region; I prefer to leave that work to the more pertinent discourses of geographers, sociologists, and historians" ("Para Giorgio Vitale," *Notebook*). All translations in this chapter are my own.

⁷⁶ Gramuglio notes of Saer's early work: "se lo ha considerado anacrónico, tradicional, objetivista o regionalista." "He has been considered anachronistic, traditional, objectivist or regionalist" ("El arte de narrar" 3).

⁷⁷ For examples of how critics have emphasized the contrast between Saer's poetics and the trappings of regionalism – *pintoresquismo*, *color local*, *costumbrismo*, etc. – see the articles of Beatriz Sarlo and María Teresa Gramuglio in *Punto de vista*.

deterministic.⁷⁸ In the face of these stereotypes, Saer repudiates the ideological work regionalist literature has often been asked to perform – that of converting traditional ways of life into objects of folklore to be claimed as national patrimony – as well as the scourge of exoticism for which Saer criticizes prominent figures of the Latin American “Boom” (“Un reportaje,” *Notebook*).

As critics such as Graciela Montaldo have noted, representations of the region as metonym for national identity or past tradition need not ossify rural life. To the contrary, Montaldo argues, the majority of literature of the rural is radical in that it seeks to re-invent tradition rather than to preserve it. The literary construction of the rural becomes “una actividad discursiva que incursiona en el pasado capturando algunos de sus aspectos y contenidos para organizar el presente como nuevo” (*De pronto* 25).⁷⁹ When treated as a living tradition, regional subcultures have the potential to challenge and destabilize narratives of national identity. When sealed off from the present in archaic time, however, representations of the rural can become instruments of conservative nationalistic ideology, furnishing stable ground on which to erect national origins myths (*ibid* 26). This positivistic regionalism, which treats the rural as a fixed spatial referent to be accurately documented, catalogued, and archived, is what Saer explicitly rejects. In contrast, Montaldo’s conception of regionalist literature as a force of disruption that insists on the ongoing reconfiguration of the past in the present offers itself as a tradition into which we might inscribe Saer.

Numerous critics have argued that Saer’s anti-naturalistic treatment of *la zona* distances him from traditional regionalist projects and have signaled the political stakes of Saer’s radical break with realist aesthetics: questioning the knowability of the real and of the past subverts the authority of official history (Premat, López), of journalism and legal writing (Maccioni), and of discourses of political representation (Peláez). Far less critical attention has been paid, however, to the political import of Saer’s combination of avant-garde aesthetics with traditionally regionalist subject matter.⁸⁰ In this chapter, I argue that Saer’s novel treatment of rural life is key to understanding the way the author critiques essentializing discourses of Argentine national identity as well as the commodification of Latin American culture in an increasingly globalized literary market.⁸¹

This chapter plumbs the significance of the largely unremarked fact that Saer’s most formally radical novel, *El limonero real* (1974), is also the novel in which the author most directly takes on regionalist subject matter: the daily lives of fisherman living on remote islands in the Paraná River. I argue that in this novel, Saer disrupts the image of Argentina’s rural

⁷⁸ Saer insists on putting “rural” and “urban” literature in quotation marks, claiming that he finds these distinctions of little use or importance (“Interview with Gabriel Saad,” *Notebook*).

⁷⁹ “a discursive activity that ventures into the past capturing some of its aspects and contents to re-organize the present.”

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that this disparate pairing is precisely what drew the attention of many of Saer’s early readers: Saer was considered an anomaly for treating regional subject matter with avant-garde aesthetics, for depicting “una zona geográfica relativamente marginal y atrasada” (“a relatively marginal and backwards geographic zone”) not with the conservative poetics of realism but with “las formas más vivas y prestigiosas de la gran literatura europea y norteamericana contemporánea” (“the most alive and prestigious forms of great contemporary European and North American literature”) (Gramuglio *Juan José Saer* 298). Note that the disconnect between Saer’s subject matter and his style is treated not only in terms of the periphery vs. the center but in terms of the “atrasada” – the behind, backwards, or belated – vs. the living and the contemporary. The temporal dissonance produced by Saer’s intervention lays bare a largely unspoken – and curiously persistent if unfounded – assumption: that “traditional” subject matter is most naturally treated with naive modes of representation.

⁸¹ Rafael Arce notes that these critiques run throughout Saer’s work, becoming most prominent in the author’s later writings (“Un enigma”).

interior as an ahistorical landscape by drawing attention to the inescapable temporality of perception and memory and contrasting these with the illusion of stillness furnished by the photographic image. Saer's reimagined regionalism thus critiques not only the construct of a stable national identity grounded in a timeless autochthonous past, but also the facility with which images of local color circulate in an age of visual culture.

El limonero real is the first work Saer published from exile.⁸² Rather than painting a nostalgic portrait of a lost homeland, however, Saer's most avant-garde novel casts critical light on the question of how regional spaces and lives can be visualized and experienced by a cosmopolitan readership. As such, Saer's text does not naively seek to represent autochthonous subject matter but, rather, engages with autochthony as Carlos Alonso proposes re-defining the term: as a "discursive mode" that encompasses the rhetorical work of conjuring the local, the indigenous, and the culturally specific as well as the rhetorical work of revealing the constructedness of such a representations (76-78). Whereas Alonso describes the work of self-criticism and self-distancing in the early-twentieth-century *novelas de la tierra* as "unwitting," making them "very modern texts even in spite of themselves" (64), I read the auto-reflexivity of Saer's poetics as a self-consciously modern re-instantiation of the paradox of representing autochthony. The novel's avant-garde formal gestures – such as precipitous breaks in the narration, uncomfortable temporal dilation, and, at one point, the dissolution of language into incoherent babel and, finally, a black box on the page – express the politically and ethically freighted challenges of representing peasant life without reducing it to the object of ethnographic study or nostalgic longing.

In other words, I argue that *El limonero real* manifests in its notoriously difficult form a preoccupation with the precarity of its representational project. The lives of the peasant subjects of *El limonero real* remain partially opaque to the reader, but not simply because cultural difference or temporal distance renders them inaccessible (such an account would risk fetishizing them as exotic or primitive). Instead, I contend, the tedium and difficulty of the text safeguard against facile consumption and appropriation of its pastoral subject matter while demanding of the reader a deeper mode of engagement, one whose ultimate reward is not the ability to visually survey or rationally comprehend the world represented but, rather, the ability to experience its temporality. In insisting on the shared time of (embodied) experience that links us to the rural world about which we read, Saer undermines the linear, teleological temporality that governs realist novels and western narratives of progress and modernization alike. In its place, Saer's most experimental fiction presents a lyric temporality of return that allows present and past, tradition and modernity, to interact in unexpected ways.

While the negativity of Saer's poetics – the ways his most experimental works resist easy consumption and throw into crisis the possibility of transparent representation – has received ample critical attention, this chapter pursues the possibility that *El limonero real* offers the cosmopolitan reader an alternative to the positivistic appropriation and mastery of regional spaces which it forecloses.⁸³ I argue that even as the formal difficulty of the novel thwarts

⁸² Saer left Argentina, then under military dictatorship, for Paris in 1968, and lived the remainder of his life abroad.

⁸³ Saer's work is often read as laying bare the impossibility of perceiving the real, let alone representing it through language: for Saer, the real is that which is inapprehensible, unnarratable, and unnamable (Premat, Torres Perdigón, Arce, Maccioni). Saer's most experimental works lend themselves particularly well to Adornian readings relating to resistance to the commodification of experience (Policsek), refusal of the communicative function of language (Oubiña), illegibility (Garramuño), and failure as an ethos and aesthetic of the avant-garde (Arce "La imagen"). Reading in a more psychoanalytic vein, Julio Premat interprets the negativity of Saer's poetics as a form of

readers who come as tourists in search of local color, Saer's peculiar treatment of the interdependence of vision and time inducts the reader into the cyclical temporality of peasant life and rewards the reader patient enough to follow the narrative's tedious unfolding with the ability to "see" temporal depth and movement in seemingly opaque and static scenes. Moreover, in an age when the visual media of photography and cinema pervade the cultural imaginary, Saer dwells on the elements of experience that elude visual apprehension and reminds us that, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested, narrative remains a privileged mode for conjuring the within-time-ness of experience.⁸⁴ According to Ricoeur, it is through the spiraling movements of repetition, remembering, and re-telling, that narrative re-opens within-timeness, offers a temporality in excess of linear, chronological time, and resists the leveling-off of history into a series of ossified events. With these principles in mind, I propose that it is Saer's formation as a poet, as much as his training as a filmmaker and his engagement with international modernism, that informs Saer's iterative narrative structure in *El limonero real* and that enables his critique of the reification of the rural in images of local color.

I will begin by introducing Saer's relationship to his *zona* – the provincial setting to which he returns time and time again in his fiction – underscoring the political dimensions of Saer's incessant re-writing of this space. I then turn in Section II to Saer's poetics of vision: I argue that by weaving analeptic and proleptic movement into the act of looking, Saer's narrative gaze foregrounds the temporal dimension of gathering fragmentary visions in order to "see" the whole. In addition to suggesting the insufficiency of a purely visual and instantaneous gaze, such as that of the camera, these techniques encourage the reader to patiently observe in order to perceive the affective charge that the banal scenes and actions described carry for those who live them.

Finally, Section III focuses on the ways in which Saer imbues the form of the novel with a recursive lyric temporality. Paying particular attention to Saer's use of iterative narrative structures in his 1976 short story "El viajero" and his 1974 novel *El limonero real*, I read Saer's *zona* as created through a looping intertextual movement within and between individual works, which creates vertical channels between different moments in time, allowing them to be experienced simultaneously. It is from poetry, I aim to show, that Saer gleans this ethos of iteration – a commitment to revisiting the same places, scenes, and moments in time again and again in order to create an intimate and temporally rich experience of the local. I thus read Saer's most experimental style as indebted to a model of lyric return and intertextual revisiting elaborated by Rioplatense poets such as Juan L. Ortiz and Jorge Luis Borges. I believe that

melancholia – a preoccupation with the irrecuperability of oneiric experience, of personal and collective origins, and of the past by narrative – and reads *la zona* as the spatialization of a lost mother figure (183).

⁸⁴ See Rafael Arce's "La imagen novelesca" on how Saer's visual descriptions in *El limonero real* contain subjective perceptions that no camera can capture, thus revealing the limits of filmic representation: "No es que la narración novelesca ponga en evidencia las imposibilidades que el relato filmico vendría a resolver: es al revés, son las posibilidades de la escritura las que marcan cierto modo de aparición de las cosas irreductible a lo visual." "It's not that novelistic narration presents impossibilities that filmic storytelling would come to solve: it's the opposite; it is the possibilities of writing that mark a certain way of seeing things that is irreducible to the visual" (115). Ricoeur sees narrative as offering a dialectical resolution to the binary often posited between Heidegger's "within-time-ness," the existential experience of the present, and the abstract, linear, "leveled off" time with which we represent History as a series of fixed dates, events, and facts. Ricoeur privileges narrative as the discourse capable of making within-time-ness transmissible, public, and meaningful for a wider community without leveling it off into abstract time (178). For Ricoeur, remembering, repetition, and re-telling all become ways of re-experiencing the past from different moments in time and constitute the strategies through which narrative re-opens with-in-time-ness without abandoning it to ahistoricity.

reinscribing Saer, who is often compared to William Faulkner and situated within an international comparative context, in a *local* intertextual web is both consistent with the ethos of returning to local landscapes expressed throughout Saer's work and necessary to understanding Saer's model of regionalist literature.

Though the structural parallels between Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Saer's *zona* are undeniable, I believe we miss a great deal if we read Saer as exclusively in dialog with international modernists. Hernán Ronsino, a contemporary Argentine writer who sees himself as working within a tradition pioneered by Saer, has emphasized that Saer was neither the first nor the last Rioplatense novelist to elaborate such an intertextual *zona*: in addition to the Uruguayan author Juan Carlos Onetti, whose fictional elaboration of Santa María de Buenos Aires is similarly constructed, we might also think of Miguel Briante (General Belgrano) and Heraldito Conti (Chacabuco) (Bellini). Yet the local literary genealogy in which we might inscribe Saer has often been overshadowed by efforts on the part of his champions to "rescue" him (as it were) from the obscurity of his provincial origins and celebrate him as a great cosmopolitan writer. My intention is in no way to question Saer's cosmopolitan pedigree – his biography, reading habits and experiments with literary form all make clear the depth of his involvement in the transnational intellectual conversations of his time.⁸⁵ However, I do want to show that the model of intertextuality that Saer theorizes from within his work compels a critical approach that attends to local webs of affiliation.

I. Juan José Saer's *regionalismo no regionalista*

As I have noted, one of the greatest obstacles to reading Saer as a local, if not to say regionalist writer has come from his own pronouncements on the subject. Although Saer has always proudly claimed filiation with fellow Argentine writers such as Macedonio Fernández, Jorge Luis Borges, and Juan L. Ortiz, he has vociferously disavowed any affiliation with regionalist literature and expressed an almost allergic aversion to any and all discourses of nationalism. I want to insist, however, that Saer's anti-nationalism – grounded in his experience with the populist rhetoric of the Perón regimes and the authoritarianism and repression of the ensuing military dictatorships in Argentina – is not grounds for ignoring the profoundly local sense of belonging out of which his literature arises. To the contrary, it is precisely this paradox – of embracing the local as well as the global, while rejecting the construct of the nation – that allows us to locate a Critical Regionalist project Saer's his work. As such, I contend that far from abandoning regionalism to pursue an international modernist aesthetic, Saer's literature makes a politically as well as aesthetically radical intervention *into* the tradition of regionalist literature by rendering pastoral subject matter in historical, though by no means linear, time rather than producing of the rural a timeless landscape. This approach not only constitutes a radical departure from the positivistic, *costumbrista* vein of regionalism, which tends to rely heavily on documenting rural spaces in fixed visual terms; it also challenges the unspoken ideological work

⁸⁵ He was extremely well-read, his notebooks scattered with references to Kafka, Baudelaire, Quevedo, Joyce, and Flaubert, among many others, and he was a consummate if amateur translator of his favorite authors. He spent the latter half of his life in exile in Europe, having fled the dictatorship in Argentina in 1968 and wrote many of his most famous novels in Paris. These features of Saer's biography, combined with his championing of artistic autonomy and his embracing of anti-realist aesthetics have often led to his being read within the tradition of international modernism.

of such representations: that of removing the rural from the flux of time and fixing it in ahistorical, archaic time.

In addition to challenging teleological progress narratives that would relegate the underdevelopment, untimeliness, and *barbarie* of the rural to the past, Saer's intervention has ethical implications for how we, the readers of his *zona*, relate to the places and lives depicted: Saer's manipulation of vision and time in his most experimental fiction restores temporal duration to the act of seeing the region. In *El limonero real*, Saer's treatment of vision, and of photography in particular, asks the reader to reflect critically on her complicity in reifying "quaint" and "primitive" ways of life by consuming their images, and its slow, spiraling narrative structure encourages her to linger in the shared time of experience that links her to the regional lives about which she reads. As a result, it becomes impossible to behold Argentina's rural interior as a timeless landscape or to contemplate its inhabitants as quaint or exotic objects. This mode of political engagement is, as Laura Maccioni has claimed of Saer's work, decidedly anti-ideological, confronting the reader, instead, with the ethical question: "¿Como vivir con el otro?" (48).

Intertextuality in *la zona*

It is impossible to approach Saer's vast and interconnected *obra* without invoking *la zona*, a term the author prefers over *la región* for reasons closely linked to his rejection of the term *regionalismo*. As we have begun to see, Saer's *zona*, although based on Argentina's Santa Fe province, cannot be reduced to a geographic space, much less a political territory. For Saer, it is importantly also an imaginary space that exists in the hearts and minds of those who know it personally. Saer comes closest to articulating this notion of the *la zona* in a short story appropriately titled "Discusión sobre el término zona" (*La Mayor*, 1976). The discussion or argument takes place between Lalo Lescano and Pichón Garay, two friends born and raised in the same small city. The question of how to retain his allegiance and connection to *la zona* from afar is a pressing one for the character Garay, who in 1967, when the story is set, is preparing to depart for Europe, as well as for Saer, whose exile in France would begin the following year. Garay is preoccupied with how he will relate to his homeland from afar: "La discusión comienza cuando Garay dice que va a extrañar y que un hombre debe ser siempre fiel a una región, a una zona" (126).⁸⁶ Lescano responds that one cannot be loyal to a region because there is no such thing: because it is impossible to delineate the border between two contiguous regions like *la costa* or *la pampa*, he argues, regions do not exist. For Lescano, deep familiarity with a place is precisely what blurs and complicates the neat boundaries drawn by cartographers and politicians: "Pero cualquiera de nosotros sabe muy bien, porque ha nacido aquí y ha vivido aquí [. . .]" (127-128).⁸⁷ Lescano recognizes a term like "la costa" is meaningless if it refers only to an arbitrary shape on a map and that it gleams its true meaning from the way people use it: to refer to places where the earth is a certain color, where certain crops (cotton, tobacco, rice) grow better than others, where certain people (poorer *criollos* rather than wealthy immigrants) live. Garay responds simply, "No comparto" (128), leaving the reader to infer that the foundation for his loyalty to *la zona* cannot be argued on Lescano's terms, or perhaps cannot be *argued* (*discutido*) in abstract, terms at all. For Garay, who speaks while staring into the river, and who prefers the

⁸⁶ "The argument begins when Garay says that he will miss it and that a man must always be loyal to a region, to a zone."

⁸⁷ "But any one of us knows very well, because he has been born here and has lived here . . ."

restaurant where he is sitting because it was once frequented by local literary *vanguardia*, loyalty does not require a mappable, geographic region to which to adhere; to the contrary, it is an affective connection to lived experience and shared history.

Replace “región” or “zona” with “nación” or “Argentina,” and Garay’s position echoes that of Jorge Luis Borges in his 1932 essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición.” Repudiating the assumption that being an Argentine writer entails writing about autochthonous subject matter, Borges’s concludes that what ultimately makes a piece of literature authentically Argentine is not local subject matter but the particular set of attitudes, neuroses, and biases with which it approaches universal themes.⁸⁸ While the ideologically motivated conflation of national literature and local color becomes an object of witty mockery for Borges, for Saer, who comes into his own as a writer during the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía in the 1960’s and publishes his most groundbreaking works at the height of military repression in the 1970’s, such nationalistic discourse represents a grave threat to the autonomy of the local as well as the autonomy of the artist. In a pointed piece entitled, “La nación es una conspiración contra el individuo”, Saer includes the tradition of national literature among the tools the totalitarian state uses to enforce its hegemony (*Notebook*).

Saer’s strong aversion to the nationalistic ideological work for which literary representations of the region are often recruited undeniably informs his protestations against the label *regionalista*. Beyond simply breaking with this stereotype of regionalism as nationalism writ small, I contend, Saer offers an alternative regionalism or perhaps “*zonaismo*” as a form of anti-essentializing discourse and a poetic position interested in the particularity of experience of place. The ideological work of this “regionalismo no regionalista” is antithetical to that of the regionalism Saer rejects: it thwarts the politically domesticating and temporally reifying rhetoric of the modern state that seeks to assimilate the region and make of it a stable, always prior yet ahistorical space in which to anchor the nation⁸⁹. As I go on to demonstrate, it is Saer’s continuous re-imagining of *la zona* that allows him to restore the autonomy of the region as a literary subject.

Whereas Borges argues that the inevitability of an Argentine writer being Argentine ought to liberate him from the obligation to write about “orillas y estancias,” Saer appears to take on the challenge of proving that one can write about *orillas* and *estancias ad nauseum* without falling into the trap of parochial nationalism. As Ricardo Piglia has argued, Saer’s *zona* is located *beyond the nation* and becomes an extra-national space from which the nation can be critiqued. Piglia writes: “a partir de ese espacio local la nación es vista como un territorio extraño, tierra ocupada por la cultura oficial. El artista resiste en su zona, establece un vínculo directo entre su región y la cultura mundial” (38).⁹⁰ In effect, *la zona* bypasses the nation as it shuttles back and forth between the local and the universal; it is in this vein that I read Saer’s *zona* as engaging with Gayatri Spivak’s notion of Critical Regionalism as a way of going “over and under the nation” to find new ways of articulating collective identity (Butler and Spivak 94). Following Piglia, I see Saer as engendering through his fiction a *zona* that is *not* coterminous

⁸⁸ And here we might also hear echoes of Machado de Assis’s “Instinto de nacionalidade,” which articulates a Brazilianess as fundamentally an instinct, a sensibility, or, for that matter, echoes of Arguedas’s “intimate indigenism.”

⁸⁹ This gesture is made official by Ricardo Rojas when he posits the rural and the *gauchesca* as the “núcleo, sólido y primordial de lo argentino” in *La historia de la literatura argentina* (1917-22) (Montaldo *De pronto* 75).

⁹⁰ “From this local space the nation is seen as a foreign territory, land occupied by official culture. The artist resists in his zone and establishes a direct link between his region and global culture.”

with the nation, a literary space that resists geographic or ideological definition and, instead, opens itself up as a site for affective and aesthetic experience.

In sum, for Saer remaining loyal to *la zona* means both continually revisiting its landscapes in his fiction and refusing to reduce it to a bounded territory, a finite object of knowledge. I propose that he achieves these dual goals through a practice of incessant rewriting that allows him to continually reconfigure his *zona*. As Marta Stern and Beatriz Sarlo, among others, have observed, each novel is a re-writing of *la zona*, a new intervention that may demand that we re-read everything we have read in a new light.⁹¹ Furthermore, Saer's fragmentation of his *zona* across dozens of works, some of which are historical, imbues it with temporal duration and emphasizes its historical change.

For example, *La ocasión* (1986), is set in the 19th century and depicts a version of Argentina's most iconic landscape, the pampa, in a state of flux: the novel chronicles the advent of wire fencing to contain and partition the pampa's vast expanse, and waves of European immigration into Argentina's heartland. For these reasons, critics such as Julio Premat have read *La ocasión* as an intervention that destabilizes populist rhetoric eager to claim the pampa as a bedrock for national identity (Premat 322-323). Going even further back in time, Saer's most widely read novel, *El entenado* (1983), is set on the same river banks as Saer's contemporary fiction but in the 16th century, when this land was inhabited by the Colastiné Indians. The novel recounts an encounter between Spanish colonial explorers and the local indigenous community. Less of an adventure story, however, than a parable in the vein of Borges's "The ethnographer," it reflects on the ethical and epistemological limits of both ethnography and art as ways of knowing and transmitting lived experience across cultural, linguistic, and temporal distances. In fact, Saer seems to engage with the ethnographic tradition only to disavow it as a way of gaining knowledge of local realities. As Julio Premat notes, Saer's frequent references to scientific ways of knowing – anthropology, ethnography, psychoanalysis, historiography, philosophy, etc. – seem designed to underscore the insufficiency of these disciplines as means of accounting for reality (301). For Saer, it is not through abstract reason but only through the proliferation of meanings afforded by poetic language, through the sensorial richness of subjective experience,

⁹¹ The idea of *la zona* as an ongoing act of re-writing has been best articulated by Mirta Stern: "La dialéctica constructiva resultante de este 'volver a narrar', sistemático y siempre gestativo, permite leer la concatenación de los relatos como el producto de las sucesivas reescrituras de un texto único, que resiste su formalización definitiva, y sobre el que la escritura vuelve para ensayar sus más diversas posibilidades" (iv). "The constructive dialectic resulting from this systematic and always gestative 'narrating again' allows one to read the concatenation of the tellings as the product of the successive re-writings of a single text, which resists definitive formalization, and to which the writing returns to rehearse its most diverse possibilities." The most dramatic example of this is the proleptic revelation in *Glosa* (1985): While Angel Leto and El matemático walk down the street together, the narrator looks forward to a day eighteen years later, when El matemático will look back on the day narrated with the possession of new knowledge about the characters in *la zona* that has never been disclosed elsewhere in Saer's work: that Tomatis and Elisa were disappeared by the military dictatorship during the same summer narrated in *Nadie, nada, nunca*, and that Angel Leto, the protagonist of *Cicatrices*, commits suicide with the poison capsule he carries so that he cannot be taken alive and interrogated by the military police. This information, inserted proleptically into *Glosa*, casts novels written years earlier into a new light and directly confronts the reader with the political violence that runs throughout Saer's work as a silenced subtext. Beatriz Sarlo compares the political developments that silently underlie the evolution of Saer's *zona* as the reverse side of a tapestry, which we can only infer from the side we do see: "En el revés del tejido están todos los hilos que no muestra la superficie destinada a ser vista." "On the reverse side of the weaving are all the threads that don't show on the surface destined to be seen" ("La política" 770). See Sarlo's "La condición mortal" (1993) for a more elaborated treatment of Saer's intertextuality and the way it requires us to re-read familiar texts as containing open secrets.

and through the material dimensions of local knowledge (*conocimiento*) that the real can be known.

Saer's commitment to undermining the authority of any one discursive construction of his *zona* is perhaps most pronounced in his non-fiction. In *El río sin orillas* (1991), which was commissioned as an expository piece about the Río de la Plata, Saer takes advantage of the opportunity to intervene in the documentary tradition in order to underscore its limits and redirect his reader to the modest wisdom of fiction over the illusory authority of fact. Giving his work the subtitle "tratado imaginario," Saer discards all pretense of offering an objective or encyclopedic portrait of the region, and produces instead a pastiche of *crónicas*, travel writing, and cultural history, liberally sprinkled with his own personal experience. Saer's version of this river (almost) unapologetically includes autobiography (the author's emotionally loaded return visits from France), the author's politics (scathing remarks about Perón and omnipresent references to the horrors of the most recent dictatorship), and the author's literary tastes (Leopoldo Lugones is ridiculed; Juan L. Ortiz upheld as *the* poet of the Río de la Plata). Saer acknowledges that these personal "asides" – so prolific they cease to be asides and become the substance of the book – are unconventional in a documentary genre. Nevertheless, he insists that the form he has chosen is the only possible means of representing the region because there is no definitive and objective version of the Río de la Plata: "Hay tantos ríos de la Plata como discursos se profieren sobre él" (24).⁹²

Truly, then, to know the banks of the Paraná through Saer's work is to know it in the shifting forms it has taken over the last three-hundred years and through the shifting perspectives that mark the author's forty-year career. As Ricardo Piglia has noted, it is this ability to reenter his *zona* again and again from different *points in time* that allows Saer to keep his fictional world always open and unfinished (63-64). In this way, Saer demystifies the way the region has been coded alternately as *barbarie* and national heartland by intellectuals from Sarmiento to Lugones to Ricardo Rojas, and refuses to sacrifice the dynamic, temporally animate *experience* of place for the sake of producing legible national narratives, as regionalist literature has so often been asked to do. Moreover, I aim to show, the formal techniques that make this specific form of political resistance possible – discontinuity, repetition, and proliferation – are largely learned from Saer's formation in poetry.

II. Algo más que mirar

In order to appreciate the political stakes of the way Saer returns the dimension of time to the way we look at Argentina's rural interior, it is necessary to understand the spatialization of the region as a tool of imperial and nationalistic ideology. Discourses that aspire to claim and domesticate wild or unruly spaces at the outer reaches of the empire or the nation have historically relied on static visual descriptions in order to master these underdeveloped spaces by documenting them in spatial terms while simultaneously displacing them from the contemporary historical moment and presenting them as artifacts of an archaic or prehistoric era. In fact, the temporal displacement of the rural into the past is integral to the nationalistic agenda that regionalist literature has often been asked to serve in Latin America. As Carlos Alonso has suggested, the paradoxical work of the nationalistic-regionalist projects of the early twentieth century requires both claiming the region as the essence of national identity and locating this

⁹² "There are as many Rivers la Plata as there are discourses uttered about it."

essence in the past so that the nation can make a claim on modernity. In order to present itself on the global stage not as a nation of *gauchos* but as the modern nation distinct from all other modern nations because it has civilized the *pampas*, Argentina must inflect its images of *pampas* and *gauchos* with an air of pastness.

The tradition of relating to the rural interior through metaphors of visual apprehension does not originate in regionalist literature, but rather, can be traced back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel writings, in which a romantic gaze that sees the world in terms of sublime tableaux co-mingles with a utilitarian gaze that sees the world through the conventions of cartography, ethnography, and the natural sciences (Pratt, Prieto, Penhos). As Mary Louise Pratt stresses, one of the primary aims of travel writing is to produce landscape – a highly codified mode of visual representation, rich in details but outside of the flow of time – out of rugged and (until recently) inaccessible spaces.

As Mary Louise Pratt and Adolfo Prieto have argued, Latin American (and Argentine more specifically in Prieto's case) national literatures and discourses of autochthony are largely founded on conventions of representing the rural interior that have been inherited, adapted, and reconfigured from European travel writing. Many of the authors who shaped Argentine national literature in the 19th century (AlberdÍ, Echevarría, Marmol, Sarmiento) were influenced by British travel narratives (Humboldt, Head, Andrews, Darwin, Fitz-Roy).⁹³

In her discussion of the relationship between visual apprehension, knowledge, and domination in late eighteenth century travel writing, Marta Penhos enumerates the techniques through which travel writers use verbal descriptions to create the illusions of *totalizing vision* and of *temporal stillness*. Penhos identifies a variety of techniques of representation borrowed from the visual arts and cartography that conspire to produce these illusions, thereby domesticating nature into visible and traversable landscape. These include the aggregation of spatial perspectives to create a totalizing bird's eye view (48), the preference for the static and impersonal perspective of an objective outsider over the dynamic perceptions of one who participates in the landscape (206), and the use of high and distant perspective to make a scene bustling with daily activity appear as a static and timeless landscape (47). Together with a Baconian faith in visualization as a means to understanding, these techniques give the foreign observer and reader a sense of mastery over spaces whose expansiveness, wildness, and foreignness would otherwise render them indomitable and threatening.

While Penhos focuses on the more instrumental writings of the late 18th century, there is surprising continuity in the techniques of visual representation used from the earlier, more romantic writings of Humboldt and the like, to the later chronicles of 19th century prospectors: the granting of authority to an objective, distant perspective by means of the interconnected illusions of totalizing vision and temporal stillness is a recurring rhetorical strategy. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that in spite of the romantic vein in European travel writing about the Americas, the representation of nature as sublime, overpowering, and indomitable is but a minor key in a genre that *by definition* renders previously inaccessible spaces knowable, representable, and by extension, conquerable. In fact, there is a curious slippage between the means of visual domestication that produce romantic landscape and those that produce the illusions of imperial mastery: panoramic perspective and the freezing of space in time are key to both modes of visual apprehension.⁹⁴ After all, even the discourse of the sublime is a prescriptive way of beholding,

⁹³ See Prieto, *Los viajeros*.

⁹⁴ Mary Louise Pratt pairs scientific and “sentimental” travel writing, discussing both as “bourgeois forms of authority” (4).

which in its own way assimilates American spaces into European conventions of looking.⁹⁵ According to Pratt, the prevalence of dense visual descriptions and the ethnographic present tense in much travel writing and *costumbrismo* alike may be understood as a means to fix colonial spaces in the imperial gaze in order to convert the excess of wild lands and foreign cultures into the plentitude of information and usable materials (193-200).

In the modern times of which Saer writes the urge to domesticate and claim remote places by visually documenting them persists, as does the inherent violence of this urge, which requires not only confining spatial expanse to the bounds of a frame, but also stripping local places and the lives that inhabit them of temporal movement and depth to produce fixed and finite images. In the twentieth century, photography assumes the role once played by cartography and landscape painting in transforming rural spaces into visual objects to be beheld and possessed (Brizuela 18-26). In fact, we might consider the modern tourist's camera a more efficient and therefore more pernicious version of the Claude-glass, one of the tools that allowed European travel writers to frame and thereby take control of the vast landscapes they encountered in the Americas. Susan Sontag sees the democratization of photography as closely linked to the rise of modern tourism precisely because photography provides the illusion of taking possession of new and potentially threatening spaces: "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (*On Photography* 9). Photographs give the viewer the dual illusions that she can bring close and contain vast, boundless spaces and that she can seize experience from the flow of time to preserve it for posterity: "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote" (163). I contend that Saer's fiction counters the ideological work Sontag ascribes to photography by allowing the regional spaces it represents to remain "recalcitrant, inaccessible," "perishable, remote." Whereas still photographs pluck scenes from the flux of time, Saer continuously inscribes rural life in time through representational techniques that foreground the inescapably time-bound nature of perception.

Though Saer insists on the temporal dimension of perception, he in no way renounces visual representation: to the contrary, Saer's most experimental prose is replete with detailed visual descriptions; his narrative voice is often described as a gaze; and his style is often called cinematic and compared to the objectivist style of the *Nouveau Roman*.⁹⁶ In Saer's fictional worlds, however, vision alone does not yield comprehension. More often it produces abstract, opaque surfaces; the reader feels that in spite of an abundance of visual information, nothing that matters can be seen. The vista does not produce mastery and knowledge and is more often linked to confusion and disorientation.

⁹⁵ Penhos writes "El modelo humboldtiano, difundido en la Argentina por los viajeros ingleses en el transcurso del siglo XIX, implica la incorporación de la categoría de lo sublime, mediante la cual podía observarse y valorarse la desmesura americana a desde un nuevo ángulo, incorporándola al vasto panorama universal" "The Humboldtian model, disseminated in Argentina by English travelers throughout the nineteenth century, implies the incorporation of the category of the sublime, through which the American excess could be observed and valued from a new angle, incorporating it into the vast universal panorama"(156). In other words, while the discourse of the sublime may appear to be in tension with the desire to control and apprehend this vastness, it also claims and assimilates this vastness as part of a European literary and artistic tradition.

⁹⁶Montaldo writes: "La voz narrativa de la novela [. . .] no es otra cosa que una mirada." "The narrative voice of the novel [. . .] is none other than a gaze" (*Juan José Saer* 31). Also note that Saer's stated purpose for leaving Argentina for France in 1968 is to accept a fellowship to study the *Nouveau Roman*. See Torres Perdigón and Arce ("La imagen") for an extended discussion of Saer's engagement with this style and Oubiña for an analysis of Saer's engagement with cinematic technology.

The most extreme and most commented-upon example of Saer's dissolution of the link between visual information and the meaning-making operations of narrative and memory is undoubtedly the short story "La mayor" (1976), a Proustian parody in which the protagonist takes a bite of moistened cracker to find he remembers nothing at all, in which his gaze "interroga" but finds that the objects it beholds "no muestran nada" (19). Most of the text is given over to disconnected descriptions of opaque and senseless surfaces: a folder and some blurry photographs on a desk, a Van Gogh print on the wall, the nighttime cityscape beheld from the protagonist's terrace. This last image evokes Paris at dusk as beheld by Rastignac at the end of Balzac's *Père Goriot*, but, whereas that panoramic view of the lights coming on across the city has a totalizing effect in keeping with the exhaustiveness of Balzac's realist project, Saer's narrative gaze does not synthesize the images it takes in to form a landscape and instead "sees" the city as a list of fragmentary images: "las casas, los árboles, las terrazas, las calles que se entrecortan cada cien metros, los edificios blanqueados, como huesos, por la luna, los parques negros, los ríos, los bares sucios, todavía abiertos . . ." (16).⁹⁷ We see that enumeration and parataxis must suffice when vision can no longer aggregate disparate images into panorama and when narrative can no longer weave isolated events into an order governed by causality or teleology.

Moreover, the ability of these sights to signify "city," or "reality," is no more secure than is that of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* to signify the landscape its title describes. The harder the narrator looks at this image, the more he interrogates it, the more it appears to disintegrate into abstract brush strokes before his eyes:

el Campo, ¿pero es verdaderamente un campo?, de trigo, ¿pero es verdaderamente trigo?, de los cuervos, y uno podría, verdaderamente, preguntarse si son verdaderamente cuervos. Son, más bien, manchas, confusas, azules, amarillas, verdes, negras, manchas, más confusas a medida que uno va aproximándose, manchas, una mancha, imprecisa . . . (14)⁹⁸

The relationship between the referent, a field of wheat with crows, and its linguistic and visual representations breaks down before the narrator's eyes: neither the language of the title nor the painted marks on the canvas can "verdaderamente" yield a wheat field or crows. We see furthermore, that these two scenes – the real-world vista and the painted landscape – become equally abstract and inscrutable as visual plains that alternate before the narrator's eyes: "miraba, alternadamente, la luna fría, las cruces nítidas, girando, inmóviles, y en su lugar, alrededor, los techos, los patios negros, las terrazas, y que estaba mirando, más tarde, las manchas amarillas, azules, verdes, negras, pardas, enmarcadas, con mucho blanco alrededor" (12).⁹⁹ The city, abstracted to light and geometry and somehow at once "spinning" and "immobile" increasingly resembles the Van Gogh canvas.

Here as elsewhere in his most experimental work, Saer's form of vision is opaque in that it cannot penetrate the surfaces it beholds and myopic in that it cannot generalize based on the particular; it insists on dwelling on the local. Nevertheless, I hope to show that in *El limonero*

⁹⁷ "The houses, the trees, the terraces, the streets that intersect every hundred meters, the buildings whitened, like bones, by the moon, the black parks, the rivers, the dirty bars, still open . . ."

⁹⁸ "the Field, but is it really a field?, of wheat, but is it really wheat?, with crows, and one could, really, ask oneself if they really are crows. The are, rather, splotches, blurry, blue, yellow, green, black, splotches, blurrier the more one approaches them, splotches, an imprecise splotch . . ."

⁹⁹ "He looked, alternately, the cold moon, the sharp crosses, turning, immobile, and in its place, all around, the roofs, the black patios, the terraces, and that he was looking at, later, the yellow, blue, green, black, taupe spots, framed, with white around them."

real, Saer compensates us for the lost ability to know by looking – to construct sweeping panoramas out of the fragmentary and particular, and to find knowledge of the real in such overviews – with the depth of local knowledge, which, while no less opaque and myopic, is rich in temporal layers and allows for a different, more intimate, and more historical relationship to place.

Saer's most experimental prose, which is exceedingly, densely descriptive belies the extent to which visual description exceeds and even destabilizes the positivistic discourses with which it is frequently associated. As Svetlana Alpers argues in *The Art of Describing*, description can also serve as a mode of probing and manipulating reality. Alpers notes that the rise of description as the primary mode of Dutch art in the seventeenth century coincides with the rise of modern science and the empirical method. Empiricism may border on positivism when its practitioners believe their senses grant them unmediated access to the truth, but this was not the case for the father of modern empiricism, Francis Bacon, who, well aware that the eye can deceive, believed the observer must probe the natural world through different modes of experience/ experiment. Alpers reminds us that Bacon, who uses "experiment" synonymously with "experience," counts art among the manipulations or "experiments" to which we might subject the natural world in order to better observe its "true nature" (105). Saer uses description in the true Baconian sense of experimentation: to describe is not merely to mimetically copy the world, but to probe the limits of our means of perceiving it. In other words, Saer's descriptions contain a surprising anti-realism.

Likewise, Alpers notes of descriptive Dutch art that detailed and accurate recreations of surface, color, and texture do not amount to realism *per se*. Citing tendencies to reproduce in paint even the distortions and "quirks" produced by the camera obscura, she argues that these artists were more interested in what they eye can tell us about the apparatus of vision than in the "truth" of the world depicted. After all, Alpers reminds us, the seventeenth century was an age of fascination with visual technologies: the camera obscura, the microscope, the telescope, and the newly discovered anatomy of the eye itself.

While the empiricism of description may be attractive to individualists like Saer because it empowers the individual to know his world through experiencing it/ experimenting with it rather than relying on received knowledge, Saer's works also express ambivalence towards the stillness visual description almost inevitably imposes on its subjects. Like photography, the descriptive paintings Alpers discusses document, catalogue, and seize visual information about the world by arresting its time. In fact, this "freezing" becomes the primary mechanism through which Dutch paintings "distort" the world, or experiment upon it so that we might observe it differently (109). Whereas classical art aims to narrate actions and stories, seventeenth century Dutch art suspends actions in order to create a visual catalogue of the details and surfaces of a given scene.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Understood as a set of skills that allows the painter or the writer to visually register the world, much as the eye does, description is less active, less totalizing, and perhaps even "gentler" than narrative. Contrasting the "Northern style" with the "classical" style grounded in the Italian Renaissance, Alpers distinguishes between the "descriptive" and "passive" style of the former and the "narrative" and "active" style of the latter. Whereas the Italian style uses images organized by abstract laws – mathematics, ideal proportions, etc. – to communicate a story of universal significance (typically sourced from the Bible or classical mythology), the Northern style functions more like a mirror or a lens, receiving visual information without discriminating between the significant and the insignificant or imposing abstract laws of composition and perspective. As such, Dutch art takes on subject matter rarely seen in classical art -- the commonplace, the vulgar – and, because it is more interested in describing than composing, displays "fragmentariness [and] arbitrary frames," qualities not permissible in classical art and today more

Saer avoids the pitfalls of freezing and dehistoricizing that which he describes by weaving the temporal fissures between “stills” into his mode of narration. In addition to slowing almost entirely to suspend and describe individual moments, the narrative time of *El limonero real* is prone to jumping back and forth between past, present, and future in seemingly erratic ways that reveal the lack of temporal continuity that lurks beneath the placid surface of still-life description.

Looking as (re)collecting past and future moments

Whereas vision alone isolates images from the flow of time, Saer’s narrative gaze weaves analeptic and proleptic movement into the act of looking, underscoring the temporal dimension of gathering together the fragments of what we behold in order to see (and make sense of) the whole. In addition to suggesting the insufficiency of an exterior, objective, and spatial gaze as a way of gaining intimate knowledge of place, this technique encourages us to read *la zona* by looking (or “more-than-looking”) *through time* in order to “see” the human drama that lies behind the surfaces we can behold with the eye. For those who possess this temporally deep *conocimiento*, the past and future can be “seen” in the present. Achieving this form of trans-temporal vision requires that we become patient observers of the slow movements of the world depicted in *El limonero real*. I argue that training us in this mode of observation – no longer simply looking but *algo más que mirar* – constitutes the most important poetic, ethical, and political work of this novel.

The phrase “algo más que mirar” comes from a passage in one of Saer’s preliminary sketches for the opening of *El limonero real*. In the voice of Wenceslao, the fisherman-protagonist of the novel, Saer writes:

[. . .] yo miro pensativo su cara, que a medida que ella recoge el tenso pelo hacia la nuca, se hace un nítido óvalo oscuro, color tierra, trabajado por el tiempo y el aire; hago algo más que mirar: porque si solamente mirara, vería un rostro y no el tiempo, el sufrimiento, y la lluvia. Vería menos que una cara. Vería ojos, y piel, y esa boca desdentada, y mandíbulas, y nariz, y orejas, no lo que puedo reunir mediante el recuerdo y llamar su rostro. (*Papeles* 121-122)¹⁰¹

Wenceslao’s meditation on the act of more-than-looking upon his wife’s face does not enter into the final version of the novel, the majority of which is narrated in the third person and is markedly devoid of internal monologue of the kind we see in the earlier draft. Nevertheless, I read the novel as a whole as aspiring to more-than-look upon the narrated world with the temporal fullness with which Wenceslao beholds his wife’s face in this passage. Just as Wenceslao sees this familiar face not simply as the composition of shapes and colors that appears before him the present moment but, instead, as a temporal composition, one that has been shaped by time, suffering, and rain, so too does the novel seek to show the world it narrates not simply as it appears in the day of narration but, rather, as a time-bound way of life that has been and continues to be shaped by the cyclical rhythms of work, weather, and hardship. This world only becomes legible when beheld with a gaze that (re)collects other times through

commonly associated with photography (43). Saer’s descriptive mode will share this fragmentariness and the seemingly arbitrary focus that devotes equal power of observation to significant as to the trivial.

¹⁰¹ “Thoughtful, I look at her face, which, as she collects her tense hair towards her nape, forms a neat, dark, earth-colored oval, worked over by time and by the air; I do something more than look: because if I only looked, I would see a face and not time, suffering, and rain. I would see less than a face. I would see eyes, and skin, and that toothless mouth, and jaws, and nose, and ears, not what I can gather through memory and call her face.”

memory and future projection. As we see in the example of Wenceslao's more-than-looking upon his wife's face, this mode of perception – animated by memory and affect – is not only more intimate; it also reveals more than would be revealed by an objective, analytic gaze that would break the face into its component parts and end up seeing “menos que una cara.”

In *El limonero real* the subjective and temporal dimensions of more-than-looking allow us as readers to integrate the fragmentary visual surfaces described into the unfolding human drama that gives these surfaces depth and meaning. The novel's spiraling narrative structure stages connections between different moments in time and imbues the narration of a single day with constant, if slow, temporal movement. *El limonero real* begins its narration of the day in question, New Year's Eve, over and over again, (critics count seven, eight, or nine cycles). All of these accounts of the same day begin with the identical refrain: “Amanece. / Y ya está con los ojos abiertos.” Each begins from the breaking of dawn, with the protagonist, Wenceslao, awake in his bed, and proceeds to summarize in the present perfect everything that has already happened before returning to the present-tense description of a given scene: “Se ha levantado y se ha vestido y ha estado tomando mate [. . .] y ahora salta a la orilla [. . .]” (47).¹⁰² While all of these cycles are recognizable as accounts of the same day, no two tellings are exactly the same; each emphasizes different events, providing new context and details for what has already been narrated. Each new cycle carries us further into the day than the last; in this halting manner, the novel eventually progresses through the twenty-four-hour window of narration.

Though relatively little takes place during the day narrated (a family gathers, prepares, and consumes food, drinks, converses, and dances late into the night), the narration of the present day is repeatedly interrupted by other times, including remembered time (principally Wenceslao's childhood and that of the son he has lost), projected future time (we often “see” events to come in a future tense of premonition), and other times that are harder to diachronically map (such as the times of dream, myth, and traumatic repetition). Through the layering of recursive narrative fragments, frequently interrupted by flash-backs and visions, the novel slowly saturates the narration of the minute and the quotidian – the petting of a dog, the washing of a face, the paddling of a canoe, the de-boning of a fish, etc. – with deeply emotional human drama – the tragic loss of a son, a wife still immobilized by grief years after the fact, an alcoholic brother-in-law (Agustín) who has lost his daughters to prostitution in the city, and the ever-present contrast between these devastated families and the comparatively intact nuclear family of Wenceslao's other in-laws (Rosa and Rogelio).

One of the most remarkable features of this novel is that the narration of one day, in which nothing especially remarkable happens, reveals through an obscured form of vision – but crucially, does not directly tell – a story of much greater duration and consequence: reaching as far back as the mythic beginning of time and projecting into an indefinite and bleak future, the story revealed is that of the loss of a way of life as the rural community depicted becomes economically unviable and the younger generation leaves for the city. The defining events of this story take place outside of the narrative frame (the temporal cycle of one day) and are conjured and “seen” within the present of the narration in ways that do not render them fully present, coherent, or visible. The reader is left with the sense that while the past is not fully legible and

¹⁰² “He has gotten up and gotten dressed and has been drinking mate [. . .] and now he jumps onto the shore.”

the future not fully foreseeable, these other times constantly invade, disrupt, and animate the relatively banal scenes related in the present.¹⁰³

Looking into the future

The ability of the past to invade the present in the form of memories so vivid that they supplant the immediacy of the present had already, by the mid-twentieth century, been thoroughly normalized by the cinematic flashback. The flash-forward, while by no means unheard of, is considerably less common, perhaps because it is less plausible in psychological terms. Saer, however, uses prolepsis to great avail. For example, Beatriz Sarlo argues that the most original feature of the temporal structure of *Glosa* (1986) is not the way its protagonists reconstruct a past event (a birthday celebration for Washington Noriega neither of them attended), nor even the way space and time are mapped over the twenty-one blocks they walk over the course of the narration one morning in 1961, but rather, the fact that over the course of the hour narrated we go from seeing them as two friends and intellectuals preoccupied with personal troubles to two men whose lives will be devastated by the political developments of the next two decades (2010). This transformation in our perspective is brought about by a lengthy prolepsis, in which the narrator looks back on the day narrated from eighteen years later.¹⁰⁴

In *El limonero real*, as well, Saer makes frequent use of the future tense to incorporate events to come into the time of narration. Usually these prolepses last for a just a few sentences, but occasionally they go on for several pages at a time. The novel's temporal projections are often linked to the inevitability of modernization, urbanization, and death, suggesting that, even as the novel attempts to hold the present moment in suspension through its slow unfolding and to resist the teleology of linear development through its recursivity, the future continually erupts from within the present.¹⁰⁵ In many instances these prolepses are treated as the temporal extension of Wenceslao's gaze. For example, a present-tense description of the play of light on the tree in Wenceslao's patio slips into a future-tense projection of how the tree's shadow will form, rotate around the tree, lengthen, and merge with the night, following the movements of the sun:

En el centro del patio delantero, el paraíso está quieto, lleno de pájaros que saltan cantando. Todavía no proyecta ninguna sombra, pero en la copa algunas hojas están nimbadas por resplandores dorados, como si la luz brotara de él y no del sol, y un rayo de luz, inesperado y también como brotando del árbol mismo y no del sol, centellea en el centro de la fronda. En seguida el árbol *proyectará* de golpe una sombra larga, cubriendo la mesa apoyada en el tronco. La sombra *decrecerá* gradual hasta mediodía, para desaparecer por un momento, y reaparecer en seguida del lado opuesto a la mesa,

¹⁰³ As Julio Premat writes, Saer's writing is characterized by "la relación peculiar con el tiempo, en donde un presente banal se encuentra circunscrito e invadido por otros tiempos." "the peculiar relationship with time in which the banal present finds itself circumscribed and invaded by other times" (220).

¹⁰⁴ We are made privy to a future of which the characters concerned are not yet aware, but, as we learn in the last third of the novel, the narrator *does* anticipate this future and uses it to cast an anachronistic shadow over the tone of the entire novel. Sarlo suggest that the reader, who is privy to the historical developments of the 1960's and 70's in Argentina, shares in the narrator's surety about what the future holds and can therefore read the as-of-yet-still-innocent present as invaded by "migrantes amenazadores" from the future ("La política" 767).

¹⁰⁵ See also Silvana López's reading of *Glosa* as attempting to hold back time, as if to forestall releasing the characters to their tragic futures (179).

estirándose ahora lenta y gradual hasta que el sol se borre y no quede otra cosa que la sombra. (14, emphasis mine)¹⁰⁶

The tree becomes a sundial, and like beholding a sundial, or for that matter the face of an analog clock, gazing upon the tree allows Wenceslao to visually perceive the specificity of the present moment as well as the complete cycle of time of which this moment forms part. Wenceslao can project the daily movements of the tree's shadow over his patio because he knows this scene intimately – *la conoce* – and in the world of the novel, there is a temporal dimension to *conocimiento*. To know experientially is not just to be able to describe in great visual detail, to render accurately in spatial terms, but also to situate in relationship to time, to know the patterns of, the way one who lives off of the land knows the diurnal, annual, and life cycles of the natural world.

The slippage from the present to the future tense in this particular passage may not seem noteworthy in and of itself, but it is the first example of a formal gesture that Saer takes to ever-greater extremes throughout *El limonero real*. Take another example from mid-way through the novel: suspended within the moment in between when Wenceslao looks at the lamb he is about to slaughter and the moment when he slits the lamb's throat, the reader encounters a lengthy, visually detailed future-tense narration of how the lamb will pass from animal to meat, to bones, to dust, to life-giving substance (138-139). To know the nature of the lamb as intimately as Wenceslao does is to be able to "see" the lamb not only in its present state, but also in every stage of the cycle of life, death, and nourishment of which it forms a part. This form of vision resembles what Pierre Bourdieu describes as a characteristic of "peasant time": the ability to see in the present not only "directly perceived properties" but also the potentiality of what Bourdieu calls the "forthcoming."¹⁰⁷ Following Bourdieu, we might understand the seemingly erratic temporal movement of the novel as an attempt to approximate the way its rural subjects experience time. In other words, Saer confronts the reader with the alterity of peasant life through de-familiarized, non-linear narrative form instead of through exotic content.

The trans-temporal vision that constitutes *conocimiento* in the novel applies to human patterns of behavior as well as to the cycles of nature; in fact, the two are depicted as intertwined. For example, a description of the late-afternoon sun low in the sky gives way to a flash-forward of sunset and nightfall, which in turn gives way to the future-tense narration of a trip Wenceslao and Rogelio will make to Bernini's bar to retrieve their brother-in-law Agustín, again (they have already extricated him from one drunken fight earlier in the day) (182-83). In this case, the inevitability of nightfall is linked to the inevitability of Agustín's drinking: to know Agustín is to know that by nightfall he will have returned to the bar. Similarly, Wenceslao's deep familiarity with his wife allows him to "see" into the future when the other women cross the river in an attempt to convince her to leave behind her mourning and join the festivities (124-126). The future-tense narration of the women's failed mission does not imply any supernatural prescience on the part of Wenceslao nor a shift in focalization away from his point of view and towards that

¹⁰⁶ "In the center of the front patio, the lemon tree is still, full of birds that jump and sing. It doesn't yet project any shadow, but in the treetop some leaves are haloed by golden rays, as if the light stemmed from it and not from the sun, and a ray of light, unexpected and also stemming from the tree itself and not the sun, scintillates in the center of the frond. Soon the tree will project, of a sudden, a long shadow, covering the table leaning against the trunk. The shadow will decrease gradually until noon, to disappear for a moment, and reappear immediately on the opposite side of the table, stretching itself now slowly and gradually until the sun is erased and nothing is left but shadow."

¹⁰⁷ Bourdieu uses the example of how a peasant beholds grain: "grain is comprehended not only with its colour, form, and other directly perceived properties, but also with qualities potentially inherent in it, such as being eaten, etc." (61).

of an omniscient narrator. As in the previous examples, the forthcoming future is portrayed as visible from within the present moment and as being as inevitable as the rising and setting of the sun.

As these examples demonstrate, the foreseeability of the cycles that govern Wenceslao's remote island world is both affirming – Wenceslao's deep *conocimiento* grants a sense of integrity, continuity, and meaning to the people, places, and actions that surround him – and damning – in a world where the future holds only more repetitions of the past, there can be little hope of breaking negative cycles like the alcoholism of Agustín or the isolation and depression of Wenceslao's wife. When the horizons of Wenceslao's insular world are breached by unfamiliar elements, however, the interplay between temporal projection and vision becomes more complex.

These unfamiliar elements come in the form of three colored splotches that appear on the horizon while the family is eating lunch. In the longest proleptic scene of the novel these abstract shapes will eventually resolve into the figures of Wenceslao's nieces, La Negra and Josefa, and their friend, Amelia, who will arrive at the ranch from the city, regale their country-dwelling cousins with tales of city life, and take a series of family portraits with La Negra's camera (82-88). This scene is narrated in the future tense and intercut with the present-tense narration of the moment when Wenceslao and his brothers-in-law first observe the three figures coming over the horizon but do not yet know who the figures will turn out to be. I say "intercut" deliberately invoking the cinematic vocabulary at play in this scene, which is constructed as a shot-reverse-shot sequence that takes us back and forth between the strained faces of the men trying to discern unfamiliar shapes on the horizon and the *future* resolution of these shapes into identifiable people and narrative events.¹⁰⁸ Unlike in the earlier examples of proleptic vision, here there is a split between what the reader can see and what Wenceslao and the other characters can see: the men straining their vision towards the horizon remain ignorant of events to come even as these events unfold before our eyes. In this case, I contend, Wenceslao cannot (fore)see the identity of the young women precisely because they do not participate in the regular rhythms of his daily life.

When the men first catch sight of the approaching figures, the image painted for the reader is not that of the horizon but, rather, that of Rogelio and Agustín in the posture of surveying the horizon:

Agustín y Rogelio hacen girar la cabeza y miran. Rogelio se incorpora y entrecierra los ojos para ver mejor, poniéndose la mano como visera sobre los ojos. Ahora ellos también van a ver las manchas verde, azul y colorada, debatiéndose móviles y avanzando por el camino arenoso. Wenceslao desvía la vista del camino para observar en cambio a Rogelio, que tiene la mirada clavada en esa dirección: Wenceslao ve en la expresión de Rogelio el esfuerzo, primero por ver, y después de haber visto para precisar lo que ve – para precisar que ve y *qué* ve – y por último para identificar las manchas y las figuras que se mueven, reducidas y constantes, contra el horizonte de árboles compacto y oscuro. Wenceslao puede adivinar el esfuerzo de Rogelio para discernir lo que ve.
(82)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ As Rafael Arce points out, Saer's "saltos temporales" evoke the cinematic flashback and flash-forward even as they are importantly different from these: whereas the cinematic cut breaks the continuity of the action, Saer's interweaving of different times insists upon the "continuidad del tiempo de la conciencia" ("La imagen" 118). Saer thus plays with the temporal structure of narrative to achieve what cinema cannot: to represent the simultaneous experience of multiple points in time.

¹⁰⁹ "Agustín and Rogelio turn their heads and look Rogelio stands up and squints his eyes to see better, putting his hand above his eyes like a visor. Now they too are going to see the green, blue, and red splotches, struggling, mobile

Unlike the all-apprehending gaze of the traveler, Rogelio's strained gaze does not yield recognition, much less mastery of the scene he beholds. From the point of view of the stationary, local resident being approached from the outside world, the act of looking is presented as a struggle rather than a commanding gesture. Furthermore, looking is broken into two discreet actions: "ver" and "precisar lo que ve." The first, seeing, is treated as a mechanical gesture. Registering a visual image, as a camera might, produces only abstract shapes: three colored spots moving along the horizon. Though we have no reason to doubt Rogelio's vision, it is the second step, resolving sight into recognition, that seems to cause the strain. Reaching the stage of recognition requires not only closer perspective but also temporal movement.

The narrative provides this movement by shifting into the future tense as it "cuts" from the faces of the unseeing men to the future revelation of the identity of the *manchas*: "Después sabrán que son la Negra y Josefa, las hijas de Agustín, que vienen de la ciudad con una amiga que han traído de paseo a conocer la costa. Comprobarán que las manchas – colorada, verde, azul – eran sus sombrillas" (83).¹¹⁰ From here, the narrative shifts back and forth between the present-tense narration of the men looking at the horizon to no avail and the future-tense narration of everything that will happen when the girls arrive: they will greet and hug their cousins; they will describe urban streets, lights, supermarkets, beauty salons, and fashion trends; they will allude euphemistically to their work as prostitutes; finally, la Negra will produce a camera and begin to direct her family members in and out of groupings and poses. As the scene unfolds, the women and children are excited by the novelty the visitors bring, but the men continue to watch the new arrivals with guarded apprehension. The simultaneous narration of these two moments in time links the reticence of the men faced with their urbanized nieces to their struggle to recognize and make sense of the strange splotches of color emerging on the horizon. While the narrator is able to move forward in time to resolve these abstract shapes into recognizable people, Wenceslao and his brothers-in-law remain stuck in the present contemplating a future they are just shy of discerning.

Fittingly, the scene in which the contrast between the traditional ways of the coast and the modern ways of the city is brought into starkest relief is narrated in the future tense as a projection generated from the glimpse of colors coming over the horizon. Similarly to how a glance at the lemon tree glowing in the morning sun forecasts for Wenceslao the inevitable passing of the day and lengthening of shadows, the sight of the three figures on the horizon forecasts (for the reader even if the connection remains partially opaque to Wenceslao) the inevitable confrontation between the remote fishing village and the urban center, as the economic promise of the latter lures the youth of the former away from their families' traditional way of life.

The peasants' perception of city life as threatening, corrupt, and debased will come up obliquely throughout the novel: when Wenceslao recollects a disastrous attempt to sell watermelons in the city, when the men at the bar gossip about the prostitution of Agustín's daughters, and, above all, when Wenceslao dwells on his own son's death. After being

and advancing along the sandy road. Wenceslao turns his gaze from the road to observe instead Rogelio, who has his gazed fixed in that direction: Wenceslao sees in Rogelio's expression the effort, first to see, and after having seen to make out what he sees – to make out that he sees and *what* he sees – and finally to identify the splotches and the figures that are moving, shrunken and constant against the horizon of compact and dark trees. Wenceslao can guess the effort Rogelio makes to discern what he sees."

¹¹⁰ "Later they will find out that they are la Negra and Josefa, Agustín's daughters, who are coming from the city with a friend they have brought along to see the coast. They will realize that the splotches – red, green, blue – were their parasols."

conscripted for military service, Wenceslao's son is lured to the city by work prospects and falls to his death from construction scaffolding. The draw of the city's wages proves to be the downfall of the youth from the coast – literally for Wenceslao's son who suffers a fatal fall and returns in a casket and figuratively for Agustín's daughters who return as fallen women. I read the narration of the nieces' arrival in an extended prolepsis as dramatizing the rural community's inevitable fall into the future as the insularity of its horizons is breached: the arrival of the young women from the city portends the inevitable subsumption of the peasant's near-subsistence existence into the modern exchange economy and the equally inevitable objectification of such "archaic" ways of life by modern means of representation, in particular, the photograph.

Reanimating the photographic gaze

Visual description and memory are closely linked for Saer, who claims his obsessive "insistencia en los detalles" comes as a response to the dizzying feeling of confronting the infinite nature of "las imágenes complejas del recuerdo," which can never be exhausted by writing (Gramuglio *Juan José Saer* 18). Saer conceives of memory as an infinite array of *images*, but in trying to approximate the infinity and the complexity of memory through writing, he does not turn to the familiar metaphor of photography as a technology that enhances our powers of memory by providing accurate and detailed images of the past. Instead, he compares the endeavor to embroidering with "pedacitos de hilo de diferentes colores, combinados con paciencia" in order to produce "un dibujo sobre una tela blanca" (17) and to styles of painting that thicken the surface of the image through the application of successive layers of paint: "Más que con el realismo de la fotografía, creo que el procedimiento se emparenta con el de ciertos pintores que emplean capas sucesivas de pintura de diferente densidad para obtener una superficie rugosa, como si le tuviesen miedo a la extrema delgadez de la superficie plana" (18).¹¹¹ In choosing these visual metaphors to describe the task of representing memory in writing, Saer values the touch of the artist over the verisimilitude of the camera and the time of craft, which requires patience and iteration, over instantaneous mechanical reproduction, suggesting that Saer shares some of Benjamin's reservations about photography¹¹². More specifically though, Saer emphasizes the texture of hand-wrought images, and it is the density, the thickness, the variegation of the embroidered or painted surface that make it preferable to "la extrema delgadez" of the photograph. In *El limonero real*, as elsewhere in his most experimental work, Saer achieves this thickness through repetition: he returns to the same images and the same scenes over and over again, just as memory might, taking note of slightly different details each time. The cumulative accretion of visual details thickens the surface of the image created and

¹¹¹ "Little pieces of thread of different colors, patiently combined"; "a drawing on the white cloth"; "More than the realism of photography, I believe that the method stems from that of certain painters who use successive layers of paint of different thicknesses to obtain a rough surface, as if they were afraid of the extreme thinness of the flat surface."

¹¹² Benjamin underscores that photography plays to our weakness, or desire to eliminate distance and *time*. Benjamin writes that photography is antithetical to preserving aura because aura has to do with distance, remoteness, whereas photography brings things closer: "What is aura, in fact? A gossamer fabric woven of space and time: a unique manifestation of a remoteness, however close at hand [. . .] Well, 'bringing things closer' (not simply to oneself but to the masses) is as passionate an inclination on the part of present-day man as overcoming the uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it. We see more cogent evidence daily of the need to apprehend and object in an image (or rather in a copy, a reproduction) from very close [. . .] Uniqueness and duration are as tightly intertwined in the latter [the image] as are intransience and reiterability in the former [the reproduction]." Benjamin sees stripping the object of its sheath, shattering the aura – "as characteristic of modern way of looking" ("Brief History" 184-185).

differentiates it from a photographic image, which may be rich in visual details but cannot escape its temporal flatness: it sees from a single instant in time.

As Susan Sontag reminds us, there is good reason to be wary of the thinness of a photographic image, at least when it fails to acknowledge its flatness, when it presumes to show all instead of inviting us to imagine beyond the surfaces presented. It is the thinness of the photograph that gives us the illusion that we can take possession of an image, put it in our pocket or file it away in our collection, a relationship of appropriation that Sontag compares to looting (64). Of course, looking at a photograph need not always be an act of violence, reification or appropriation. Some photography reminds us that it is only a fragment of the real and invites us to imagine beyond what we can see, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, the ethical dilemma posed by photography is that the onus to recognize its illusory claims to truth and totality lies with the viewer: the photograph cannot stop us from facetiously appropriating its subject matter or engaging with it superficially or voyeuristically. Saer will not run this risk of producing a quaint rural landscape that might be so easily consumed by a cosmopolitan audience; he chooses instead to represent the real through techniques that retain the texture of time – the thickness of iteration, the blurriness and opacity of layer upon layer of description – at the expense of the crispness and “accuracy” of the photographic image.

More than looking: *watching* the act of photography

With the possible exception of the retelling of the watermelon story, the scene where La Negra arrives and photographs her family is the only moment in the novel when the peasant families look at themselves through the gaze of outsiders, and it is certainly the only time when they imagine being beheld through the mechanical gaze of the camera. The peasants’ self-conscious anticipation of how they will be seen is evident in Saer’s description of the way the family members fidget uncomfortably before the camera:

Incluso después de haberse ubicado, seguirán moviéndose, buscando la actitud adecuada, como si quisiesen poner en la fotografía lo mejor de sí mismos, o lo que esperan que los otros perciban de ellos, o lo que ellos mismos esperan reconocer de sí mismos tiempo después, cuando se reencontren en la imagen: Rosa se tocará una y otra vez el pelo, nerviosa; los chicos se reirán y adelantarán la cabeza hacia la cámara; Wenceslao, el viejo y Rogelio se pondrán serios y graves, como si estuviesen por ser no reproducidos sino juzgados por la cámara [. . .] (87)¹¹³

These subjects understand that the camera will preserve their image for posterity, allowing them to look back on themselves from a future point in time, but also exposing them to the judgment of others. The implied viewers of the image(s) produced in this scene might logically include the city-dwelling nieces and their urban friends, people like Amelia, who, sitting on the sidelines, also happens to be a spectator of the scene in which the photographs are posed and taken. As an outside observer, Amelia serves as a counterpart for the reader, who might recognize herself as a potential viewer of the photograph and, thus, as one of “los otros” whose gaze the family members nervously anticipate. As I have suggested though, the structure of the novel thwarts the

¹¹³ “Even after having situated themselves, they will keep moving, looking for the adequate attitude, as if putting into the photograph the best of themselves, what they hope others will perceive of them, or what they themselves hope to recognize in themselves in later times when they reencounter themselves in the image: Rosa will nervously touch her hair once and again; the kids will laugh and stick their heads out towards the camera; Wenceslao, the old man and Rogelio will become serious and grave, as if they were to be not reproduced but judged by the camera.”

reader's ability to visually command or possess the world represented as one possesses a photographic image.

In this scene the reader is granted visual access to the photograph, which has not yet been taken, developed, nor printed, through Saer's photographically detailed description of the subjects posing for it; crucially, however, Saer does not permit the reader to simply gaze upon the family as if looking at a photograph. To the contrary, the momentary exercise in being asked to occupy two temporally distinct positions – that of the viewer of the finished photograph and that of the observer of the scene in progress – underscores the contrast between these two modes of perception. On the one hand, Saer's description, which precisely notes the placement of each person within the frame, reads as if written from looking at a photograph: "Los viejos ocuparán el centro del cuadro, sentados, tiesos y erguidos, en pose perfecta, y el resto se acomodará en torno a ellos: en la misma fila, de pie, estarán Rosa y Teresa, a la izquierda, del lado de la vieja, y del otro lado, a la derecha, del lado del viejo, Josefa y Rosita la hija de Rogelio" (86-87).¹¹⁴ On the other hand, reading this scene significantly differs from looking at the finished photograph. The protracted narration of the scene – a full two pages elapse from when La Negra removes the camera from her bag to when the shutter clicks – imbues the act of looking with tedious duration: instead of looking at subjects fixed in time by the mechanical gaze of the camera, we *watch* an event slowly unfold before our eyes.

This shift of focus to what Ariella Azoulay calls "the act of photography" and, more specifically, to "the attitudes of the photographed people towards this act" (395) invites critical reflection on the ethical position of the reader vis-à-vis the peasant subjects upon whose lives she gazes throughout the novel. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay proposes the intriguing thesis that restoring the temporal duration of the encounter that produces the photograph to the act of looking at a photograph might save the gaze of the viewer from objectifying the photographed subjects. In contrast to just looking, the protracted act of *watching* allows us to recognize the personhood of the photographed subjects as well as the injuries they suffer in the inevitably violent act of being photographed:

The photograph bears the seal of the photographic event, and reconstructing this event requires more than just identifying what is shown in the photograph. *One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it.* The verb "to watch" is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image. (14, emphasis mine)

Saer's prolonged description of the photographic event, complete with the nervous fidgeting of the family posing for the photograph, accomplishes such a shift from looking to watching: positioning the reader as a spectator to the self-conscious micro-movements of the photographic subjects is one way of insisting on the humanity of the lives represented and safeguarding them from being reduced to objects of indexical documentation or aesthetic contemplation. I contend, moreover, that this technique of asking us to watch rather than just look is not confined to this one scene. To the contrary, the demand that we observe over time underlies the slow, but never frozen, narrative progression of *El limonero real* as a whole.

As such, the shift from looking to watching constitutes one of the primary means through which Saer avoids the pitfalls of *costumbrismo* and positivistic regionalist literature: namely the

¹¹⁴ "The old couple will occupy the center for the frame, seated, stiff and upright, and the rest will be seated around them: in the same row, standing up, will be Rosa and Teresa, to the left, next to the old woman, and on the other side, to the right, next to the old man, Josefa and Rosita, Rogelio's daughter."

rendering of rural subjects as exotic, primitive, or quaint specimens whose lives have been removed from our own time. Johannes Fabian has decried the way classical anthropology denies the coevalness of the “primitive” cultures it studies by relying on “objective” language that occludes the shared time of intersubjective experience and communication between anthropologist and native informant. Similarly, locking the rural interior in a gaze that strips it of time reduces the lived experiences of its inhabitants to relics of an archaic past. The photograph-taking scene underscores Saer’s refusal to objectify his subjects in this way.

By reanimating the posed figures in a time that lies beyond the taking of the photograph, the narrative performs the reverse gesture of that performed by photographs, which render living, moving subjects deathly still. The photograph-taking scene will end abruptly with the return to movement of the family members who have been frozen in place awaiting the click of the shutter:

Permanecerán unos segundos así, inmóviles y en silencio, con sus sonrisas congeladas y sus ademanes a medio realizar [. . .] así hasta que en el intervalo de una fracción de un segundo no pasará nada, salvo los cuerpos cambiando en reposo y sus sombras inmóviles contra la pared centelleante, y después se oirá el sonido metálico del obturador y entrarán otra vez en la corriente del movimiento visible, y se dispersarán. (87-88)¹¹⁵

We see the portrait that attempts to condense the present moment into a snapshot, but instead of seeing it after the fact, when its within-time-ness has already been leveled off into the impenetrable, undevelopable surface of a fixed image, we see it from before and during the “now” it seeks to capture. In other words, we see everything that eludes the camera’s eye: all of the minute movements of bodies and light that cannot be suspended completely, even for a fraction of a second, and the continuous current of motion and time that will reclaim the photographic subjects immediately after the click of the shutter. So, too, will the narrative reclaim the subjects from the photographic gaze and reinscribe them in the flow of time by continuing to describe their actions throughout the rest of the day.

The use of the future tense in this scene inverts the intuitive notion that photographs document the past. In this case, visualizing the photograph Saer describes is not a matter of looking back at what has been but, rather, of looking forward to what will be: we “see” the photograph in great visual detail before it has been taken. If, according to Roland Barthes, every photograph anticipates a future viewer who will gaze upon the anterior future death of its subject, in *El limonero real*, the reader finds herself in the awkward situation of recognizing herself as that future viewer, from a point in time in which the subjects are still very much alive and animate, before the picture is even taken.¹¹⁶ This peculiar manipulation of photographic temporality allows the narrative to anticipate a future in which the rural community depicted will find itself frozen, as an object of curiosity, in an exterior, urban gaze while also insisting on the

¹¹⁵ “They will stay this way for a few seconds, immobile and in silence, with their smiles frozen and their gestures half-realized [. . .] like that until in the interval of a fraction of a second nothing will happen, except the bodies changing in repose and their immobile shadows against the scintillating wall, and then the metallic sound of the shutter will be heard and they will enter once again the current of visible movement and they will disperse.”

¹¹⁶ As Barthes notes in his reading of Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Payne waiting to be hanged, photography asks us to anticipate the future death of its subject from the point in time when the photograph was taken: “I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), this photograph tells me death in the future” (*Camera Lucida* 96). By going on to conclude, “Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe,” Barthes insists that we do not need to know the subject has already died in order to feel like we are looking at the dead when we behold a photograph.

aliveness of the photographic-subjects-to-be by rendering them as fidgeting, self-conscious people.

In the act of looking *forward* in time to make out the unfamiliar figures arriving from the city, the narrative has already looked *back* upon the future death of its subjects by envisioning the image of the family arrested in the gaze of the camera for future viewers to behold. As such, the future-tense narration of the photograph-taking scene foretells the future death of the world it describes without conceding the pastness of this world. The temporal structure of the novel thus asks us to reflect critically on the fraught process of making regional lives visible to cosmopolitan viewers and, in particular, on the ethical pitfall of reifying rural subjects by fixing them in a gaze that strips them of their within-time-ness and reduces them to local color.

Catch-and-release: shuttling back and forth between stillness and motion

This scene in which the entire family gathers together and poses before the camera (and the reader) makes explicit one of the major formal preoccupations of the novel: the tension between the need to suspend action in order to capture the singularity of a given moment and the need to release the “stills” produced back into the flow of time in order not to ossify the moment. As I will argue in the final section of this chapter, this tension between stillness and motion expresses Saer’s deep ambivalence towards the linear temporality of narrative and, more specifically, narratives of modernization and progress.

“Inmóvil” and “sin avanzar” are two of the most common descriptors used in *El limonero real*. Importantly though, immobility is almost always qualified as momentary: when he pauses to pet his dogs, “Wenceslao se queda *un momento* inmóvil,” before continuing with his morning routine (14); at midday, the sun “por *un momento* permanecerá inmóvil” (60) before continuing its arc across the sky; etc.. The halting advancement of the characters and objects that move across this world is echoed in Saer’s fragmented style of narration: most scenes are composed by stringing together isolated “stills,” and, on a larger scale, the novel as a whole is ordered by a halting temporal structure full of narrative breaks and recommencements. As a result, many readers experience the temporality of *El limonero real* as both slow and jerky: the languor of indulgent visual descriptions is abruptly broken, over and over again, by unmarked shifts into new scenes and moments.

While Saer’s style of “cutting” from one visually rich scene to another is often described as cinematic, David Oubiña rightly suggests that Saer’s method is neither as smooth nor as totalizing as cinema. In fact, he has described Saer’s poetics of suspension in his most experimental phase as influenced by cinema’s precursor, the chronophotograph. In order to represent movement, chronophotographic images like the iconic stop-motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Maray must first break motion down into still frames of each microsecond. Oubiña argues that Saer’s narratives preform this decomposition of movement with the result of fragmenting the narrative into isolated moments of suspended action. His narrators linger on the task of perceiving each moment in its entirety rather than serializing these moments into the smooth progression of a linear narrative. However, unlike Muybridge’s camera, which freezes time so that it might definitively grasp each micro-movement, the mode of perception at play in saerian narratives does not successfully wrest moments from the flow of time in order to immobilize and isolate details and study them “bajo el microscopio de su percepción” (83). Saer focuses instead on the insufficiency of perception to arrest time and hold on to a moment for long enough to know it, to name it, to keep it:

Mientras que la mirada cronofotográfica de Muybridge lograba fijar el movimiento y lo cristalizaba como imagen nítida (plena de sentido) sobre el papel, la percepción del narrador saeriano – aunque opera con las mismas estrategias – ya no obtiene resultados similares [. . .]La descripción no es aquí un instrumento de captura sino una operación que testimonia cómo el objeto resbala y se escapa irremediabilmente. (Oubiña 84-85)¹¹⁷

Saer's unique treatment of time and motion ensures that the spaces he represents are never static spaces that can be visually apprehended as a perfect *cuadro* but always temporally animated. In fact, Saer's poetics of suspension dramatize the futility of the positivistic urge to arrest the flow of time in order to perceive and represent each moment adequately, as well as the inevitability, the necessity, and even the desirability of letting the moment escape.

The text thus expresses an ambivalence towards photographic capture. In a novel that is set in a brutally hot summer's day, the sun's glare serves almost as a photographic flash, enabling such an act of visual capture by illuminating the most minute visual details of the world represented and by imposing, through its immobilizing heat, a deathly stillness upon this world. Throughout the text, immobility is frequently linked to light, and to the paralyzing light of the mid-day, mid-summer sun in particular, whereas movement is linked to shadow and to human life. This contrast becomes most explicit in the scene that describes the family eating their mid-day meal in the shade immediately before the nieces from the city arrive:

El contraste no es únicamente de sombra y luz sino también de movimiento y de inmovilidad: por un lado están los árboles inertes, los espinillos que bordean el camino amarillo, y por el otro el crecer y disminuir imperceptibles de los pechos al ritmo de la respiración, la arena amarilla muerta y los brazos que se levantan con el tenedor en la mano en dirección a la boca, el tejido de alambre que separa la casa del camino y apenas si se ve y las cabezas que giran de un lado a otro y las lenguas que se mueven en la conversación, los cráteres vacíos de las huellas sobre la arena y los ojos que se mueven para mirar, el sol inmóvil contra el conjunto en el interior de la esfera de sombra, el aire estacionario y sin viento y la fluencia de las palabras que repercuten y se esfuman. (75)¹¹⁸

The narrative gaze turns back and forth between the landscape illuminated by the sun, which is painted as still, lifeless, sharply focused, and rich in visual details, and the human scene that takes place in the opacity of the shade, which is described in terms of the minute and ephemeral movements that make perception, communication, and life itself possible: gestures, words, breath. The human life of the scene cannot be apprehended in the fixed visual language of landscape. It is literally unilluminated by the sun and consists not of objects but of motions: “el crecer y disminuir imperceptibles de los pechos,” “los brazos que se levantan,” “las cabezas que giran,” “las lenguas que se mueven,” “la fluencia de las palabras,” etc. All of these rhythmic

¹¹⁷ “While the chronophotographic gaze of Muybridge was able to fix movement and crystalized it as a clear image (full of meaning) on the paper, the perception of the Saerian narrator – even though it operates with the same strategies – no longer obtains similar results [. . .] The description here is not an instrument of capture but rather an operation that witnesses how the object irredeemably slips and escapes.”

¹¹⁸ “The contrast it isn't just of shadow an light but also of movement and immobility: on one hand are the inert trees, the spots that border the yellow road, and on the other hand the imperceptible growing and diminishing of chests with the rhythm of breath, the dead yellow sand and the arms that rise with the fork in hand in the direction of the mouth, the weaving of wire that separates the house from the road and can barely be seen and the heads that turn from one side to another and the tongues that move in conversation, the empty craters of footprints on the sand and the eyes that move to see, the immobile sun against the group in the interior of the sphere of shade, the stationary and windless air and the flowing of words that reverberate and disappear.”

gestures prove fleeting, like the words that “repercuten y se esfuman.” In this scene, human life transpires almost imperceptibly in the shadows of what can be seen.

In the photo-taking scene that follows, in contrast, La Negra poses the family in the glare of the sun – “contra la pared blanca, llena de refulgencias” (87) – while she remains in the shade. The family that the camera can see, fully lit and immobile, is not the family that we have witnessed moving among the shadows. By prefacing the camera scene with these observations on light and dark, stillness and motion, Saer draws attention to the insufficiency of the camera to capture the family, “as it really is,” constantly performing minute and mundane actions.

While Saer’s gaze strives to renounce the objective and objectifying gaze of a camera and aspires instead to the subjective and temporally animated gaze of perception, the narrative still runs the risk of freezing and isolating individual frames because “capturing” motion is necessary to representing it. Re-animating the images captured by returning to them, re-opening them, and re-writing them through repetition might then be understood as Saer’s technique of mitigating this violence. It would seem, in fact, that this tension between the desire to capture and the need to release, informs the halting temporal structure of the novel, and it may reflect the process of its composition as well.

Saer wrote *El limonero real* over nine years, and the manuscript spans several notebooks, only two of which (presumably the first two) have been recovered. An examination of the existing manuscripts of the novel reveals a choppy composition process full of false starts, breaks, and recommencements. In reading the “false starts” in Saer’s notebooks, one is struck by how much the pattern of breaking off and starting over again at the beginning resembles the formal structure of the finished novel, which starts over with the opening line “Amanece. Y ya está con los ojos abiertos” no fewer than eight times. Saer is generally known for committing early on to the final form his novels will take. Julio Premat notes that Saer generally does not leave behind drafts and variants of the kind scholars are accustomed to working with but only alternate beginnings. Beyond these initial experiments, Premat implies, the versions to be found in Saer’s manuscripts are already too close to their finished form to be considered drafts or variants. The composition process of *El limonero real* would appear to be an anomaly, however: there is not one manuscript that, if transcribed with a few corrections and modifications here and there, would yield the novel in its final form.¹¹⁹

It appears, in fact, that Saer created the structuring principals of his novel out of the struggle to find an adequate approach to his material. Mirta Stern has in fact described the form of the novel as a mangled manuscript turned legible: “La superposición de las distintas partes no haría sino reconstituir un ‘manuscrito’, que torna legibles sus tachaduras, sustituciones y expansiones” (vii).¹²⁰ Saer seems to have made the decision to incorporate the choppiness, the frustration, and the struggle of the writing process into the form of the novel. If, as Premat suggests, Saer’s distinctive composition process is to try on numerous beginnings, creating a space of “proliferación y duda” before arriving at “la versión definitiva” (2012 12), then *El*

¹¹⁹ At least no such manuscript has been found. There are, in the collection of Saer’s notebooks currently held at Princeton, two journals that contain drafts of the material that would become the first third of the novel. One of these contains a proliferation of beginnings as described above. The second notebook does not contain the continuation of the story laid out in the first, but rather, scenes that would later be inserted into the middle of the narrative elaborated in the first, suggesting that Saer composed the final version of the novel by cutting, pasting, and combining materials written at different times, or at least in different notebooks.

¹²⁰ “The superimposition of the distinct parts wouldn’t do otherwise than reconstitute a “manuscript,” that turns legible its strikethroughs, substitutions and expansions.”

limonero real, which breaks and starts over again and again, would seem to perform this process and hold open indefinitely the space of proliferation and doubt.

If each break in the narrative represents a fissure that introduces doubt and the spaciousness of infinite possibilities, each break may also represent a suspension in the composition process, a period of stillness before the world narrated is reanimated¹²¹. For example, the first notebook containing material for *El limonero real* ends abruptly with the photo-taking scene. While there are many blank pages left in the journal, Saer leaves off writing after describing the image of the family posed before the camera:

Permanecerán una fracción del segundo así, en silencio e inmóviles, con sus sonrisas congeladas y sus ademanes a medio realizar [. . .] no pasará nada, salvo los cuerpos cambiando en reposo y sus sombras inmóviles contra la pared refulgente, y después se oirá el sonido metálico del obturador y el movimiento les atraparà otra vez y se dispersarán” (manuscript version, *Notebook*).¹²²

It is as if Saer has left his characters frozen upon the page, suspended in the gaze of the camera, holding the pose indefinitely in anticipation of a future moment when they will be reanimated. This inevitable reanimation is treated with ambivalence. Ending with the phrase “el movimiento les atraparà otra vez y se dispersarán” suggests that the author anticipates future reanimation as a potential loss and not only the necessary continuation of the story. Recall, however, that the revised version of this phrase envisions this moment in less violent terms: “y después se oirá el sonido metálico del obturador y entrarán otra vez en la corriente del movimiento visible, y se dispersarán” (1974, 88). Here, the clicking of the shutter brings release from stillness rather than “trapping” the figures in movement and situates the people as subjects who *will enter* the current of time and *will disperse themselves* rather than as objects who will *be trapped* and *be dispersed*. It appears that in the process of revision, Saer negotiates his ambivalence about reanimating the world he has left immobile, and perhaps attempts to mitigate the loss he feels at doing so.

Nevertheless, the ambivalence remains in the title Saer chooses when he once again picks up the narration: “Para *El limonero real* (Sacándola de su perfecta inmovilidad).” This phrase will appear in the finished novel in a description of the halting movement the canoe when Wenceslao and El Ladeado cross the river: “A veces pareciera que entre cada palada de los remos no pasa nada, y que la canoa queda inmóvil y suspendida sobre el agua, hasta que la corriente de sangre la impulsa otra vez sacándola de su perfecta inmovilidad” (41).¹²³ The “corriente de sangre” is Wenceslao’s energy, his “fuerza animal” that he passes on to the oars to move the boat forward. In the phrase, “Sacándola de su perfecta inmovilidad,” then, the pulse of embodied life appears to be what continually disrupts the fleeting illusion of stillness that makes representation possible. It would appear that Saer must reanimate the “perfect immobility” of both the writing process and of the characters themselves, who, when he abruptly left off writing the previous fragment of manuscript, were frozen in the gaze of La Negra’s camera. To continue

¹²¹ Indeed, the manuscripts reveal that the “breaks” between sections of the novel, where a flashback begins or ends or where the narration of the day starts over again, generally correspond to changes in the ink used, suggesting a different sitting.

¹²²“They will stay this way for a fraction of a second, in silence and immobile, with their smiles frozen and their gestures half-realized [. . .] nothing will happen, except the bodies changing in repose and their immobile shadows against the brilliant wall, and then the metallic sound of the shutter will be heard and movement will trap them once again and they will disperse.”

¹²³ “Sometimes it would seem that between each stroke of the oars nothing happens, and that the canoe remains immobile and suspended on the water, until the current of blood propels it again, removing it from its perfect immobility.”

to write after leaving a project still and untouched is to bring back to life, but also to disrupt the perfect *cuadro* – that painstakingly wrought still image that perfectly captures, expresses, and reifies the moment.

III. Intimacy and iteration: The crisis of narrative and the return of poetry

The extreme formal experimentalism of *El limonero real*, *La mayor*, and *Nadie nada nunca*, has often been understood as Saer's response to what he perceives as a crisis of representation, as classical modes of narration become ossified and no longer serve as means of exploring reality but only as means of packaging it for the ideological needs of the totalitarian state and the commercial needs of the global literary market. Beatriz Sarlo argues that the mature style that Saer forges in this period is one that seeks to dramatize this crisis even as it insists that "después de la crisis de la narración, todavía es posible narrar" (Sarlo "Aventuras" 296). I would argue, moreover, that *El limonero real* plays a central role in Saer's reinvention of the modern novel. It is in this novel that Saer consolidates his mature style as radically antithetical to naturalism and *costumbrismo*¹²⁴. By insisting on the destabilizing temporal dimension of a space that has traditionally been represented in visual and ahistorical terms, Saer thus wrests the region away from the authority of metaphysical knowledge and the certainty of ideology and reclaims it as the living, ever-shifting ground of memory. If visual representations and realist prose threaten to reify this space in a timeless past, Saer learns from poetry how to resist such ossification through an ethos of incessantly revisiting, observing anew, and revising.

¹²⁴ Saer's manuscripts reveal that he was experimenting with the structure and tone of this novel well into the composition process, and that his style moves further and further away from naturalism as he re-writes and edits. When he begins working on the novel under the title of "Los limones bajo la luna" in 1963, Saer starts chapter one no fewer than four times before settling on the opening he would use in the novel. These "false starts" are generally more naturalistic and less stylized than the novel in its finished form. While the finished version of the novel is devoid of internal monologue or psychological processing of the events narrated, the alternate beginnings of the novel in the manuscripts more closely resemble the naturalistic prose of a 19th century realist, psychological novel. In these alternate beginnings, Saer experiments with narrating the opening of the novel in the first person, with using colloquial peasant language, and with explicitly treating the resentment Wenceslao feels towards the exploitative city economy, as represented by the fish wholesalers who buy from him (*Papeles* 122). The manuscripts also contain lengthy scenes that do not make it into the novel: an alternate version of the scene where Wenceslao crosses the river in a canoe with his nephew El ladeado, and two presumably simultaneous scenes that follow Wenceslao's brothers-in-law as they start their respective days. In one, the industrious and physically robust Rogelio goes fishing in the early hours of the morning; in the other, the degenerate Agustín wakes up on the floor of his dilapidated cabin after a night of heavy drinking. These later-omitted scenes suggest a very different structure and tone from those Saer settles on for the final version of the novel, which is focalized almost exclusively through Wenceslao and employs a much lighter touch in its characterization of the contrast between the three brothers-in-law. Excising these scenes seems to be a way of purging any hints of *costumbrismo* from the novel. As beautifully crafted as the omitted scenes are, there is something too easy or too explicit about the way they cast the three brothers-in-law as distinct types. These richly detailed depictions of peasant labor and squalid living conditions may be too close to local color for comfort: there are too many straw hats, adobe walls, thatched roofs, and *ombú* trees. The scene at Agustín's home in particular comes close to making a voyeuristic spectacle out of Agustín's abjection. Even in Saer's hands, the image of the tottering drunk surrounded by semi-feral animals, bony children, and a wife who is literally barefoot and pregnant starts to feel like a stereotype. Finally, the deleted scenes further elaborate the relationship between El ladeado, the son Agustín rejects for his physical deformity and blames for the family's misfortunes, and his uncles, Wenceslao and Rogelio, who try to provide their crippled nephew with the support and encouragement he is denied by his father. While the extended treatment of these relationships in the later-deleted scenes is touching and beautifully restrained, it still seems too sentimental for the tonal subtlety Saer adopts in the final version of the novel.

As such, Saer's radical poetics do not only constitute a rejection of the traditional regionalist novel; they also constitute a rejection of the novel itself, which for Saer connotes an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century form linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie and defined by "el uso exclusivo de la prosa, la ilusión totalizante, el realismo, etc." ("Un reportaje," *Notebook*). From an aesthetic point of view, he sees the twentieth century novel as an extraneous genre, one incapable of discovering anything new because it remains tethered to conventions that guarantee legibility and marketability. The only way he sees to renovate this form is to do as the great modernist novelists of the 20th century have done and write novels that are not novelistic, to incorporate into the novel the "no novelable" (1997 124). Saer prefers to refer to his own works as "*narrativas*" rather than "*novelas*" for this reason ("Un reportaje," *Notebook*). In fact, I would propose that we might understand Saer's most experimental phase in the late sixties and early seventies – including the novels *El limonero real* (1974), *Nadie, nada, nunca* (1980), the short story collection *La mayor* (1976), and the poetry collection *El arte de narrar* (1977) – as an attempt to reinvigorate what he felt to be a stagnating narrative tradition by exploring the limit between poetry and prose.

We would do well to remember that Saer was also a poet, although he is much better known for his novels. In 1977, he published a collection of poems written over the previous two decades, titled "El arte de narrar" or "The art of narrating." As this ironic title suggests, Saer was deeply preoccupied with the relationship between prose narration and poetry, and far from being simply a secondary literary pursuit, poetry offered him a way of revitalizing the form of the novel: in a conversation with Ricardo Piglia, for example, he expresses hope that "la relación entre lírica y narración" might offer "una superación de ciertos callejones sin salida de la tradición novelística" (Saer and Piglia 11-12).¹²⁵

Saer, who once called prose "un instrumento del Estado" ("La cuestión de la prosa" 57), felt the political stakes of this undertaking to be high. His stated goal in reinventing the form of the novel was to free it from its "servidumbre ideológica" ("La cuestión de la prosa" 61) so that it might once again serve as "un órgano sutil de conocimiento" (a subtle organ of knowledge) (*Trabajos* 277). In other words, poetry offered him a way of taking the novel away from its ideological certitude and restoring it as a means of conveying experience.

One of Saer's explicit objectives in forging this new, hybrid genre is to "quebrar el naturalismo y el realismo mecánico que endurecen la estructura y limitan el vuelo de la novela moderna" (*Papeles* 114).¹²⁶ In other words, Saer's aim in infusing the novel with qualities of poetry is to revitalize what he sees as an ossified and stagnant genre (and we should note that he is writing in a moment – in Peronist Argentina when social realism and narrow interpretations of Sartre's notion of political commitment dominated the literary climate). Saer's prognosis for the realist novel is grim indeed: he describes it as an extraneous genre, as a relic from the nineteenth century, and as the most belated of art forms, largely because it remains tethered to mimetic representation when music, visual art, and poetry have all moved on, leaving the novel in Saer's words to "bear the cross of realism" ("La cuestión de la prosa" 58). He writes in the Advertencia for his 1964 debut novel first novel that, "sin una experimentación vasta y racional la novela moriría a corto plazo" (*Trabajos* 267).¹²⁷ As Beatriz Sarlo points out, there is nothing triumphant about Saer's declaration of the death of the novel; his tone has none of the giddiness

¹²⁵ "a way out of certain dead-ends within the novelistic tradition."

¹²⁶ "to break with the naturalism and mechanical realism that harden the structure and limit the flight of the modern novel."

¹²⁷ "Without vast and rational experimentation, the novel will die in short time."

of an avant-garde manifesto and all of the urgency of someone negotiating a dire crisis: “No se trata de celebrar la muerte de la novela y la desaparición del personaje, sino de trabajar en ese suelo estético inseguro. [. . .] Saer narra conociendo la imposibilidad de la narración clásica y al mismo tiempo reconstruyendo nuevas condiciones de narración” (La condición mortal 294).¹²⁸ Far from triumphantly declaring their break with tradition, Saer sees experimentation as an urgent response to a grave crisis: reinventing classical narrative becomes the only hope of keeping narrative alive. Rather than claiming to be a pioneer in new territory, moreover, Saer believed that his genre-bending experiments were in keeping with the local tradition: he considered the evolution and transgression of generic limits to be “la tradición más fecunda de nuestra literatura,” dating back to Facundo, and he saw Juan L. Ortiz as following in this tradition with his “lírica narrativa” in long poems like “Gualeguay” and “Las colinas” (“Juan” 79).

Saer’s poetic apprenticeship

In order to understand what poetry offers to Saer’s prose fiction, it is necessary to understand his poetic apprenticeship as extending beyond his own poetic compositions to include as well his passion for reading and translating poetry and, specifically, to his close relationship to the poet Juan L. Ortiz, whom Saer proudly claims as a friend and a mentor. “Juan L.” as he is affectionately called by those who knew him, served as the “padre literario” to Saer’s group of friends and fellow writers in Santa Fe (Gramuglio *Juan José Saer* 275)¹²⁹. As Saer fondly recalls in his tribute to Juan L., the intellectual life of this group, which he insists was “no más que un grupo de amigos” (ibid 274), revolved around many long afternoons and longer nights spent sipping mate by the river or gathered around an *asado* and a few bottles of wine, deep in conversation. Though Saer, who prized his autonomy from affiliation with any institution or ideology, would repudiate the notion that the group constituted a literary school or movement, he nevertheless embraced the literary influence of Juan L. Ortiz.

Ortiz’s treatment of landscape is particularly influential. What Saer claims to find most valuable and instructive is the poet’s renunciation of any ambition to objectively document space or catalog local color; instead, Saer points out, Juan L. treats the landscape as always already colored the poet’s subjectivity and perception:

el paisaje, que ocupa un lugar tan eminente en la poesía de Juan, no es la consecuencia de un determinismo geográfico o regional, sino una proyección de su percepción del mundo y su concepción de la poesía. Esa concepción es de índole materialista [. . .] un deslumbramiento ante la proliferación enigmática que llamamos mundo. Para la poesía de Juan el paisaje es enigma y belleza, pretexto para preguntas y no para exclamaciones [. . .] (“Juan” 13)¹³⁰

¹²⁸ “It’s not about celebrating the death of the novel and the disappearance about the character but of working on this unstable aesthetic ground [. . .] Saer narrates knowing the impossibility of classic narration and at the same time reconstructing new conditions of narration.”

¹²⁹ This group includes Hugo Gola, Roberto Maurer, Jorge Conti, Raúl Beceryro, Luis Priamo, Marylyn Contardi among others. Graciela Montaldo describes them as “solitario e independiente” and “ajeno a los efectos del ‘boom’ de la literatura latinoamericana” and also credits them with being among the first intellectuals to appreciate the aesthetic innovations of Borges (*Juan José Saer* 12-13).

¹³⁰ “the landscape, which occupies such an eminent place in the poetry of Juan, is not the consequence of geographic nor regional determinism, but rather the projection of his perception of the world and his knowledge of poetry. This conception is of a materialist nature [. . .] a confusion before the enigmatic proliferation that we call the world. For the poetry of Juan the landscape is enigma and beauty, pretext for questions and not for exclamations.”

Recent readings of Saer, such as those of Rafael Arce, will make a very similar claim about Saer's own treatment of landscape, noting how, somewhat surprisingly for an author whose style is often compared to the objectivist style of the Nouveau Roman, Saer's narrative gaze infuses the landscape with subjective affects a camera would be hard-pressed to capture (Arce 2013).

One of the most important lessons Saer learns from Ortiz seems to be the value of returning to the same landscapes over and over again. Ortiz uses repetition – in particular the revisiting of the same riverbanks, the same trees, the same fields – not as a means of consolidating a totalizing vision of the landscape but, rather, as a means of revealing its temporality and emphasizing the singularity of each moment it contains: a field observed at dawn in the winter is not the same as a field observed in summer, in the afternoon, in the rain, etc. The temporal animation and fluidity of the landscape is perhaps most apparent in Ortiz's river poems. Though rivers have often served as symbols for the irreversibility of time, the proliferation of river scenes in Ortiz's poetry contributes to a rhythmic temporality of return that can be traced both within and between Ortiz's poems.

We might look for example at "A la orilla del río." Like most of Ortiz's poems, it is written in free verse but creates a lapping sonoric rhythmic through the repetition of sounds, words, and phrases:

A la orilla del río
un niño solo
con su perro.

A la orilla del río
dos soledades
tímidas,
que se abrazan.

¿Qué mar oscuro,
qué mar oscuro,
los rodea,
cuando el agua es de cielo
que llega danzando
hasta las gramillas?

A la orilla del río
dos vidas solas,
que se abrazan.
Solos, solos, quedaron
cerca del rancho.
La madre fue por algo.
El mundo era una crecida
nocturna.

¿Por qué el hambre y las piedras
y las palabras duras?
Y había enredaderas
que se miraban,
y sombras de sauces,
que se iban,

y ramas que quedaban . . .

Solos de pronto, solos,
ante la extraña noche
que subía, y los rodeaba:
del vago, del profundo
terror igual,
surgió el desesperado
anhelo de un calor
que los flotara.

A la orilla del río
dos soledades puras
confundidas
sobre una isla efímera
de amor desesperado.

El animal temblaba.
¿De qué alegría
temblaba?
El niño casi lloraba.
¿De qué alegría
casi lloraba?

A la orilla del río
un niño solo
con su perro.

(Obras)

In addition the frequent doubling of words and phrases – “Qué mar oscuro”, “Solos, de pronto, solos”, “De qué alegría, “de qué alegría” – the poem is characterized by the internal rhythms created by repeated sounds, perhaps most pronounced in the lolling refrain of the title “A la orilla del río.”

On a larger scale as well, this poem evidences an interesting tension between linear narrative temporality and a cyclical lyric temporality – a tension that will become central to Saer’s poetics. Time flows in a linear manner in the long second stanza, where the narrative events of the poem are laid out – a boy has been left alone while his mother goes to fetch something and now the night is encroaching. Here we feel the passing of time acutely in the rising fear that nightfall brings: the anxious piling up of short lines emphasizes that too much time is going by and there is still no sign of the mother’s return. In contrast, the following stanzas, which grow shorter until they return us to the opening three lines of the poem, hint at the promise of a return. Once darkness has descended, the passing of time is less pronounced, and the twin solitudes of boy and dog appear to find some solace in the fluttering, trembling rhythms that unite them. Though the boy’s desolation has not been alleviated, the return of the poem to where it began reminds us of the larger cyclical patterns in which time’s linear movements are inscribed, cycles which promise the eventual return of daylight and of the boy’s mother.

One of the ways that Ortiz underscores the cyclical – or perhaps, better yet, spiraling – temporality of his landscapes is in his proclivity for including the names of seasons and times of day in his titles. For example, in his early writings, we find a proliferation of poems entitled “Mañana” or variations thereof – “sol de esta mañana,” “otro amanecer,” “mañana otoñal,” “la mañana penétrame,” “La mañana quiere irse,” “Despertar,” etc..¹³¹ His poetry offers an equally rich array of midday, evening, and night scenes as it rhythmically moves through the diurnal and annual cycles that animate his pastoral landscapes.

It is worth noting that this proclivity to iteratively accumulate dawns, afternoons, and sunsets between poems is shared by Ortiz’s better-known contemporary Jorge L. Borges. The two writers are of the same generation, both nearly forty years older than Saer, but are rarely read side-by-side in large part because Borges is associated with the cosmopolitan *vanguardistas* of Buenos Aires and Ortiz is remembered, when he is remembered at all, as a reclusive provincial poet. But, lest we forget, Borges, too, began as a poet of place. Borges’s first collections of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and *Luna de enfrente* (1925), paint vignette after vignette of empty streets and courtyards in the *arrebales* of Buenos Aires. The moon, the dawn, the afternoon sun, or the sunset, become recurring characters animating these scenes with their daily cycles. For the reader, who will encounter half a dozen sunsets in a single collection of poetry, each one evokes a plurality of others. The iterative nature of these daily temporal markers (which is sometimes made explicit in phrases like “todas las tardes” or “tus ponientes”), does not diminish the singularity of each one but, rather, imbues otherwise still landscapes with a sense of belonging to the flux of time, underscoring the ephemerality of, for example, the way a wet street catches the light on a given afternoon.

The willingness to return to the same landscapes again and again, saturating them with temporal fullness, may not seem noteworthy within the context of lyric poetry, but for poets like

¹³¹ There are three poems titled “Mañana” in *Protosauce* – the until-recently-unpublished collection thought to have preceded and informed the later compilation *En el aura del sauce* (Obras).

Ortiz and Borges beginning their literary careers in Argentina in the interwar period, this ethos of return constitutes a radical repudiation of the cultural trends of the moment: the cult of the new, the allure of speed and of technologies that promised to collapse spatial distances, granting rapid access to the far corners of the globe. Neither poet was remotely ignorant of these trends – Borges was explicitly in dialog with the European avant-gardes of the 1920's, and Ortiz was far more cosmopolitan than his persona as provincial poet would suggest – yet they both chose instead to pursue a slow, deep intimacy of the local – *un conocimiento* – born of iteratively retracing the same paths in order to discover the subtle shifts of a landscape over time.

Though Borges is an urban writer and Ortiz and Saer are strongly identified with the provincial landscapes about which they write, I would insist that the three share a radical form of localism, which as the case of Borges illustrates, need not be confined to rural settings. Nevertheless, I believe that treating marginal spaces (in Borges's case, not Paris but Buenos Aires and not even downtown Buenos Aires but the fringes of the city) with such avant-garde techniques constitutes a particularly radical political gesture. In the face not only of the drive for novelty and cosmopolitanism animating 20th-century avant-garde and modernists movements, but also of the persistence of ideologies that define modernity in opposition to a pre-modern *space* on the periphery of the lettered city– whether these be versions of the pastoral fantasy or the myth of civilization's conquest of *barbarie* –, I find something very radical indeed about a literature that lingers in spaces on the margins of modernity and that aims to transmit the temporality of these spaces to the reader *through its form*. This is precisely what I see Saer as doing in his most poetic novels.

Bringing the lyric temporality of return to bare on the novel

In his notebooks, Saer theorized at length a hybrid genre he called *la novela poética*, which, as he lays out in his notebooks, would be written in a language whose rhythm varied only subtly from regular prose; but its distinguishing feature would be its temporal concentration: the entire novel would take place in the span of one or two days (*Papeles* 114). Intriguingly, several notebook pages after his meditations on *La novela poética*, Saer begins his first draft of the novel that would become *El limonero real*, which famously takes place in a single day.¹³²

One of the principal questions Saer faces in his quest to write *una novela poética* is how to bring the lyric temporality of return to bare on the traditionally linear form of the novel. How might iterative structures learn to give birth to narrative movement? As is often the case with Saer, his most compelling theorization of this problem comes from within his fiction. In one of strangest passages of *El limonero real*, a creation myth recounted in the voice of an oral storyteller, Saer provides the figure of identical islands appearing on the surface of the water: “Y aparece después otra islita, y después otra, y otra, y otra. Siempre la misma islita [. . .] Al rato había tantas, digo había aparecido tantas veces, la misma islita, que usted podía pasar saltando de una a la otra, sin miedo de meter pie en el agua” (149).¹³³ As we will see, the creation of *the same island* again and again recalls the narrative structure of the novel, in which the same day is brought into language again and again. In both cases the repetition of the same, but not identical,

¹³² It is worth pointing out that Saer was also a reader of Joyce, but I believe the version of the lyric novel that Saer goes on to elaborate expresses a different model of intertextual return than what we see in Joyce – not simply cyclicity, but recursivity – a narrative looping that revisits the same scenes over and over again.

¹³³ “And then there appears another little island, and then another, and another, and another. Always the same little island [. . .] After a while there were so many, I mean it had appeared so many times, the same little island, that ‘ya could get across jumping from one to the next, without fear of putting a foot in the water.’”

eventually forms a transversable, if not continuous surface – a series of islands you can hop across without getting your feet wet, a series of isolated, descriptive moments that yield a story. This mode of storytelling, which I would argue is writ large in Saer’s continuous re-creation of the same *zona*, is also reminiscent of the alternate models of history and cultural identity that Antonio Benítez-Rojo explores in his figuration of the Caribbean archipelago as a *repeating island*: when we conceive of narratives of history and cultural identity as governed by rhythm rather than teleology, we are able to attend to the discontinuities that disrupt totalizing portraits of place as well as to the iterative reproduction of the same that undermines progressivist rhetoric. This iterative model of narrative and history is thus inherently critical of triumphant accounts of modernization, drawing attention to all that seems condemned *not* to change as well as to the subtle shifts and variations in what a more totalizing account might present as a static and monolithic regional identity.

Before diving into my analysis of *El limonero real*, I want to look at one additional moment in Saer’s fiction that appears to theorize the tension between lyric recursivity and narrative progression. The short story “El viajero,” published in Saer’s 1976 collection *La mayor*, recounts the slow and disorientatingly recursive advancement of its protagonist, a British traveller named Jeremy Blackwood, towards his death after he has become hopelessly lost on the expanse of the pampa. From first glance, it is apparent that the layout of the story on the page evokes poetry and also expresses the halting, stilted movement of the journey it traces. The story begins:

Rompió el reloj el vidrio que protegía el gran cuadrante en el que los números romanos terminaban en unas filigranas prolijas delicadas lo diseminó sobre el montón de ceniza húmeda que noches atrás había sido la hoguera temblorosa que él mismo había encendido

Estuvo acucillado un momento entregado al trabajo pueril de espolvorear de vidrio la masa grisácea y pegoteada de la ceniza después se paró y miró a su alrededor

La llovizna seguía impalpable lenta adensándose pareciéndose más y más a la niebla a medida que se alejaba hacia el gran horizonte circular

Su cara permaneció más dura y más tranquila que si la hubiese alzado para mirar la hora en Big Ben (164)¹³⁴

Saer emphasizes the uselessness of clock time in this world in the images of the broken face of the watch and the British protagonist’s futile gaze surveying the blank horizon, as if looking for the familiar face of Big Ben through the mist. As the story progresses (if we can describe its recursive movement as progression), we learn that Jeremy Blackwood has been wandering for days, that he has been separated from his horse, that he has been going in circles because he

¹³⁴ “He broke the watch the glass that protected the great face in which the roman numerals ended in prolific filigrees delicate He disseminated it on the pile of wet ash that nights before had been the trembling fire that he himself had lit. / He was kneeling a moment submitted to the puerile work of sprinkling the grayish and sticky mass with glass then he stopped and looked around him./ The drizzle continued impalpable slow densifying seeming more and more like the fog as it withdrew toward the great circular horizon.”

cannot identify a single reference point such as a ranch or a tree on the horizon, and that he cannot even navigate by the stars because of the incessant mist and drizzle veiling the sky.

The reader's disorientation converges with that of Blackwell in the moment when both the story and its protagonist return to a previously narrated moment in time. The story which began with the line, "Rompió el reloj," takes us back to the moment immediately before this initial action :

Un momento antes de romper el reloj la perplejidad creció un poco descubrir que
después de caminar dos días parándose únicamente de tanto en tanto para jadedar más
cómodo se llegaba otra vez al punto en que la tregua de la llovizna había permitido
encender una hoguera débil [. . .] (165)¹³⁵

Here we discover that the protagonist has just stumbled upon the ashes of his own campfire, thereby realizing that he has been walking in circles. Interestingly, however, Saer emphasizes that Blackwell has returned again not to a point in space but to a point in time, "al punto en que la tregua de llovizna había permitido encender una hoguera débil." The reader, too, experiences the sense that time is moving in circles when the scene of breaking the watch is then narrated *a second time*, as if the circular return to the same place has induced the memory of the original event:

Está otra vez en el punto de la hoguera sacó
el reloj de su bolsillo lo rompió diseminó los pedacitos
de vidrio sobre la ceniza acucillado

Se paró y miró el horizonte el pajonal
no sabía que se llamaba así se extendía

hasta el horizonte gris parejo monótono¹³⁶

In this second narration of the breaking of the watch, the cause of Blackwell's disorientation becomes more apparent: lacking familiarity with this local landscape, the protagonist can read neither its space nor its temporality. Not even knowing the local term for the patch of vegetation he sees on the horizon, the British traveller is incapable of distinguishing potential landmarks, and everywhere he looks, he sees only more of the same gray, identical, monotonous, flat land extending to the horizon. The expanse of the pampa, unmarked by any distinguishable features, and unbound by any borders but the horizon becomes a disk as devoid of meaningful information as the face of the broken watch. There is no totalizing, cartographic perspective from on high to be had; nor is the corresponding site of enunciation – that of an objective, scientific, and masterful outside perspective – available to the protagonist. He is limited to his own bodily perceptions and irrelevant memories and visions of home.

This story thus engages with a tradition of European travel narratives, drastically rewriting the triumphant tone of travelers who report dominating the American landscape by

¹³⁵ "A moment before breaking the watch his perplexity grew a little to discover that after walking for two days stopping only here and there to pant more comfortably he arrived again to the point where the respite in the drizzle had permitted him to light a feeble fire."

¹³⁶ "This time again on the tip of the fire he took the watch out of his pocket he broke it he disseminated the little pieces of glass on the ash kneeling/ He stood up and looked at the horizon *el pajonal* he didn't know it was called that extended to the gray, similar monotonous horizon."

beholding it from a panoramic perspective. But I would also argue that it evokes the reader's experience of trying to navigate Saer's most experimental fiction, particularly in infamously disorienting works such as *La Mayor*, *Nadie*, *Nada*, *Nunca*, and *El limonero real*. For the reader, too, the accretion of concrete details – such as the texture of the broken glass falling on campfire ash after the protagonist breaks his watch – creates a dense visual field, but his density, much like the incessant mist and drizzle that shrouds the pampa in gray, obscures more than it reveals. As the narrative and the protagonist repeatedly return to the point where they began, the passage of time ceases to correspond with forward progress. Yet the scene is not static or frozen in time, as the image of the broken watch might suggest. Instead, the recursive temporality of the story seems to draw dizzying circles around the protagonist and underscores the futility of his advancement.

Both the cyclical narrative structure and the dense, opaque visual descriptions characteristic of “El viajero” are defining features of *El limonero real*, to whose iterative narrative structure I will now turn. As I have already mentioned, in the process of narrating a single day, the novel begins over and over again, each time breaking off to recommence with the identical refrain: “Amanece. Y ya está con los ojos abiertos” (“Dawn breaks. And he already has his eyes open”). Marking both a break in the forward progression of the narrative and a cyclical return to where it began, these lines serve as a refrain, both in the poetic sense of a recurring verse and in the etymological sense of pulling back on the reins, and drawing forward advancement to a halt. The cycle recommences, no fewer than seven times, with each iteration progressing slightly further into the day than the last. Much as in “El viajero,” each re-telling revisits previously narrated scenes from slightly different perspectives, making it extremely difficult for a first-time reader to tell if one is making narrative progress or reading in circles.

I want to suggest that the challenges faced by the reader resemble those faced by Jeremy Blackwood, unfortunate protagonist of “El viajero”, not only in regards to structural disorientation – encountering dizzying cyclicity where we expect or hope for linear progression – but also in regards to cultural dislocation. Recall that Jeremy Blackwood's fate is sealed in part by his outsider status: he speaks only English and sees only scenes of London in his mind and therefore experiences the expanse of the pampa as illegible. *El limonero real* was the first novel Saer composed and published from exile in Europe, and, we might conjecture, the first work that self-consciously conjures *la zona* for an international audience. In *El limonero real*, more so than in any other of Saer's works, *la zona* proves a hostile literary landscape for readers who come as tourists in search of local color. Unlike the doomed Jeremy Blackwood, however, Saer's reader is granted the opportunity to learn how to navigate this landscape. With every iteration, we become better equipped to recognize the recurring landmarks in the narrative, to discern the clues that we have returned to a familiar scene, and to locate ourselves in time and space.

For example, we learn to keep our place in the ever-multiplying iterations of Wenceslao's day by noting the position of the sun or the moon, the length of shadows and the quality of light in Saer's rich visual descriptions. Much as in the poetry of Ortiz and Borges, we learn to draw connections between discontinuous scenes that are marked by the same time of day: saturated with mid-day sun, set under moonlight or starlight, etc. In this way, the recursive temporal structure of *El limonero real* involves the reader in the process of re-collecting scattered moments and narrative fragments in order that we might begin to not only follow the story that spans them but to perceive the affective charge they collectively carry.

Espejismos: death foretold on the horizon

Take a set of scenes (in truth, multiple iterations of the same scene) that take place under the punishing mid-day sun: Wenceslao and his brother-in-law Rogelio are making their way on foot to a local bar when Wenceslao sees a mirage on the horizon. The mirage appears at high noon, when the sun gives the illusion of holding still at the apex of its arc and when the staggering mid-day heat makes movement feel impossible:

a mediodía el sol calcinará el aire, lo hará polvo; la arena de la costa se pondrá blanca, la tierra parecerá cocida y después como encalada, y cruzando el río y a una hora de a pie desde la otra orilla, el camino de asfalto que lleva a la ciudad se llenará de espejismos de agua. (23)¹³⁷

While the first description of this image stresses the effects of the heat on the earth, the second iteration expands upon this image, thickening it with more visual details:

A mediodía estará en lo alto del cielo, porque sube despacio, sometiendo a las sombras a una reducción lenta; por un momento permanecerá inmóvil en lo alto, el disco al rojo blanco y lleno de destellos paralelo a la tierra y sus rayos verticales chocando contra las cosas, penetrando con incisión sorda la materia que cambia en reposo aparente; la luz llevará por el aire el reflejo de los ríos y de los esteros y lo proyectará sobre el camino de asfalto que corre liso hacia la ciudad creando ante los ojos de los viajeros espejismos de agua. (60)¹³⁸

The second narration of the mirage emphasizes the sun's momentary immobility and includes in the scene the unnamed travellers (at once Wenceslao and his brother-in-law and the archetypal travellers fatally misled by mirages of water in the desert). The fact that the mirage appears specifically on the paved road to the city is significant in a novel where the city is viewed as a source of dangerous and illusory promises, luring the youth from the coast away from their traditional ways of life, and, in the case of Wenceslao's son, luring him to his death.

As it turns out, the treacherousness of this same paved road when it actually is wet plays a prominent role in the only episode related in which Wenceslao travels to the city. After lunch, Wenceslao recalls a trip he and his brother-in-law Rogelio once took to sell a bonanza crop of watermelons at the market in the middle of a violent storm. Thwarted by the rain, the mud, and the slipperiness of wet asphalt under the unshod hooves of the horse pulling their cart, the two brothers-in-law arrive late to the market, which is already glutted with watermelons, and are forced to unload their crop at discount prices. This episode dispels the illusion of progress and prosperity promised by the paved road to the city, at least for the traditional farmers and fishers of the coast. The road which has been paved to benefit motor traffic proves a hazard to those relying on more traditional and "primitive" modes of transport. The city proves equally inhospitable to those who are out-of-step with the times: the brothers-in-law are disrespectfully dismissed by the other merchants. The disastrous attempt to participate in the exchange economy of the market cements Wenceslao's disillusionment with the promise of financial gain to be had in the city. For Wenceslao, then, as well as for the implicit worldview of the novel, the mirages

¹³⁷ "At midday the sun will scorch the air, it will turn it to dust; the sand of the coast will become white, the earth will seem cooked and later as if whitewashed, and crossing the river and an hour on foot from the other bank, the asphalt road that leads to the city will fill with mirages of water."

¹³⁸ "At midday it will be at the top of the sky, because it rises slowly, submitting the shadows to a slow reduction; for a moment it will remain immobile at the top, a red and white disc full of sparkles parallel to the earth and its vertical rays will crash into things, penetrating with deaf incision the material that changes in apparent repose; the light will carry the reflection of the rivers and estuaries through the air and will project it on the asphalt path that runs smooth towards the city creating before the eyes of travelers mirages of water."

on the road to the city are understated reminders of the siren songs of urban, commercial culture to which the younger generation is always at risk of succumbing.

The same scene of the mirage is later related in Wenceslao's voice, that of an uneducated peasant who describes what he sees without recourse to literary allusions or even the vocabulary *espejismo*:

Yo veía adelante el camino blanco y derecho, y al fondo el calor subiendo desde la tierra y enturbiando que le dicen el horizonte. Más avanzábamos más nos costaba avanzar. No va que llega un momento en que me parece que casi no avanzo más. (166)¹³⁹

Here the apparition of the mirage coincides with the disorientating illusion of not advancing. The abundance of verbs assures the reader that action is taking place, but the glut of modal verbs, as in the constructions, "me empieza a parecer que no avanzo" and "sigo teniendo," rob these actions of their decisiveness and sense of completion. Just as the sun *appears* to briefly pause at the top of its arc, and just as narrative time *appears* to be suspended in this moment, Wenceslao perceives that he has ceased advancing, even though his ability to keep pace with Rogelio illustrates that the feeling of suspension is only in his head, an effect of exhaustion in the intense mid-day heat.

Finally, this scene echoes another scene set under the mid-day sun: the scene that follows an abrupt break upon Wenceslao's diving into the river after slaughtering the lamb (141-148). This barely coherent first-person narrative describes Wenceslao collapsing on the path from the shore up to his ranch, at mid-day six years after the day in which the majority of the novel takes place. He blames his fall on the mid-day sun: "por el sol, por el sol cayendo a pique en pleno mediodía que ha de ser seguro lo que me tumbó" (141).¹⁴⁰ The narrator becomes increasingly incoherent as he is brought indoors and lain down in bed, until his speech gives way to inarticulate sounds and finally the silence of a black box on the page (148). We might conjecture that this other mid-day scene is the scene of Wenceslao's death. One of the final retellings of the story – a saccharine religious fable that recounts in broad strokes the story of Wenceslao and his family – tells us that Wenceslao is greeted by the Archangel Gabriel and climbs up to heaven to be reunited with his father and his son at mid-day on a sunny summer's day: "Era el mediodía, y había en toda la comarca un hermoso sol, porque la aparición del Arcángel Gabriel había tenido lugar en verano" (228).¹⁴¹ The suggestion that Wenceslao eventually dies of heatstroke under the mid-day sun imbues the scene of his exhaustion on the path when the mirage appears with a sense of mortality. The fact that this scene is recounted several times in the future tense further makes it seem like a premonition.

Reading between these multiple iterations of the same scene, it is possible to connect Wenceslao's perception that he has ceased advancing with the image of the sun suspended in its arc in the sky, and we begin to see that Wenceslao's fear that there will arrive a moment when "no avanzo más" reflects not only the fear of falling behind Rogelio in this specific moment but also the fear of death amplified by the impossibility of carrying on his line now that his only child is dead. It is not surprising that Wenceslao, who is the oldest of the three brothers-in-law should feel tinges of mortality when walking-side-by-side with Rogelio, who is married to the

¹³⁹ "I saw ahead the white and straight road, and at the end the heat rising from the earth and clouding what they call the horizon. The more we advanced the harder it was for us to advance. Won't there arrive a moment in which it seems to me that I don't advance any more."

¹⁴⁰ "because of the sun, because of the sun falling on the path in the very middle of the day, that must be surely what knocked me down."

¹⁴¹ "It was midday and there was a beautiful sun throughout the region because the apparition of the Archangel Gabriel had taken place in summer."

youngest of the three sisters and is depicted throughout as robust and strong. Rogelio is also the only one of the three fathers depicted who has reason to feel hope for his children, all of whom still live at home and appear to be healthy and industrious. In contrast, Agustín has given up on his offspring, no longer speaking to his fallen daughters and blaming his crippled son for all of his misfortunes. As the novel reminds us at every turn, Wenceslao has lost his only child. With no living heir, Wenceslao cannot hope to pass on the skills, traditions, and way of life he has inherited from his father. The simultaneous apparition of the mirage on the road to the city thus evokes the eventual extinction of Wenceslao's family and way of life.

Of course, this reading is not available from within any one iteration of the scene of the mirage; it is only by gathering together a multiplicity of scenes linked by the presence of the mid-day sun, that we come to recognize the depth and complexity of affect carried by the mirage, which evokes Wenceslao's mistrust of the path towards modernity as well as his fear of immobility, stagnation, and mortality. These iterations thus function as refrains in Felix Guattari's sense of a looping return of affect, a cross-temporal stitching together of different but linked moments of intensity and sensory perceptions (Bertelsen and Murphie).

In other words, though the process of transmission is slow, tedious, and rigorous for both author, who spent no fewer than ten years composing the novel, and reader, who must be willing stumble blindly and patiently re-read, I believe Saer's *novela poética* does ultimately impart to the reader the affective experience of inhabiting its rural world. I stress this point because it seems a significant point of contrast with Julio Premat's reading of Saer's experimental poetics as an expression of melancholia: "una búsqueda frustrada" for lost origins, a hopeless nostalgia for a pre-linguistic, pre-rational one-ness with the real, a perennially failed attempt to return to pure sensorial, material experience. Working within a psychoanalytic vocabulary, Premat likens this irrecoverable state of immanence to the unconscious; I would argue that it is in fact quite similar to what I have been calling experience or affect.¹⁴²

As I hope I have made clear, I do not find affect to be absent, much less irrecoverably lost, in *El limonero real*. Though I wholeheartedly agree with Premat's assessment that Saer's most experimental prose is self-reflexively fixated on the difficulty of bringing experience into discourse (and I would add, wary of doing so too readily, lest experience be reduced to ideology), I also believe that Saer's iterative accretions of description deliver affective experience in droves, if we know where to look, or how to read. If we can attend to both the rhythms of Saer's poetics, gathering together resonances between different moments, and to the surface of his descriptions – that is, heed the advocates of surface reading and resist the temptation to read only symptomatically for what is not there, dwelling instead on the richness of the visual and temporal texture of Saer's prose, we will find we have gained a profoundly intimate experience of his *zona*.¹⁴³ As I have emphasized, this intimacy is not to be gained merely by looking. Returning to the example at hand, the mirage Wenceslao sees on the road to

¹⁴² The sense in which I am using the term "affect" is drawn closely from Frederick Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism*. For Jameson, who had famously declared postmodernity to be characterized by "a waning of affect" in his earlier work, affect turns out to be an enduring component of realism. Jameson articulates affect as a characteristic of narrative temporality: it resides in an impulse towards scenic elaboration and description over teleological development, in a return to conjuring the sensory experience of an eternal present over the alienation of naming and the interchangeability of moments in linear narration. Understanding these pairs – scene vs. recit, body vs. language, sensory experience vs. representation, potentiality vs. reification, etc. – as antinomies rather than dualities spares Jameson's model of affect from the dualistic thinking of which affect theory has sometimes been accused. (I am thinking specifically of Ruth Leys's critique of Massumi et al. in "The Turn to Affect".)

¹⁴³ On surface reading, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "How We Read Now."

the city itself is an illegible blur on the horizon, but by iteratively layering analogous scenes, the novel's recursive structure encourages the reader to do *algo más que mirar*: to glean the affective resonances of a deeply human tragedy from seemingly opaque descriptions by returning to them again and again from different perspectives and different moments in time.

The politics of preserving poetic experience

Saer's peculiarly iterative treatment of his *zona* would constitute radical political gesture at any time, since Argentina, like many American nations, has a long history of shoring up its national identity on literary versions of its rural heartland. Unmooring these spaces from authoritative discourse is a particularly subversive gesture in the Argentina of the 1970's, when the military dictatorship drew its authority from a stable, monolithic narrative of the national experience¹⁴⁴. If, as Montaldo has argued, the literary discourses of the rural serve as a way or reinventing the nation's past in order to authorize a given version of the present and the future, then an authoritarian state seeks to mystify this process and naturalize its version of the past to secure a stable version of the foundation myth that is in keeping with its ideological needs.¹⁴⁵ By revealing the possibility and the necessity of re-writing these foundation myths and opening up the rural to rediscovery in the present, Saer challenges the monolithic version of history that props up this state and introduces a discursive vision of the rural.

In the face of expectations that literature about the rural ought to articulate the essence of national culture, Saer writes a recursive and fragmented novel that reclaims the region as a time-space of openness, where the point of origins we seek in the rural proves elusive and always under discursive construction. In particular, Saer seems to be writing against the ossification of the discursive practice of collective memory when the region is purged of its temporal dimension and rendered in spatial terms. The spatialization of the past gives us concrete, fixed images into which to channel our nostalgia, but it does so by stripping tradition of its temporal dimension –

¹⁴⁴ As Beatriz Sarlo writes, insisting on the autonomy, the fictionality, and the multiplicity of literary discourse, rather than explicitly taking on political material, becomes literature's best weapon against authoritarian discourse: "Si el discurso autoritario se caracteriza por cerrar el flujo de los significados y, en consecuencia, indicar líneas obligadas de construcción de sentido, proporcionando un modelo comunicativo pobre y unidireccional, en el cual un elenco muy reducido de figuras agotan las representaciones de lo social y lo individual, de lo público y lo privado, del presente y de la historia, los discursos de la literatura pueden proponer una práctica justamente de sentidos abiertos, de cadena que no cierra, de figuraciones abundantes [. . .] En escala reducida, la literatura reinstala las condiciones de una situación comunicativa no unidireccional" ("El saber" 7). "If authoritarian discourse is characterized by closing the flow of meanings and, consequently, indicating obligatory lines of constructing meaning, providing an impoverished and unidirectional communicative model, in which a very reduced cast of figures exhausts the representations of the social and the individual, of the public and the private, of the past and of history, the discourses of literature can propose a practice of open meanings, of a chain that doesn't close, of abundant figurations [. . .] On a reduced scale, literature reinstates the conditions of a non-unidirectional communicative situation." In this political environment, dissident literature is that which attacks the realist illusion, foregrounds the contractedness of its own discourse, and interrogates the external reality of the object of its discourse (ibid). It is self-reflexive works that interrogate the real and the illusions of organic connections between fact and discourse that can offer different and dissident versions of truth.

¹⁴⁵ Sarlo also supports this reading, writing in "El saber del texto": "En ese aspecto, el discurso autoritario es transhistórico y transubjetivo, en la medida en que sólo habla de la historia como pasado fundacional que debe ser restaurado, porque en él se forjaron los valores cuya vigencia presente queda fuera de cuestión [. . .] Se trata de una situación de verdad única y sentido único, en la que no hay interpretaciones sino Interpretación" (6) "In this respect, authoritarian discourse is transhistoric and transubjective, to the extent that it only speaks about history as a foundational past that should be restored, because on it will be forged the values whose present validity remains unquestioned [. . .] It is about a situation of only one truth and only one meaning, in which there aren't interpretations but rather Interpretation."

that is both of the within-time-ness of experience *and* of the discursive process through which tradition is constructed through tellings and re-tellings of the past.

When this discursive practice breaks down, so does the communicability of experience. In order for narrative to facilitate the transmission of tradition or experience between generations, it must be generated through what Ricoeur calls the “communal act of repetition” (189): it takes a group of people committed to telling and retelling the past in order to generate tradition as a discursive practice. It is this collective re-writing of history and tradition that begins to falter in a totalitarian age where the state generates a monolithic version of the past.

We see in *El limonero real* that the ability to collectively re-tell the past has been damaged: Wenceslao’s wife lives entirely in the past but is so mired in grief that she barely speaks and refuses to join the family in their New Year’s Eve rituals; Agustín bitterly dwells on a better past while he avoids eye-contact and drowns his regrets in alcohol; Wenceslao participates in the rituals of the present in spite of constantly “seeing” images of the past before his eyes, but he barely speaks to anyone. In fact, dialog is extremely limited in the novel. No one ever directly vocalizes the sense of grief and loss that pervades the novel, and no one ever tells the loss at the center of the story: the death of Wenceslao’s son. We must reconstruct this event from fragmentary images and flashbacks. The only successful act of storytelling the characters participate in is the narration of the watermelon fiasco (88-106). This tale of financial loss and humiliation upon attempting to participate in the exchange economy of the city stands in for all of the other losses and failures that cannot be adequately re-collected through the communal act of storytelling. The fact that these fragments of the past are born silently by isolated individuals is part of what contributes to the crisis of communicability of experience that seems to be at the core of this novel. Thus, the breakdown of vision and intelligibility in *El limonero real* is both a strategy of resistance that attempts to counter the spatialization of the region (and its subsequent political domestication and economic commodification), and an expression of collective trauma¹⁴⁶. It reflects a political situation where there is a widespread inability or unwillingness to engage in the discursive practice of re-writing tradition. The text’s very fragmentation and opacity thus reflect a Benjaminian crisis of communicability of experience, characterized by the break in the inheritability of place-specific ways of life and the ossification of the novel as a form capable of communicating the lived experience of place.

By questioning the transmissibility of rural experience through writing, and through classical realist aesthetics in particular, Saer undermines the rhetoric through which the state might instrumentalize the regional, the rural, and the popular by claiming it as national patrimony. In particular, Saer subverts the qualities of prose that he claims have long made it “el instrumento por excelencia del Estado”: its clarity, coherence, efficiency, pragmatism, certainty, and commitment to the communicable (“La cuestión de la prosa” 57). Yet, I would insist, that in *El limonero real* in Saer’s work more generally, the urge to prove old ways of knowing and telling insufficient is only half the story; the other half lies in the shaky though persistent quest to resuscitate storytelling as a means of knowing our reality by reinventing narrative conventions.

¹⁴⁶ Florencia Garramuño describes Saer’s most experimental prose as seeking to express the unnarratable trauma of the dictatorship (105-106), but she also insists that, “la ininteligibilidad o dificultad de la prosa no debería verse como un modo de enmascaramiento de algo que se querría decir pero que se censura, sino como una forma de resistencia literaria que involucra una transformación de la función de la prosa literaria como fundamentalmente distanciada del Estado” (109). “the unintelligibility or difficulty of prose shouldn’t be seen as a way of masking something that would want to be said but that is censored, but rather as a way of literary resistance that involves a transformation of the function of literary prose as fundamentally distanced from the State.”

Following Benjamin, the challenge for Saer seems to be how to wrest ephemeral experience of everyday life away from positivism, abstraction, and reason without foregoing its communicability¹⁴⁷. The radically experimental use of narrative time that Saer develops in *El limonero real* is animated by the tension between these two seemingly contradictory modes of experience. On the one hand, it expresses the urge to render pre-reflective personal experience (*Erlebnis*) in its immediacy by suspending narrative time, disrupting the comprehensibility of the story, and focusing obsessively on the material and sensorial details of experience. On the other hand, it expresses the urge to impart the storyteller's communicable and narrative experience (*Erfahrung*) by situating each moment in historical time, in plot, and in the context of a story with universal emotional resonance. For Saer, as for Adorno, immediacy of experience is never a "safe haven from history"¹⁴⁸; to the contrary, it retains a historical, if not to say narrative dimension, in which we might locate a longing (and perhaps even a living hope) for the communicability of experience.

Nevertheless, this communicability is by no means guaranteed, let alone delivered to the reader in *El limonero real*, which is an intentionally difficult text that appears to willingly sacrifice comprehensibility in the name of preserving the particularity of experience from generalization and ideological cooption. Doing so lies at the heart of Saer's notion of political commitment:

Preservar la capacidad iluminadora de la experiencia poética, su especificidad como instrumento de conocimiento antropológico, éste es, me parece, el trabajo que todo escritor riguroso debe proponerse. Esta posición, que puede parecer estetizante o individualista, es por el contrario eminentemente política. En nuestra época de reducción ideológica, de planificación represiva, la experiencia estética, que es una de nuestras últimas libertades, es constantemente amenazada. La función principal del artista es entonces la de salvaguardar su especificidad (*El concepto de ficción* 282).¹⁴⁹

As we see, Saer has occasionally felt the need to defend himself against the charge of solipsism, of turning his back on politics. Saer's extreme poetics of rupture in *La mayor* have rightly been called hostile to communication (Oubiña 35), and the author's commitment to preserving artistic autonomy and individuality above all else clearly leads him to privilege first-hand experience of the world (*el conocimiento*) over the knowledge imposed by abstract reason or conventions (*el saber*), even when preserving the singularity of individual experience requires sacrificing its intelligibility.

At the same time, Saer resists the urge to fetishize a negative image of experience as an innocent, pre-representational, or pre-historical moment (just as the rural for Saer does not take place in a static, innocent, or pre-ideological time before history, but rather, within our time.) To

¹⁴⁷ While Saer is more often associated with Adorno's aesthetics of negativity, I foreground Benjamin over Adorno here because Benjamin seems to hold out greater hope that the very poverty of experience in the modern era may yield traces of a more imminent experience that is always already lost to symbolic discourses, whereas Adorno critiques this position as contradictory if not untenable (Jay 331-336).

¹⁴⁸ These are Martin Jay's words, describing Adorno's conception of experience "For Adorno, experience is an openness to the unexpected with its dangers and obstacles, not a safe haven from history, but a reminder of the encounters with otherness and the new that await those who, despite everything, are willing and able to embark on the voyage" (360).

¹⁴⁹ "Preserving the illuminating capacity of poetic experience, its specificity as an instrument of anthropological knowledge, this is, it seems to me, the work that any rigorous writer should set himself. This position, which might seem aestheticizing or individualist, is to the contrary eminently political. In our age of ideological reduction, of repressive planning, aesthetic experience, which is one of our last freedoms, is constantly threatened. The principal function of the artist is then to safeguard its specificity."

grant experience such primacy runs the risk of essentializing experience as originary and pre-ideological state outside of the structures of signification. Saer knows only too well that experience becomes useless and dangerous if it is treated as a pre-conceptual, “authentic bedrock of authentic truth” (Jay 250). This is the problem with discourses of autochthony and leftist politics that hinge on them: they risk reducing “authentic experience” to an essentializing category (i.e. the Latin American experience, the Argentine experience, the rural experience). As Frederic Jameson reminds us, affect may offer a way of conceiving of experience as offering something in excess of reason and ideology without being prior to and wholly separate from language.¹⁵⁰

Reading Saer’s *novela poética* begs the question: isn’t this what poetry has known all along? In praise of Hugo Gola, for example, Saer writes that the best poetry, through its rhythms and “matices afectivos,” becomes “un objeto que no emite mensajes sino, más bien, destellos o radiaciones” (*Trabajos* 165).¹⁵¹ In a similar vein, Francine Masiello argues that reading poetry can be a profoundly embodied experience, as the rhythms, silences, caesuras, and friction between words allow us to feel the materiality of the poem with our bodies and may thus provide “Un vía para encontrar un punto de contacto entre nuestros cuerpos y el cuerpo del poema” (219).¹⁵² Understood as such, communicability, and indeed communion and community, can be achieved through language whether or not it delivers a message intelligible to the intellect.

Rather than fetishizing a negative image of “authentic,” pre-linguistic experience that is always already lost to the page, Saer uses the rhythms, breaks, and repetitions of his language to communicate the precarious and temporally dependent nature of perception itself, which proves unstable “originary” ground on which to erect the representation of experience¹⁵³. Because experience is irredeemably temporal, not even vision, the source of positivistic authority, can capture it as it is. In fact, overreliance on spatially-dominant means of perception may be precisely what makes positivistic discourses such poor vessels for representing experience. If Saer succeeds in disavowing these discourses, he does so not by treating them as secondary to an original and ineffable experience but by suggesting that their ways of knowing are ill-equipped to capture the temporal dimension of experience, which is better served by poetry because its non-linear structure can better register the temporal instability of perception and the richly layered affective textures created by memory’s ever-multiplying incursions into the past.

We might even say that *El limonero real* emphatically insists on the temporal dimension to storytelling that Benjamin laments has been lost in the impatient culture of modernity. At a time when the trend is towards abbreviation and the efficient communication of information, Benjamin fears that the world has lost patience for the iterative accumulation of tellings in the oral tradition and for the time it takes to craft and to read a story that communicates experience

¹⁵⁰ Affect theory has often been critiqued for fetishizing a pre-linguistic, pre-rational, or pre-ideological state (see Ruth Leys), but Jameson’s model posits such differences as antimonies – opposites in tension that create a unity – rather than mutually exclusive binaries. See *The Antimonies of Realism*.

¹⁵¹ “affective shades”, “an object that doesn’t emit messages but, rather, glimmers or radiations.”

¹⁵² “A route to find a point of contact between our bodies and the body of the poem.”

¹⁵³ Saer has written: “El mundo es difícil de percibir. La percepción es difícil de comunicar. Lo subjetivo es inverificable. La descripción es imposible. Experiencia y memoria son inseparables” “The world is difficult to perceive. Perception is difficult to communicate. The subjective is unverifiable. Description is impossible. Experience and memory are inseparable” (Gramuglio *Juan José Saer* 17). Beatriz Sarlo also notes that Saer’s narrative techniques in his most experimental phase interrogate the possibility of perceiving, much less representing the materiality of the world, which is never stable but always caught in the flux of time (“Narrar la percepción” 285).

rather than just information (1968 93). In *El limonero real*, Saer emphatically foregrounds the time it takes to tell a story. In fact, its iterative narrative structure evokes the “slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers” that Benjamin describes as the best metaphor for the “perfect narrative” forged in the oral tradition (ibid). Having composed the novel over nine years, Saer proudly describes his method as necessarily “un trabajo lento y medido” (a slow and measured work). Furthermore, by spreading the narration of a single day out over 240 pages of dense descriptive passages and hard-to-follow temporal shifts, Saer thwarts the reader’s desire to rapidly consume the world narrated and get to “the end.” In fact, given that the defining events of the story related happen outside of the narrative frame, before and after the diegetic time of the novel, we never arrive at any denouement. Even for the reader who is willing to read on without the lure of teleological plot development, *El limonero real* cannot be read in a hurry. The reader who tries will find herself hopelessly disoriented in time and continually thrown back into the past by the narrative’s recursive temporal structure. The time it takes to read is still greater if we take into consideration that following the story requires drawing vertical connections between noncontiguous scenes and that many of the patterns that give the story meaning only emerge after one or more re-readings. In fact, the end of the novel literally sends us back to the beginning, since the final line is identical to the opening line: “Amanece. Y ya está con los ojos abiertos.” This cyclical structure makes the time of reading/re-reading as infinite as the time of writing/re-writing the *zona*.

Conclusions

As we have seen, in Saer’s world, characters who strain their vision in the direction of the horizon see no more than abstract shapes and illusory mirages. While detailed descriptions of surfaces, objects, and mundane actions abound, one gets the sense that nothing that matters can be seen, at least not immediately. While a visual gaze isolated from the flow of time (such as that of the still camera) produces deathly stillness and a suffocating sense of immobility, the temporal dimension of more-than-looking – that is “seeing” by gathering together fragments from memory, by discerning patterns through the cyclical movement of time, by projecting future actions based on deep familiarity and intuition – re-animates the world depicted and renders it intimate and human. The text is constantly performing both gestures: suspending narrative time in a visual gaze, and re-animating it through temporal shifts and repetitions. In keeping with Jameson’s model of affect, Saer privileges description over narration as a means of conjuring the immediacy of experience, but he reanimates these isolated stills by returning to them again and again; the incessant layering of iterations safeguards against the reification of any one snapshot of *la zona* and requires that the reader glean her *conocimiento* of this world over time.

Thus, even as Saer tears to sunders the illusions of comprehensive vision and temporal continuity that make traditional realism possible, he lures us into a different way of looking that aspires neither to totality nor to mastery, but through its patience, its modesty, and its resignation to its own precariousness and contingency on time, achieves the transtemporal vision of intimate *conocimiento*. This way of more-than-looking knows through the recursive logic of day-in-day-out familiarity rather than through totalizing vision. It conjures for the reader non-narrative, lyric moments connected through an iterative structure, which suggests historical time may not be as linear and unidirectional as modernity’s progress narratives suggest.

The unique temporal structure of *El limonero real* imbues the rural world depicted with a particularly eerie sense of tragedy that comes with the ability of the present to anticipate its future reification as an archaic past. While the novel provides ample evidence that the way of life

of the peasants and fisherman represented is on the brink of extinction, it also reminds us that this way of life is not dead yet. By continuing to open up the within-time-ness of experience through repetition, the text refuses to surrender any moment, past or present, to the archaic. At the same time, there is a sense in which the present is always already being fixed in a gaze that strips it of time.

Saer's extremely experimental poetics are geared in large part towards safeguarding *la zona* from being misappropriated by centrist ideology or reductively consumed as quaint or exotic. Saer's work thus provides a new model of regionalist literature as an extreme poetic and political position of autonomy, one that resists complicity with forces of the state and the market alike in order to remain loyal to the region as it exists in the unstable and subjective realms of memory and poetry. Yet this mode of resistance is hardly triumphant: the same flickering quality that makes Saer's *zona* so dynamic, so living, so intransigent to commodification and ideological manipulation also reflects its precarity. Saer's experimental regionalism thus performs the paradox of avant-garde poetics as a strategy of resistance: the same defamiliarizing gestures that allow poetic language to outpace ideological and market forces bring it closer and closer to an abyss of meaning and communicability. Saer's flirtation with illegibility in his most experimental works thus gestures to a crisis of representation wherein experience is less and less communicable, wherein new technologies of representation threaten to bypass the arduous process through which experiential knowledge of place is gained, and wherein rural ways of life may not be transmissible for much longer.

Chapter Three

Back, Back into the Backlands: the Regressive Temporality of *Grande sertão: veredas*

While João Guimarães Rosa's early works such as *Sagarana* (1947) could conceivably be assimilated into the milieu of the naturalistic regionalist literature amid which they arose, Rosa's masterpieces, *Grande sertão: veredas* and *Corpo de baile* (both published in 1956), are celebrated for decidedly leaving behind the provincialism, naturalism, and local color associated with regionalist literature and taking on universal themes through sophisticated and innovative formal means. Though there can be no denying Rosa's investment in representing universal human experience nor his mastery of literary form, I find that this particular narrative of Rosa's significance in the evolution of Brazilian literature feeds into a problematic trend throughout the Americas in the mid-twentieth century: that of reducing literary regionalism to a pejorative designation, a foil against which to celebrate the modern, the cosmopolitan, the aesthetically innovative.

In this chapter, I argue that the spiraling, recursive narrative structure of the *Grande sertão: veredas* subverts the teleological model of history that would displace the space of the sertão into a pre-modern past and a parallel narrative in literary periodization that would dismiss regionalist literature as a naïve or outdated mode of representation. I am far from the first to note the regressive, backwards-looking impulses in Guimarães Rosa's major novel: the author himself has insisted that he is more of a reactionary than a revolutionary (Coutinho 1983), and the resistance to closure and elements of melancholia and *saudade* in his work have been amply theorized.¹⁵⁴ Nor am I the first to suggest that the author's noteworthy formal innovations contain a political critique that is surprisingly radical coming from an author who has vociferously disavowed the notion of politically engaged literature.¹⁵⁵ What I add to the already-rich critical conversation on *Grande sertão: veredas* is an approach that brings these two veins of criticism together to locate the radical politics of the text *in its reluctance to abandon the past*, a reluctance I trace in the form of the novel – in its non-linearity, its immersive perspective, and its predilection for narrative suspension over narrative completion.

I see Guimarães Rosa's most radical intervention in *Grande sertão: veredas* as the way the text makes space for looking backwards in a political climate eager to figure Brazil as a forward-looking nation.¹⁵⁶ In contradistinction to the nostalgia of romantic portraits of the region, however, Guimarães Rosa's works do not figure rural Brazil as an ahistorical landscape lost to modernity nor as an autochthonous site of origins for the nation. Instead, Guimarães Rosa collapses the distance that would separate the landscape of the past from the experience of the present. His sertão, like his language, is culturally and temporally heterogeneous, containing

¹⁵⁴ See in particular the work of Rowland, Lages, Librandi-Rocha, and Carmello. It is important to note that the theories of melancholia and *saudade* that have most informed my reading do not equate looking backwards simply with nostalgia for the past. Informed by queer theory, the melancholic temporality I describe is not reducible to a longing to return to the past; rather, it expresses an unwillingness to abandon cherished experiences to the past, as demanded by teleologically-oriented narrative.

¹⁵⁵ Willi Bolle's reading of *Grande sertão: veredas* is the most notable example of criticism that locates radical politics in Rosa's work. See Günter Lorenz's interview for Rosa's views on politically committed literature.

¹⁵⁶ Guimarães Rosa is not the only one to do so at this historical juncture. We might also consider the return of the archaic and the irrational in the work of Clarice Lispector. Yet both of these authors, central as they are to Brazilian literature in the second half of the twentieth century, are famously exceptional cases, difficult to assimilate into any one line of literary filiation.

elements of the indigenous as well as the foreign, of the modern as well as the archaic. It is, moreover, a textual palimpsest in which we can discover traces of previous literary *sertões*, from that of Euclides da Cunha to that of Graciliano Ramos. His works, then, for all of their groundbreaking formal innovations, does not allow us to leave behind regionalist literature anymore than they allow us to “sair do sertão.” I read *Grande sertão: veredas* in particular as pushing back against the teleological account of Brazilian modernity that presents the sertão (and its literature) as an archaic and backwards site of origins. Against this narrative, I argue, Rosa’s text insists on the continued relevance of the sertão in the Brazilian imaginary.

Central to my reading is the contrast between two epistemological configurations of the sertão: the *landscape* of the sertão, which, following Raymond Williams’s definition of landscape, is a visual tableau produced through separation, observation, and visual consumption (120-121), and the *travessia* of the sertão – the blind, immersive act of moving through its time-space. The word “travessia” – crossing, journey, passage – appears as a refrain of sorts throughout *Grande sertão: veredas*; it is also the famously enigmatic last word of the novel: “Existe é homem humano. Travessia” (624). Through the concept of the *travessia*, I argue, Rosa reconfigures the sertão, making of it no longer a timeless landscape to be visually beheld from a distance but, rather, a baroquely folded temporal structure to be traversed. Configured from the internal perspective of one who is endlessly crossing its vast expanse, the sertão becomes spatially and temporally boundless. Rosa’s insistence on the continued openness and presentness of the sertão is politically significant because it challenges nationalistic progress narratives that seek to displace the backwardness and underdevelopment associated with this region into the past in order to articulate Brazil as a modern nation.

In the first section of this chapter, I argue that *Grande sertão: veredas* challenges the cultural construct of the sertão as modernity’s other. I begin by surveying the scholarship that reads *Grande sertão: veredas* as revising the predominant progress narratives of two formative historical moments alluded to in Rosa’s fiction: the defeat of Canudos in 1897, and the launching of Juscelino Kubitschek’s “Plan of National Development” in 1956, the same year that Rosa published *Grande sertão: veredas*. I go on to suggest that what Rosa’s challenges to each of these nationalistic progress narratives have in common is a refusal to delineate a spatial or temporal border that bounds the sertão, separating it from Brazil’s urban coast and from Brazil’s modern identity. In refusing to visualize the sertão from a cartographic or aerial perspective, Rosa’s text insists that we dwell in the *travessia* – in the fluid experience of crossing over between worlds and historical epochs. From this perspective – immersive, itinerant, and always in flux – it becomes impossible to identify one place or one moment where a definitive limit is crossed, and we are confronted instead with the continuity between sertão and civilization, between tradition and modernity. This dissolution of the rural-urban binary to reveal the imbrication of the sertão in the city and visa-versa lies at the heart of the particular form of Critical Regionalism I see at play in Rosa’s text.

In the second section, I take as my point of departure Clara Rowland’s reading of Riobaldo’s narrative as resisting the closure imposed on it by the form of the novel. I then go on to argue that Rosa’s work expresses an ambivalent longing to return to a state of suspension and potentiality that is incompatible with the entrance into any totalizing and teleologically oriented narrative. In dialog with Peter Brooks and D.A. Miller, I argue that in the perennial lure of this state of suspension we might locate a vain desire to continue to inhabit the fluidity of experience from which we are inevitably sealed off by narrative’s promise of *telos*/ threat of death. The openness of the sertão exemplifies this mode of suspension, which might also describe the errant

life of *jagunçagem*, the ambiguity of the love interest, Diadorim's sexual identity, and, perhaps, the elusive "ficar sendo" that Riobaldo desires above all else in the scene of the pact (436).¹⁵⁷ Riobaldo's reluctance to abandon the suspension, openness, and fluidity of the *travessia* is reflected in the expansiveness of the text as well as its recourse to the cyclical and non-narrative forms of poetry and song. As such, I argue, Rosa's text expresses a peculiar form of melancholia that yearns not for the past *per se* but, rather, for an outside to the linear march of time, narrative, and history: a longing not for an Edenic fantasy of lost origins but, rather, for a utopic hiatus that would grant a sense of eternity to the present moment.¹⁵⁸

The third and final section of the chapter traces the particular mechanism through which Riobaldo's narrative thwarts teleological readings and redirects us *back* away from scenes of finality and closure and into the undecidable *travessia* of experience: the narrative has a way of hollowing out the climatic scenes that supposedly mark cataclysmic changes in Riobaldo's life, namely that of the dubiously-consummated pact with the devil and that of the final battle in which Diadorim perishes. Given the amount of suspense and build-up that precede each of these

¹⁵⁷ In the scene of the pact, Riobaldo asks: "E, o que era que eu queria? Ah, acho que não queria mesmo nada, de tanto que eu queria só tudo. Uma coisa, a coisa, esta coisa: eu somente queria era – ficar sendo!" (436). "And what was it that I wanted? Ah, from wanting so much of everything, I don't think I really wanted anything. Just one thing: I wanted only this – to be myself!" (343). Taylor and Onís translate this key phrase as "to be myself" (343), but it is closer to "to keep being." The difference between the notion of coherent identity posited by the phrase "to be myself" and the notion of persistent (but not necessarily immutable nor self-identical) existence implied by "ficar sendo" is important. In her reading of Agamben, Judith Butler suggests that we might understand "being" as "precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation" (*Psychic Life* 131). Critic Joyce Anitagrace has also made this connection between the phrase "ficar sendo" and Butler's theory of subjection. See Section II of this chapter for a longer discussion of Butler on the unity of the subject as it relates to Riobaldo's narrative.

A note on translations: Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. Trans. James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963. I have frequently added my own translation of passages where I have found the Taylor and Onís translation leaves out or fails to capture the linguistic features I wish to analyze. It should be noted that this translation, the only translation of *Grande sertão: veredas* published in English to date, omits entire phrases of Rosa's language; these omissions cumulatively abridge the text by more than one-hundred pages. While generally tactful in his appraisal of translations of his work, the author has lamented that, in this particular translation, too many concessions were made to make the work palatable to a North American audience: "[...] reconheço que temos de fazer sacrifícios. Mas, não tanto quanto os que se verificaram na tradução americana. Acho que eles simplificaram demais, em certas passagens. Principalmente, cortaram muita coisa boa e muita coisa importante" "I recognize that we have to make sacrifices. But not as many as can be seen in the American translation. I believe they oversimplify, in certain passages. Principally, they cut may good and important things" (*Cadernos de Literatura Brasileira* 113, translation my own). Rosa cites the elimination of metaphysical passages, descriptions of nature, and "poesia implícita" as principal among these unnecessary sacrifices (*ibid*). In my work with the two versions of the text, I have found that the English translation also irons out much of the temporal ambiguity that is of interest to me in the original. Over-correcting perhaps in my own translations, I have leaned towards being as literal as possible in translating the idiosyncrasies of Rosa's syntax and use of verb tense.

¹⁵⁸ Beyond troubling the official Brazilian national formation narrative, as Willi Bolle has argued it does, the melancholic narrative structure of *Grande sertão: veredas* contributes to the text's infamous ambiguity with regards to gender and sexuality and, as such, must be factored into any future queer readings of Rosa's text. The dearth of queer readings of *Grande sertão: veredas* is astounding given that one of the novel's primary themes is the guilt and shame that Riobaldo feels over his erotically-charged love for Diadorim, who he believes (and leads the audience to believe) is a man for the vast majority of the story. Diadorim is revealed at the end of the novel to be a woman who has been passing as a man, but as I argue in the next section of this chapter, this revelation comes too late to fully lay to rest the homoerotic tension that animates the novel for over six-hundred pages, during which time Riobaldo presents his "impossible love" as a man. See Balderston and Anitagrace for the most substantial queer readings of the text to date.

scenes, these moments in the narrative are frustratingly opaque. Because these scenes yield so little to hermeneutic probing, our attention is inevitably deflected back to earlier scenes of apparent quiescence, often on the eve (*na véspera*) of a major event, where we discover the loss, death, or betrayal to come is always already unfurling in a latent state. In addition to compounding the sense that there is no “límite certo,” no definitive place nor moment when everything changes, this narrative structure further thwarts a teleological reading of the novel because it requires the reader to turn her attention away from the denouement and back to the suspension of the “meanwhile.”

In sum, I argue that just as it throws into crisis our ability to map the sertão and mark its borders, *Grande sertão: veredas* throws into crisis our ability to segment the narrative, and, by extension, time itself, into discreet periods: before and after, past and present, then and now. Closely related to the novel’s refusal of finality and closure, this insistence on the fluidity and unboundedness of time allows Rosa to keep open and inhabitable that which a teleological account of history would deem foreclosed and extinct: the sertão and the unexhausted potentiality represented by the *travessia*.

I. “A gente tem que sair do sertão!”

“Agora o mundo quer ficar sem sertão” (“Now the world wants to be without a sertão”), observes Riobaldo, the narrator of *Grande sertão: veredas* (305). Indeed, the lifetime of Guimarães Rosa, was marked by a series of political movements intent upon figuring Brazil as a nation “sem sertão,” a modern nation that had vanquished and left behind the elements of barbarity, backwardness, and unruliness for which the sertão stands. In *Grande sertão: veredas*, the would-be-reformer Zé Bebelo embodies this progressive sentiment: “A gente tem que sair do sertão!”, he exclaims in the scene of his trial (294). These words could well serve as the slogan for each of the many modernization campaigns that characterized Brazil’s First (1889-1930) and Second (1930-1963) Republics. From the military campaign to suppress (and eventually eradicate) the “atavistic” religious colony at Canudos in 1897, to the use of the call for *ordem e progresso* to consolidate central power under Getúlio Vargas’s *Estado Novo* in the 1930s, to Juscelino Kubitschek’s decision to construct a new, modernist state capital, Brasília, in the interior state of Goiás in the late 1950s, the Brazilian government has, again and again, cited the need to lift the country out of the barbarity and backwardness represented by the sertão as the impetus behind its moves to consolidate central authority.

It is important to emphasize that in the rhetoric of progress and modernization invoked by such governmental programs, the Brazilian sertão is as much a symbolic construct as it is a real geographical referent. The term refers to the vast, semi-arid central plains that span much of the northeast of Brazil and parts of the central states of Minas Gerais and Goiás. This region has been historically underdeveloped and impoverished, and twentieth-century Brazil saw wave after wave of internal immigration from the northeast to the more prosperous urban centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo on the southeast coast. Yet, as the history of the word belies, to speak of the sertão is not simply to reference rural Bahia or northern Minas Gerais but, rather, to speak of the way geographically and culturally remote areas are figured by the cosmopolitan imagination.

“Sertão” derives from “desertão,” meaning “big desert,” but rather than simply describing a particular topographical or ecological zone, the term is inherently relational, connoting inaccessibility and distance from central power. The research of Gustavo Barroso (1983) reveals that the original meaning of the word, as used by Portuguese explorers in Africa, was less

indicative of desert and dryness than of a remote, interior location: “sertão” originally signified distance from the coast and named a remote area at the center of the territory (Bolle *Grande sertão: veredas*, 48). João Adolfo Hansen claims that for early Portuguese settlers in Brazil, the word “sertão” effectively names an epistemological and legal void: “the space where the laws of the Portuguese Crown are not enforced [. . .] empty space – which is identified in those centuries with savagery and barbarism of beasts and Indians” (“Grande sertão: veredas” 3). In more general terms, “sertão” comes to signify the unruliness that always hovers at the outer reaches of the power of the sovereign or state; marking the far frontier, it is both a threat and a necessary other whose existence consolidates the fiction of the sovereign state. The use of the term in modern Brazil retains these connotations: to say “sertão” is to suggest a wild and dangerous hinterland, a distant place of misery and backwardness barely reached by the inroads of civilization.

The sertão conjured by João Guimarães Rosa in *Grande sertão: veredas* complicates many of the negative stereotypes that accompany the term: Riobaldo describes a sertão that is at times brutally violent and at times serenely pastoral, at times remote and mythic and at times messily imbricated in the power structures of modern capitalism, at times rendered senselessly savage and at times mediated by a culturally sophisticated, and *lettered* subjectivity.¹⁵⁹ In spite of its contradictions, it remains a “sertão” in the original sense of the word insofar as it exists outside of the authority of the federal state. The sertão of Riobaldo’s youth and young adulthood (set in the late nineteenth century) is populated around the edges by *fazendeiros* (landowners and ranchers) who hire bands of loyal *jagunços* (bandits) to protect their plantations and economic interests, but the interior of the sertão is inhabited only by small, primitive communities and roamed by errant bands of rogue bandits who answer to no one but their *chefe de jagunços* (band leader). As such, the sertão is governed by a quasi-feudal order rather than by the modern state. Government troops enter this sertão from time to time in the narrative, but they never succeed in establishing a permanent presence.

The character Zé Bebelo, who pronounces the need to “sair do sertão,” is dubiously allied with these centrist forces. Though it is hard to pin down exactly where his loyalties lie from moment to moment, Zé Bebelo’s greatest ambitions are to become a government deputy and to bring order and progress to the sertão in the form of rule of law, modern infrastructure, and progressive education. As such, he is often read as a figure for the modernizing forces of the Republic; he even signs his letters “Ordem e Progresso.”¹⁶⁰ Ironically, however, Zé Bebelo realizes that the only way to put an end to the barbarous system of *jagunçagem* that currently governs the sertão is to become a *chefe de jagunços* himself: to form his own band and combat rival bands on their terms. He expresses the paradox of having to civilize through uncivilized methods when he is on trial for his life after having been captured by the band of Joca Ramiro. In order to make sense of the contradiction he faces, Zé Bebelo explains: “A gente tem de sair do sertão! Mas só se sai do sertão é tomando conta dele a dentro . . .” (294-295).¹⁶¹ Leaving

¹⁵⁹ Walnice Nogueira Galvão notes the importance of Riobaldo being a *lettered jagunço* and being called “professor”: this distinction disrupts a classical regionalist or anthropological model where there is a marked contrast between the intellectual and the native informant on the level of language (“Rapsodo” 165).

¹⁶⁰ Brenno Kenji Kaneyasu Maranhão reads Zé Bebelo as representing “Comtean positivism, as an advocate of progress a defender of the Republican centralist ideal, appearing thus in frontal opposition to the federalist tradition around which the world of the *sertanejos* and the *jagunços* turned” (85).

¹⁶¹ “We have got to wake up the sertão! But the only way to wake the sertão is to do so from within” (232). Note that the verb in the original is not “despertar” (to wake) but “sair de” (to depart from, leave, or get out from inside of). Literally, “We have to get out of the sertão! But the only way to get out of the sertão is by grasping it from within.”

(behind) the sertão ironically requires plunging oneself into the heart of its brutalizing culture and dirtying one's hands by abiding by its moral codes.

To a certain extent, Zé Bebelo's tactic of immersing himself in the barbarity of *jagunçagem* in order to put an end to it and pull the country out of the sertão proves successful. In the scene of the trial, he turns his defeat in arms into a victory for the rule of law and reason: he successfully convinces his captors to give him a trial rather than killing him on the spot. In so doing, he forces the *jagunços* to articulate the largely unspoken codes by which they are governed and to rationally apply them to his case (272-297). At the same time, however, he ultimately receives clemency only because the *jagunços* agree that he has waged battle in accordance with their codes of conduct: according to *a lei da jagunçagem*, there is no crime in going to war and killing one's enemies. As such, it is only Zé Bebelo's successful assimilation into the kill-or-be-killed culture he wishes to terminate that allows him to escape alive. The paradox of being forced to use means that seem to lead away from the end goal – “A gente tem que sair do sertão!” – becomes even more evident when Zé Bebelo later returns to the sertão and takes over as *chefe de jagunços* for the late Joca Ramiro, thus assuming the role of his former captor and further complicating our ability to read him as an unequivocal enemy of the system of *jagunçagem*.

As the case of Zé Bebelo illustrates, seeking pull the country out of the sertão by plumbing its depths, and thus risking becoming *sertanejo* oneself, is a dubiously successful strategy. On the one hand, Zé Bebelo ultimately prevails in his quest to “sair do sertão”: he transitions from the world of arms to the world of letters to become a city-dwelling lawyer. By the time he recounts his story as an old man, our narrator-protagonist Riobaldo, too, has transitioned from being a *jagunço* to being a landowner and a storyteller. Moreover, we can gather from Riobaldo's references to how times have changed since his youth that *jagunçagem* has become a thing of the past; the modernizing forces for which Zé Bebelo stands seem to have ushered in a new era. On the other hand, the extremely non-linear temporal structure of Riobaldo's narrative complicates our ability to leave the past in the past, suggesting that, as he says of the sertão, everything we have ostensibly left behind lives on “dentro da gente” (“within us”) (325).

Riobaldo's narrative effectively thwarts any teleological reading that seeks an end – either of the sertão or of the story related – and, instead, asks the reader to inhabit the time, space and lived experience of the sertão from within. Because there is no external viewpoint from which to survey the sertão, the only hope of mastering, containing, or subduing it is from within. To complicate things further, our narrator Riobaldo's commitment to mastering the sertão through his narrative is plagued with ambivalence. Instead of charting a unidirectional linear trajectory that leads from the barbarity of the sertão to the modern nation, the extremely nonlinear narrative structure of *Grande sertão: veredas* traces a recursive path, where incessantly going back to the sertão and back into the past becomes the only way of understanding the present. In addition to foreclosing any act of external, objective moral judgment on this world, submerging the reader the “tempo de jagunços” in this way restores, at least for the considerable duration of the narrative, the unboundedness – in spatial and temporal terms – of the very sertão that reformers like Zé Bebelo seek to symbolically enclose and historically terminate. For the reader caught up in the *redemoinho* (whirlwind) of Riobaldo's recursive narrative, the sertão is all-encompassing, “sem termo” and “sem lugar” (331, 370).

To insist that the sertão is still with us in this way, as a time-space that can be re-entered indefinitely, is to question the teleological model of history upon which Brazil's national origins

myth is founded: when the landscape of the sertão can no longer be sequestered in a mythic, pre-modern past, it ceases to serve as a projected site of origins that can be claimed by the nation or as a foil against which to measure the progress of modernity. In *O Brasil não é longe daqui*, Flora Süssekind writes that Brazilian national literature has always sought to figure Brazil as a pure and natural landscape in which to locate the nation's autochthonous origins. Writing the nation becomes "um movimento de retorno" that involves going back to fabricated origins, to a fantasy of an atemporal landscape untouched by history or European presence (37). Ironically, notes Süssekind, this fantasy is mediated by the European gaze, which in colonial travel writing, described Brazil as a timeless and virgin landscape (17). As Raymond Williams emphasizes in *The Country and the City*, constructing the myth of such an Edenic past necessarily involves whitewashing history, excising political and economic tensions, and imagining "not a living [. . .] but an enameled world" (18). Moreover, the romantic mystification of real social relations necessary to imagine a more pristine and "natural" world often belies a conservative ideology aimed to reinforce "certain kinds of order, certain social hierarchies and moral stabilities" in times of social upheaval (36). Along these lines, Süssekind argues that the fantasy of a pure and natural Brazilian landscape, which is reinforced through romantic nationalistic literature, has long been used by the dominant classes to consolidate their authority. As such, writing a temporally and culturally hybrid Brazilian landscape as Guimarães Rosa does in *Grande sertão: veredas* is inherently subversive. When the sertão ceases to be a desert landscape and is depicted as peopled by heterogeneous cultures and times, it can no longer be banished from the contemporary moment and displaced into an imagined past. When the sertão continues to act on the present and to interact with the forces of civilization and modernity that claim to have definitively conquered it, we must question celebratory progress narratives as well as nostalgic portraits of lost origins, along with the political authority such narratives have historically bolstered.

A travessia

"Digo: o real não está na saída nem na chegada: ele se dispõe para a gente é no meio da travessia" – Riobaldo (80).¹⁶²

Exemplifying the slippery multivalence for which Rosa's language is known, the leitmotif of the *travessia* is associated with the sertão, with rivers, with danger, with Diadorim, with the devil, with courage, with repetition, with temporal duration, with the difficulty of narrating the past, and with life itself. This seemingly all-encompassing term can be said to definitively exclude only two things: the beginning and the end. The *travessia* is by definition what lies between departure and arrival. One way of understanding the *travessia* is thus as a kind of spatial and temporal in-between space, the fluid expanse contained between two banks of a river or between the beginning and the end of a journey, a narrative, or a life.

Guimarães Rosa's characters frequently choose to inhabit this in-between space, as we will see for example in the case of the boy in "As margens da alegria" who delights in the borderlands between city and sertão. The most iconic example of a character embracing such a liminal position is the father in "A Terceira margem do rio", who departs in a canoe only to remain floating in the river indefinitely. Guimarães Rosa's *terceira margem* has often been taken up as a figure of hybridity, and as such, it may indeed be useful as an alternative to the dichotomies that fail to fully account for Brazilian social reality (and for that matter, those of the

¹⁶² "I mean, the truth is not in the setting out nor in the arriving: it comes to us in the middle of the journey" (52).

Americas more generally): civilization and *barbarie*, the European and the indigenous, the universal and the regional, the modern and the archaic, etc.¹⁶³ I am privileging the term *travessia* over *terceira margem*, however, in part because it is the term invoked explicitly and repeatedly in *Grande sertão: veredas* and in part because I am interested in the *temporal* in-between it evokes: a time-space suspended between beginning and ending. Though it is impossible to talk about the tension between *a cidade* and *o sertão* without talking about spatial and cultural hybridity, the metaphysical shift I find most radical in *Grande sertão: veredas* is that of moving from a worldview that sees time unfolding in discreet chapters or epochs bounded by diachronic breaks to one that suspends teleological progression out of interest in the “meanwhile.”¹⁶⁴

The sertão has often been imagined as such a hiatus. Euclides Da Cunha may have been the first to describe the sertão in this way, figuring it as “uma interrupção, uma cesura, no tempo e no espaço” (Brizuela 173). Yet, as Vincenzo Arsillo points out, Rosa’s sertão is both “in a state external to time” (285) and pregnant with all time, including the time of its future death (291-293). How can the time-space of the sertão and the narrative traversing it be at once infinite and circumscribed, suspended in time but also doomed to end? Marília Librandi-Rocha’s discussion of Guimarães Rosa’s “poetics of latency” offers one way of making sense of this paradox: the sertão, she argues, is “a true landscape of latencies” (“Nuvens” 3), meaning that it contains not only the past, present, and future, but also an infinite array of possibilities in an as-of-yet unrealized state. In “time in a state of latency,” Librandi-Rocha posits, each moment contains all that has come before and all that is to come. When each moment already contains the future in a latent state, the ending (including the death it brings) is, as Riobaldo will insist of his own narrative, always already contained in the middle.

Even though every moment of suspension contains a future death, always already unfurling like a germinated seed beneath the soil, the latent state of suspension may still be preferable to the entrance into teleological narrative. In the short story “Nenhum, nenhuma,” for example, the love story is indefinitely forestalled when the beloved *moça* disappoints her suitor by insisting that they “wait, until the time of death” to be together, thus choosing to “remain in a state of latency, waiting, in suspense, in order to continue pulsing infinitely” (Librandi-Rocha “Nuvens” 8). This story, set in an unnamed and distant pastoral setting seems to dramatize what Renati Poggioli describes as the insistence of the pastoral genre on “the preliminaries of love rather than on its final consummation.”¹⁶⁵ In *Grande sertão: veredas* as well, love flourishes in a time-space of narrative suspension rather than narrative development.

¹⁶³ Ettore Finazzi-Agrò draws the connection between the suspension of the *travessia* and the suspension of the *terceira margem* and sees both as expressions of hybridism, to which Rosa’s texts, like Riobaldo, are attracted. He points to Diadorim (both man and woman, both amorous and diabolical) and Hermógenes (whose name derives from Hermaphrodes) as figures of hybridity; he also points to the narrative’s habit of continuously crossing and therefore abolishing boundaries and to the hybrid nature of Rosa’s language (47-56). Marli Fantini is among the many critics to understand Guimarães Rosa’s work as offering a third term between regionalism and universal literature, arguing that *Grande Sertão: veredas* shakes off cartographic notion of the border and posits the *fronteira* as a hybrid space of blending rather than a border between discreet and different places, times, cultural categories (153). She also reads Riobaldo as a figure of transculturation in Ángel Rama’s sense (79).

¹⁶⁴ The longing for such a state of suspension is also thematized in spatial and temporal terms in “Os Cimos.” As Marília Librandi-Rocha notes, the young protagonist of this story “wishes to stay in the ‘meanwhile’, in [the] aerial space” represented by an airplane journey, which is “lived as a continuous state in-between, high up: neither here nor there” (“Sertão” 72).

¹⁶⁵ Poggioli goes on to conclude: “the pastoral does not like happy endings as such precisely because it does not like happiness to end” (qtd. in Alpers 335).

Some of the questions raised by reading Rosa's sertão as a time-space of latency include: Can the dreaded ending (of life, of love, of narrative) be indefinitely forestalled as long as we are willing to remain suspended in a latent state, allowing narrative potential to remain hidden and unrealized? Is latency a tenable alternative to the problems posed by closure? Can techniques of narrative suspension succeed in resisting the death, ossification, and reification of the past that are inevitable consequences of teleological narrative, and, if so, at what cost? What must be sacrificed or must remain veiled, silenced, and unnarrated in order for this state of potentiality to be indefinitely preserved? And, conversely, what must be sacrificed in order to activate narrative potential, enter into a teleological narrative, and reach the longed-for denouement?

Ultimately, I read Riobaldo's pact with the devil and cardinal sin as being no more and no less than the sacrifice of this state of latency – choosing instead action and teleological narrative momentum – in order to finally achieve the goal of killing his nemesis Hermógenes. In order to succeed in this endeavor, ironically undertaken on Diadorim's behalf, Riobaldo has to forego the quiet suspension of the pastoral intervals he once enjoyed with Diadorim in order to enter into narrative structure that can only bring Diadorim closer and closer to death. The price of this entrance into teleological narrative is not only Diadorim's death, but also the eventual deaths of the no-longer-infinitely-expansive narrative, *travessia*, and sertão. In the reluctance on the part of narrator and narrative to arrive at these deaths – of Diadorim, of *jagunçagem*, of Brazil's wild sertão – lies a desire to continue to dwell in the latent potential of a less-than-fully-expended narrative, to regressively return to and indefinitely inhabit the space of suspension represented by the *travessia*.

The subversive continuity of the *travessia*

The *travessia*, which we might also translate as “crossing-over,” is an inherently transgressive act that connotes overstepping boundaries, but the most subversive feature of concept of the *travessia* in Rosa's text may be the way it posits a time-space without boundaries at all.¹⁶⁶ Limitless and fluid, the *travessia* shares in the unfixable ambiguity associated with Diadorim, the devil, the sertão, and water. The unboundedness of the *travessia* and its temporality of perpetual repetition and return threaten to make of it a narrative black hole, a “buracão do tempo” (439), akin to what Peter Brooks calls the “inescapable middle [. . .] suggestive of the demonic” (100). Yet, for Riobaldo (and arguably for Rosa's fiction more generally), in contradistinction to Brooks' model of narrative, the desire to escape the demonic “buracão,” or perhaps “redemunho,” of the *travessia* is ambivalent at best.¹⁶⁷ Or rather, there is no escape conceivable, because just as Rosa's “sertão é o tamanho do mundo” (89), the duration of the *travessia* is the same as the duration of life itself: “Travessia perigosa, mas é a da vida. Sertão que se alteia e se abaixa. Mas as curvas dos campos estendem sempre para mais longe.

¹⁶⁶ Literally meaning “crossing,” but also translated as “journey” and “passage,” *travessia* comes from the Latin prefix, *Trans* – meaning “beyond”, “across”, or “over.” In the same linguistic family as “transgression”, *travessia* is closely related to the Portuguese words *travesso*, a naughty child, *travessura*, a prank or form of mischief, and *travessa*, a side-street or detour (i.e. off of the straight and narrow path). The word also evokes a gendered form of crossing over in its similarity to *travesti*, transvestite, whose root – the French verb *se travestir*, to disguise oneself or change one's apparel – is also the etymological root of the English “travesty” (Skeat). This etymological association with cross-dressing as a form of deceit and social taboo can be no coincidence: Rosa could have just as easily chosen to use *viagem* or *passagem* to describe Riobaldo's literal and metaphorical journeys, but, in a novel principally concerned with the multiple interdiction surrounding a man falling in love with a woman who is passing as a man, it is the word “*travessia*” that becomes a recurrent motif.

¹⁶⁷ See Brooks 334

Ali envelhece vento” (558).¹⁶⁸ In this sentence, the sertão, the *travessia*, and life itself collapse into one perilous time-space bounded only by the curving of the horizon.

The same qualities of openness, unboundedness, and indeterminacy that allow the *travessia* to accommodate utopic possibilities also make it precarious, much like the itinerant and stateless life of *jagunçagem*. The blind, irrational, immersiveness of the *travessia* underlies Riobaldo’s refrain: “viver é muito perigoso.” The novel contains several prominent and perilous literal crossings that remind us of the inherent danger of the *travessia*: the formative event (for Riobaldo and for the narrative) of crossing the Rio São Francisco in a canoe with Diadorim as an adolescent, the two crossings of the parched Liso do Sussuarão (the aborted attempt under the leadership of Medeira Vaz and the later, successful crossing under Riobaldo’s leadership), the transgressive crossing of foreboding barriers to enter the “fundo do sertão,” and the crossing of the plague-stricken town of Sucruíú in silent prayer. The dangers of the *travessia* do not diminish its appeal for Riobaldo, and, in fact, as we see in *o primeiro fato*, the courage to face the *travessia* is a large part of what he finds attractive in and seeks to emulate from Diadorim.¹⁶⁹

Diadorim embodies the courage required to undertake the *travessia*, understood not only as a risky journey or literal crossing but also as an inherently transgressive *crossing over*: the fluidity of the *travessia*, like the fluidity of Diadorim’s gender, reveals the boundaries that uphold binary identities to be porous and shifting.¹⁷⁰ Many of the literal *travessias* narrated represent the crossing of borders between different spaces and times (i.e. from ally territory into enemy territory, from relatively civilized rural life into utter barbarity, from youthful innocence into the vocation of *jagunçagem*, from modernity into archaic time), but the impossibility of measuring the distance or the duration of the *travessia* in any terms but those of subjective experience calls into question the fixity, and perhaps the very existence of the spatial-temporal demarcations it supposedly crosses.

These include temporal borders, as we see that different times do not succeed one another, but rather, coexist side-by-side. For example, the *catrumanos* inhabiting the *fundo do sertão*, with their archaic currency, weapons, and speech, and their primitive lifestyle coexist with, and in fact are exploited by the modern, capitalistic projects of Seu Habão and the progressive mission of Zé Bebelo. As Finazzi-Agrò argues, *Grande sertão: veredas* confronts us not with two different times or spaces but, rather, with the impossibility of delineating between

¹⁶⁸ “A journey through it is dangerous, as is the journey through life. The sertão rises and descends. But the curves of its plains extend even farther. The wind grows old there . . .” (439).

¹⁶⁹ “O primeiro fato” refers to the chronologically first story that Riobaldo tells: the crossing of the Rio São Francisco with Diadorim/Reinaldo as an adolescent (117-125). Riobaldo admits to being terrified during this crossing because he does not know how to swim. When he asks Diadorim if he is frightened, the latter responds: “Costumo não”; “Meu pai disse que não se deve de ter”; “Meu pai é o homem mais valente deste mundo”; “Carece de ter coragem” (122). “Can’t say I have”; “My father told me that one should not be”; “My father is the bravest man in the world”; “You must be brave” (88). Impressed with Diadorim’s courage and refusal to turn back, Riobaldo marks this moment as a transformative one for his own sense of courage: “E eu não tinha medo mais. Eu? O sério pontual é isto, o senhor escute, me escute mais do que eu estou dizendo; e escute desarmado. O sério é isto, da estória toda – por isto foi que a estória eu lhe contei ---: eu não sentia nada. Só uma transformação pesável. Muita coisa importante falta nome” (125) “And then I was no longer afraid. This is the important point – now listen, sir – listen beyond what I am telling you: I did not feel anything. Only a transformation, a real one. Many important things have no name” (91).

¹⁷⁰ In Rosa’s world, the characters are dynamic and mutable, self-contradictory, exceeding the bounds of socially constructed identities. Joyce Anitagrace locates the masculine-feminine divide as one among many binaries that is thrown into crisis by the undecideability of Rosa’s concept of the *travessia*. She cites the way both Diadorim and Riobaldo exhibit stereotypically masculine as well as stereotypically feminine traits (120-121, 123).

city and *sertão* or modern and archaic: “convivem e se misturam o moderno e o arcaico, a exatidão da ciência e a superstição da magia, o amor pela precisão e pelo indistinto [. . .] o atraso e o progresso, o passado e o futuro, o interior e a cidade, a aridez de sertão e o vicejar das veredas” (79, 85-86).¹⁷¹ This model of inter-temporal *convívio* has obvious ramifications for how we narrate the modern nation, and I would argue it also demands that we rethink familiar narratives of cultural and literary history, including the myth that, with Guimarães Rosa, Brazilian literature definitively leaves behind literary regionalism.

Rosa’s radical subversion of teleological structures of history in *Grande sertão: veredas* implicitly challenges any literary historiography that would declare regionalism a predecessor to modern Brazilian literature¹⁷². In the face of this pervasive narrative, Rosa’s masterwork represents an urge to renovate rather than break with regionalist literature and teaches us that despite the eagerness of celebratory discourses of modernity to declare the death of the sertão or the death of regionalism, neither the region nor its figuration in the Brazilian imaginary can be dismissed as quaint, archaic, much less as dead, so long as we continue to revisit it with fresh eyes. Instead, Guimarães Rosa insists that the sertão extends into modern Brazil and that its labyrinthine time-space remains accessible to (and perhaps even inescapable for) modern readers.

O sertão só se sabe por alto?

“Eu atravesso as coisas – e no meio da travessia não vejo! – só estava era entretido na ideia dos lugares de saída e de chegada”¹⁷³ – Riobaldo (51)

The problem Riobaldo runs into again and again is that while beginnings and endings are easy to tell, the *travessia* is more recalcitrant; it remains an opaque, undemarcated time-space suspended between beginning and ending. The impossibility of seeing when we are actually immersed in the real, suspended somewhere between the idea of a place called departure and a place called arrival, will be a recurring theme in *Grande sertão: veredas*. In fact, it is supposedly to gain the overview provided by an outsider’s perspective that Riobaldo tells his story to O doutor: “Porque o sertão se sabe só por alto” (548). Yet, Riobaldo and his narrative repeatedly confound the listener’s ability and undermine the listener’s authority to construct such an overview. The novel ultimately insists that we can *only* experience the sertão from the relatively myopic perspective of the *travessia*, or what Tim Ingold calls the “dwelling perspective.”

¹⁷¹ “The modern and the archaic, the exactitude of science and the superstition of magic, the love of precision and of the indistinct [. . .] backwardness and progress, past and future, the interior and the city, the aridness of the sertão and the flow of the streams all coexist and mix together” (my translation).

¹⁷² Brazilian regionalism is often broken into three or four distinct stages. See, for example, Walnice Nogueira Galvão’s “Rapsodo do sertão: da lexicogênese à mitopoese.” Like Cândido, Nogueira Galvão points to urban literature and poetry as the breeding grounds for modernist and avant-garde innovation, while the rural novel remains the last stronghold of nineteenth-century naturalism (182).

¹⁷³ “I go through an experience, and in the very midst of it I am blind. I can see only the beginning and the end” (27). José Carlos Garbuglio notes that this passage also expresses the narrator’s distrust in the power of linguistic signification to recover the past in narrative. The disconnect between the present tense of action – “atravesso”, “vejo” – and the strange imperfect construction “estava era entretido” suggests a chronological breakdown, which makes us question the reliability of the narration: “Mas a palavra que recupera e cristaliza o acontecimento, tornando-o presente teria sido fiel à memória e a memória aos acontecimentos?” (438) / “But would the word that recuperates and crystalizes the event, making it present, have been loyal to memory and to the memory of events?” (my translation).

The distinctions that Ingold draws between space and landscape and between abstract time and taskscape are helpful in understanding the way the chronotope of the *travessia* is configured in *Grande sertão: veredas*.¹⁷⁴ Whereas spatial meaning is generated by measuring distances in feet or miles, and by dividing spatial planes “into a mosaic of eternally bounded segments” such as nations, states, or properties, “in the landscape, the distance between two places, A and B is experienced as a journey made, a bodily movement from one place to the other, and the gradually changing vistas along the route” (Ingold 154). Landscape is not segmented by rationally derived boundaries; those boundaries that do run through a landscape, such as fences, hedges, rivers, ridge-lines, etc., only take on the meaning of a boundary “in relation to the activities of the people (or animals) for whom [they are] recognized and experienced as such” (156). Moreover, such functional boundaries “do not segment the landscape, for the features with which they are identified are themselves an integral part of it” (ibid).

Similarly, what Ingold identifies as the taskscape – the array of activities that make up the experience of dwelling – cannot be measured or segmented in abstract clock-time; to the contrary, the taskscape is governed by a social temporality whose boundary markers – social rituals and cyclical events such as nightfall or the harvest – when experienced in time, as opposed to retrospectively, do not constitute definitive breaks between one period and another:

Thus the present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself, like refractions in a crystal ball. And just as in the landscape, we can move from place to place without crossing any boundary, since the vista that constitutes the identity of a place changes even as we move, so likewise can we move from one present to another without having to break through any chronological barrier that might be supposed to separate each present from the next in line. Indeed the features that Durkheim identified as serving this segmenting function – rites, feasts and ceremonies – are themselves as integral to the taskscape as are boundary markers such as walls or fences to the landscape. (159)

Ingold concludes by suggesting that “we can do away with the dichotomy between taskscape and landscape” if we learn to recognize the temporality of the landscape itself, to see our environment as being continuously shaped by the “rhythmic pattern of human activities” within a larger, slower pattern of biological, geological, and astrological rhythms (164). Returning the landscape to time by viewing it through an archeological lens (reading all of its features as the evidence of the dwelling activities of human and natural life) allows us to see it as a time-space differentiated and given meaning only by the activities of those who dwell there.

The *travessia*, understood as the undifferentiated time-space suspended between departure and arrival, is thus a kind of narrative landscape in Ingold’s sense of the term. It is that which can only be perceived from within and, as such, that which defies rational measurement in space or time and refuses the imposition of spatial-temporal breaks, whether of the landscape traversed (i.e. the borders between political states) or of the narrative itself (i.e. the division into chapters, analytical schemas, etc.).

¹⁷⁴ In fact, Marília Librandi Rocha finds that Ingold’s understanding of landscape “fits perfectly to understand the invented world of Guimarães Rosa” (“Sertão” 73).

From Euclides's landscape of the sertão to Rosa's *travessia* of the sertão

In the most comprehensive and prominent sociological analysis of *Grande sertão: veredas* to date, *grandesertão.br*, Willi Bolle reads Rosa's novel as a critical re-writing of Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902). *Os sertões* catalogues the types, customs, and landscapes of the Brazilian backlands and ultimately chronicles the destruction of the religious settlement at Canudos by federal military forces in 1897. Known as the Guerra de Canudos, the violent suppression of the religious community of Antônio Conselheiro's followers has often been read as symbolizing the "chegada da nova República à modernidade," and even as the Brazilian history's final stand-off between civilization and *barbarie*, "progresso e atraso" (Brizuela 166-167). In other words, the siege of Canudos, which culminated in the massacre of thousands (if not tens of thousands, as Euclides estimates) of *sertanejos*, has come to stand in for the symbolic death of the sertão. This casualty is often justified as the price of the nation's entrance into modernity: the death of sertão becomes a way of securing the version of modern Brazil promised by the First Republic (Brizuela 173).

In the Guerra de Canudos, the conquest of the sertão is undertaken simultaneously on two planes: one material in the military defeat of the settlement of Canudos, and one epistemological, in the documentation of the sertão by writings and photographs that seek to convert its unknowable wildness and otherness into objects of positivistic knowledge. Euclides da Cunha's representation of the sertão, which draws on the techniques of *costumbrismo* and the natural sciences to document rural life, is often read as paralleling the military conquest he chronicles: whereas the government troops he accompanied sought to subject the sertão to federal rule, his text seeks to subject the sertão to modern disciplines of knowledge. To what degree it succeeds in this "conquest" and to what degree it ultimately allows the sertão to escape the grasp of its representation, however, remains a topic open for debate. Natalia Brizuela, for example, reads *Os sertões* as a failed work of positivistic documentation (179), and I would go a step further to argue that this failure may be willful one. Recognizing the willing failure of Euclides's text to provide such mastery may ultimately suggest greater continuity between the works of Euclides and Rosa than is generally acknowledged, thus complicating our ability to reduce Euclides's text to a foil against to offset a more complex and more modern vision of the sertão.

What I find helpful in Bolle's reading is the contrast articulated between what he calls the cartographic aspirations of *Os sertões* and the historical project undertaken by Rosa. Bolle notes Euclides's goal of providing an overview of Brazil and "uma visão de cima" of the sertão (*Grande sertão: veredas* 53). He highlights the inclusion of maps in the text and the author's predilection for seeking out high points in the topography in order to achieve panoramic vistas (which also served as strategic vantage points for the military personnel with whom Euclides travelled) (ibid 54). Bolle argues that this cartographic tendency expresses "um *esprit de géometrie* planejador e controlador" continuous with the instrumental reason that would posit man as dominating nature (ibid 76). In *Grande sertão: veredas*, in contrast, Bolle sees the narrator as adopting "uma perspectiva rasteira" (a tracker's perspective); Riobaldo appears more interested in wandering and losing himself in the sertão than in rationally mapping out its space (ibid 65). Bolle invokes Walter Benjamin's analogy of walking along a country road as opposed to surveying it from above in an airplane to contrast these two approaches to charting space, one rational and cartographic and the other labyrinthine and immersive (ibid 76-78).¹⁷⁵ Bolle argues,

¹⁷⁵ See Benjamin's "One-way Street": "The person in the aeroplane sees only how the lane moves through the landscape, unwinding in conformity with the laws of the surrounding terrain. Only someone walking along the lane will experience its dominion and see how, from the selfsame countryside as for the flyer is simply the unfolding

and I agree, that Riobaldo's meandering path through his story and the sertão it traverses renounces the ambition for spatial control and orientation, highlighting instead dimensions of experience of place that exceed or escape cartographic knowledge. These "dimensões além da cartografia" include the dimensions of time and history (ibid 53). In other words, Bolle's reading suggests, keeping the sertão alive by reinscribing it in historical time requires renouncing the Birdseye perspective that would render the sertão an object of spatial knowledge.¹⁷⁶

This line of observation directly informs my reading of *Grande sertão veredas*: I argue that instead of producing a map of the sertão, Guimarães Rosa's text charts a *travessia*, an immersive journey through its time-space. Riobaldo famously laments that, because he is an inhabitant of the sertão, knowledge of it escapes him, belonging instead only to the birds who look down upon human joy and misery from above: "Sei o grande sertão? Sertão: quem sabe dele é urubú, gavião, gaivota, esses pássaros: eles estão sempre no alto, apalpando ares com pendurado pé, com o olhar remedindo a alegria e as misérias todas . . ." (590).¹⁷⁷ Statements such as these, coupled with the text's predominant mode of focalization through the myopic perspective of one immersed in the events as they unfold may seem to constitute a repudiation of the cartographic aspirations of *Os sertões* (not to mention the convention of the omniscient narrator in the realist novel).

Yet, before equating Euclides's text with the positivism Rosa rejects, I believe it is necessary to interrogate, as Natalia Brizuela does, whether or not *Os sertões* ever succeeded in mastering the sertão through such a Birdseye perspective. Arguing that Euclides's sertão remains partially opaque and unrepresentable, Brizuela contends that, far from documenting the sertão as relic to be filed away in the archives of Brazilian history, *Os sertões* may actually destabilizes the triumph of order and modernity that it is often thought to celebrate when read, as by Bolle, as tolling the death knell of the sertão (180). In light of this analysis, I argue that *Grande sertão: veredas* does indeed shine a new light on *Os sertões*, but rather than simply revealing the complicity of Euclides's project with the progressive ideology of the First Republic, Rosa's text helps us to perceive the gap between the mandates of this ideology – that the sertão be made visible, that it become the object of a rational and totalizing gaze, that its way of life be removed from the flow of historical time and treated as a relic of an archaic past – and their fulfillment in Euclides's text. In other words, the timeless, distant, and totalizing perspective with which we might contrast Rosa's chaotic, immersive, and fluid experience of the sertão was never to be found in *Os sertões*. What is novel in Rosa's text is that he converts this "failure" to visually apprehend the sertão into an opportunity to explore dimensions of experience that exceed rational, spatial knowledge and to change the terms on which the modern, cosmopolitan reader attempts to know the sertão: once we acknowledge the impossibility of magisterially surveying this time-space from a distance, it becomes possible for us to inhabit it, which is how I argue Rosa's text ultimately asks the reader to engage with his sertão.

plain, at every turn it summons up distances, views, clearings, and outlooks [. . .]" (52). This passage will be discussed at length in the third section of this chapter. Dantas Lima also argues that this perspective allows Rosa's text "uma proximidade empática, solidária com os humildes [. . .]" (16).

¹⁷⁶ As Süssekind points out, the cartographic gaze and the traveller's "olhar-de-for" are prominent means through which European travel writing and Brazilian national literature alike have visualized Brazil: the local color and timeless landscapes produced yield "um 'Brasil atemporalizado'" (20-21, 71).

¹⁷⁷ "Do you know the great sertão? The ones who know it are the vultures, hawks, kites, and birds like that: they are always high up there, feeling the air with lowered feet, sizing it up at a glance all joys and sorrows" (465).

Brasília and the promised arrival of modernity

The ambition to civilize the sertão once and for all would be picked up again by the progressive government of Juscelino Kubitschek in the 1950's. The construction of the new capital, Brasília, in the interior of the country is often seen as the symbolic culmination of the “avanço da civilização sobre os sertões” (Bolle *Grande sertão: veredas* 311). The crown jewel in Kubitschek's *programa de desenvolvimento*, which promised fifty years of progress in five, the new, modernist capital city in the heart of the sertão was to be a beacon of civilization and progress: “A fundação de Brasília é um ato político cujo alcance não pode ser ignorado por ninguém. É a marcha para o interior em sua plenitude. É a completa consumação da posse da terra. Vamos erguer no coração do nosso país um poderoso centro de irradiação de vida e progresso” (Kubitschek 1957).¹⁷⁸ Designed by Oscar Neimayer, the grand-scale concrete-scape rising out of the sertão projected a new, forward-looking image of Brazil and represented a definitive break with the past. Whereas the sertão had long represented the unreachable hinterlands on the outskirts of the nation and of modernity, the new capital literally brought the central government to the sertão and promised to symbolically unite the country.

As with any event that claims to represent the dawn of a new era, the inauguration of Brasília in 1960 was also marked by pangs of nostalgia. The first and last stories in Rosa's 1962 collection *Primeiras estórias* grapple with the conflicting emotions produced when a boy from the countryside visits the city of Brasília while it is under construction. Marília Librandi-Rocha reads these stories as evoking a moment of national *saudade*, not simply for a past that had been lost but also for a present slated for destruction by a national “impulse toward the future”: “[. . .] the present moment is immediately felt as the past, for we know that this present will no longer exist because it will be destroyed by the onslaught of the future and the continual production of pasts, such that one *feels saudades for the present*” (“Sertão” 62).

In her analysis of “As margens da alegria” and “Os cimos,” Librandi-Rocha signals an important shift in how the landscape of Brasília is experienced: a cartographic view from on high is renounced in favor of an immersive perspective that allows the landscape to remain animated by memories, affect, and imagination. The city of Brasília was designed to be beheld from on high: when viewed from above, the plan of the city forms the shape of an airplane, the technological means through which a modern subject might attain this distant point of view. Rosa alludes to this well-known fact by opening both stories with his young protagonist's arrival in Brasília by airplane. In “As margens da alegria,” the boy arrives full of excitement and optimism, sentiments having to do in part with the novelty of experiencing air travel for the first time. During the journey, his uncle and the other passengers encourage him to view the land beneath him cartographically:

Entregavam-lhe revistas, de folhear, quantas quisesse, até um mapa, nele mostravam os pontos em que ora e ora estava, por cima de onde. O menino deixava-as, fartamente, sobre os joelhos, e espiava: as nuvens de amontoada amabilidade, o azul de só ar, aquela claridade à larga, o chão plano em visão cartográfica, repartido de roças e campos, o verde que se ia a amarelos e vermelhos e a pardo e a verde; e, além, baixa, a montanha. Se homens, meninos, cavalos e bois – assim insetos? (*Primeiras Estórias* 27)¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ “The foundation of Brasilia is a political act whose reach can be ignored by no one. It is the march into the interior in its fullness. It is the complete act of consummation of the possession of the land. We will raise in the heart of our country a powerful beacon of life and progress” (my translation).

¹⁷⁹ “They handed him magazines to leaf through, as many as he wanted, a map too, and pointed out where they were from one moment to the next, above which places. The Little Boy left them piled up on his lap, and peered out: the

The boy is more interested in marveling at the new point of view afforded him by the airplane window than in charting his journey on the map, and Rosa's description calls attention to all of the visual details and movements a map would fail to capture: the shapes of the clouds, the vastness of the sky, the shifting colors of the ground beneath the plane, and the minute figures of men and animals traversing the landscape.

Neither here nor in either of the two flights (arrival to and departure from Brasília) recounted in "Os cimos" does the boy lay eyes on the airplane-shaped silhouette of the new city. This omission might be read as a gesture towards historical accuracy: the stories are set at a time when "a grande cidade apenas começava a fazer-se" (*Primeiras Estórias* 28), and its outline, still under development, may not yet have been legible from above. After his initial flight, however, the boy does not even look down, suggesting that he has lost any interest he once had in knowing the world from this Birdseye perspective. Instead, throughout the majority of these stories, he delights in contemplating the natural world – and principally its birds – from ground level. From the vantage point of his uncle's house, which is located on the outer edge of the city-under-construction, where the cleared land meets the *mata*, the boy finds happiness, as the first story's title suggests, in the "margens," the border between city and sertão. It is here that he sees both the peacock and the toucan of which he becomes enamored and here that, more generally, the treasures nature conceals in her dense forests and vast backlands become visible: "O buriti, à beira do corguinho, onde, por um momento, atolaram. Todas as coisas, surgidas do opaco" (29).¹⁸⁰ These same borderlands between city and sertão will be the site of the boy's disillusionment, as he learns of his relatives' willingness to kill and eat the peacock and to cage the toucan in misguided efforts to please him, and as scenes of birds and forest are increasingly replaced with scenes of dust, rubble, and construction equipment.

On the boy's return flight from Brasília at the end of "Os cimos," looking out the window has transformed from an act of looking down upon a flattened world into an act of gazing into a void, into himself, and into the past: "E, com pouco, o menino espiava, da janelinha, as nuvens de branco esgarçamento, o veloz nada. Entretanto se atrasava numa saudade, fiel às coisas de lá. Do tucano e do amanhecer, mas também de tudo, naqueles dias tão piores: a casa, a gente, a mata, o jipe, a poeira, as ofegantes noites – o que se afinava, agora, no quase-azul de seu imaginar" (157).¹⁸¹ The sky has merged with the boy's imagination and *saudades*. Rather than looking down, where he might see Brasília, with its emerging shape of an airplane receding into the distance, the boy looks inward, where he sees the other possible interpretation of Brasília's winged outline: a bird (Librandi-Rocha "Sertão" 73). Librandi-Rocha argues that, in addition to transforming a symbol of technology and modernity back into one of nature, transfiguring the city's shape in this way leads the reader back to the boy's internal experience. The distant, cartographic perspective afforded by air travel remits immediately to the boy's ground-level affective experience with majestic birds whose capricious appearance and disappearance leave

clouds heartily heaped up, the blue that was air and nothing else, that endless clear sky, the flat ground laid out like a map, divided up into farms and fields, green merging into yellows and reds and into brown and green again; and further off, low down, the mountains. How come men, children, horses, and cows – like bugs?" (*Jaguar* 21-22)

¹⁸⁰ "The buriti palm, beside the little stream where they got stuck for a moment. Every little thing, out from the opaqueness" (*Jaguar* 24).

¹⁸¹ "And before long the Little Boy was peering out through the cabin window at the clouds' white unraveling, the speeding nothingness. In this meanwhile he lingered in his longing, still loyal to the things back there. The toucan and the dawn, but everything, too, from those days that had been so much worse: the house, the people, the forest, the jeep, the dust, the breathless nights – all that was growing more rarefied now, in the near-blue of his imagining" (*Jaguar* 38).

him entranced. In other words, the perspective of mastery and knowledge that the aerial point of view promises the modern subject over the newly modernized sertão is immediately renounced in favor of an immersive perspective that leaves the boy and the reader at the mercy of the vicissitudes of embodied and “internally lived experience” (ibid 73). Librandi-Rocha notes that Rosa’s insistence on the impossibility of mastering the sertão from this perspective is one of the principle ways that he sets his version of the sertão apart from celebratory discourses of modernity.

As we see in these stories, however, Rosa’s version of *saudade* is not simply a nostalgic longing for a lost past nor an impotent desire to return to a primitive landscape that has been defiled in modernity. As Susana Kampff Lages argues, *saudade* functions in the work of Guimarães Rosa not as a “refúgio no mito, no arcaico,” but rather, as “um elemento textual performativo” in which landscapes are imaginatively transformed, different temporalities brought into contact, linear chronologies upended, and empty spaces held open for elements of the past that cannot be recuperated (50). I would argue, more specifically, Rosa’s texts express their peculiar loyalty to the past by refusing to relinquish the immediacy of lived experience to a version of history or memory that would render it dead or archaic. In *Grande sertão: veredas*, as in the short stories we have been examining, this gesture is accomplished in part through a shift in perspective, a renunciation of the knowledge-producing position of spatial and temporal distance in favor of plunging oneself into internal experience, where the lines between present and past are not as starkly drawn.

“[. . .] cidade acaba com o sertão. Acaba?”

One of Riobaldo’s principle challenges as a narrator is how to give his urban interlocutor contact with a place and with a way of life that is already becoming a thing of the past. Early on, Riobaldo tells O doutor that the sertão that he (and presumably we, the readers) are looking for no longer exists: “Mas, o senhor sério tenciona devassar a raso este mar de territórios, para sortimento de conferir o que existe? Tem seus motivos. Agora – digo por mim – o senhor vem, veio tarde. Tempos foram, os costumes demudaram. Quase que, de legítimo leal, pouco sobra, nem não sobra mais nada” (41).¹⁸² Aside from finding O doutor’s desire to transparently know an unfathomable “sea of territories” absurd, Riobaldo sees this quest for knowledge as coming too late, at a time when few traces of the “legítimo leal” sertão are left.

As we have seen, the sertão is for Riobaldo, as for the Brazilian imaginary, a place of openness and lawlessness: “Lugar sertão se divulga: é onde os pastos carecem de fechos; onde um pode torar dez, quinze léguas, sem topar com casa de morador; e onde criminoso vive seu cristo-jesus, arredado do arrocho de autoridade” (24)¹⁸³. As we see in the conflict between Joca Ramiro, whose noble leadership upholds the “lei do sertão” (a code of honor that includes always keeping your word, refraining from stealing cattle, never insulting the mother of another *jagunço*, etc.), and Zé Bebelo, who is allied with state powers, longs to be a deputy, and ends up being a lawyer, the status of the sertão as the lawless backlands is already being contested during the time of the narrative. By the time Riobaldo tells his story, decades later, the old sertão has

¹⁸² “But, are you seriously planning to launch out on this sea of territory, to find out what it contains? You must have your reasons. But you have come late. The old days are gone, habits have changed. Of real things of the past, few or none are left” (19)

¹⁸³ “The sertão describes itself: it is where the grazing lands have no fences; where you can keep going ten, fifteen leagues without coming upon a single house; where a criminal can safely hide out, beyond the reach of authorities” (4).

been superseded by a tamer, modern version¹⁸⁴. It is not just that roads have been built and cars have started to replace carts, and that the government has changed the names of many towns (Riobaldo tells us all of this has happened too); an older order, best epitomized by Joca Ramiro, has been lost.

Yet, as I aim to show, Riobaldo's narrative makes it extremely difficult to locate this loss in time, leaving us to experience the death of the sertão as always already in progress and never fully consummated. For example, Joca Ramiro's death is narrated in the preterit as a completed event, but the fact that this death happens "offstage," reported to Riobaldo and Diadorim via horseback messenger, dislocates this event in time: by the time we hear the news, Joca Ramiro has already been dead for an unspecified amount of time. Moreover, Riobaldo tells us that Joca Ramiro was of such mythic proportions that he seemed dead even while still alive: "Assim era Joca Ramiro, tão diverso e reinante, que, mesmo em quando ainda parava vivo, era como se já estivesse constando de falecido" (326).¹⁸⁵ Always more of an ideal than a man, Joca Ramiro continues to live on, in a sense, in the quest to avenge his death, and in Diadorim (secretly his daughter) who inherits his courage and sense of honor. Similarly, the larger-than-life, mythic world for which Joca Ramiro stands is figured in the novel as always already dying and never quite dead. The novel is rife with images of the walking dead, like poor Felisberto who walks around with a bullet in his head for days or weeks before his death, which is never narrated, or like the "cavalo já morto" upon which Suzarte comes galloping up to deliver the message that the enemy are approaching¹⁸⁶. We get the sense that the life of *jagunçagem* itself is a kind of dead-man-walking, irrevocably condemned to end, but at an indefinite future date.

In his characteristically contradictory speech, Riobaldo comments on this inevitability even as he calls it into question: "Ah, tempo de jagunço tinha mesmo de acabar, cidade acaba com o sertão. Acaba?" (183).¹⁸⁷ The line "cidade acaba com o sertão" can be read as "the city puts an end to the sertão" or "the city ends at the sertão." Both of these delineating borders – the

¹⁸⁴ And, in fact, by the time Rosa published *Grande sertão: veredas* in 1956, the federal government was quite literally moving into the sertão: the Brazilian capital was moved from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, in the state of Goiás, just west of the sertão traversed by Riobaldo and his men. The construction of Brasília, designed by modernist architects Lúcio Costa and Oscar Neimeyer, began in 1956, and is widely seen as marking the end of the sertão as a space "sparsely occupied by pastoral economic activities" and the inauguration of "the expansionist and developmentalist occupation of the sertão for soy plantation and other agribusiness in large scale" (Librandi-Rocha, "Multiple Rumors" 66).

¹⁸⁵ "Joca Ramiro was a man so different and so commanding, that even while he was still alive he was revered as one dead" (258). I might translate the last part: "it was as if he was already observed as a deceased person," preserving the strangeness of the original.

¹⁸⁶ Felisberto is one of Riobaldo's men; he receives a mortal injury in battle but continues to live in limbo with death for an unspecified amount of time: "A morte estava com esse Felisberto, coitado desgraçado. A coisa estranha que uma bala de arma tinha entrado nos centros da cabeça mesma dele, recessos da ideia dele – de lá, de vezes em fezes, perturbava com excessos: daí um dia, em curto, era a morte fatal [. . .] Aquele fato daquela bala entrada depositada no dentro de um – e que não se podia tirar de nenhum jeito, nem não matava de uma vez, mas não perdoava na data – me enticava" (544). "Felisberto, poor devil, had death inside him. The foreign object – the bullet from a gun – had buried itself deep inside his head, in the recesses of his mind, and from time to time it drove him to act wildly; one day it would prove fatal [. . .] That bullet buried inside him, though, which had not killed him outright but did not relieve him, either, bothered me" (429). On the eve of the final battle, Suzarte arrives on a horse whose entrails are already hanging out of it to announce that the enemy is close: "Chegou, parecia galopando num cavalo já morto" (578). "He came in, galloping on a dying horse" (455). The original uses the past participle (morto/ dead) instead of the present participle (morrendo/ dying).

¹⁸⁷ Taylor and Onís do not translate these lines. My translation: "Ah, the times of jagunçagem had to end, the sertão ends with the city, does it? End?"

temporal border marked by the death of the sertão when it is civilized by the city and the spatial border that divides the sertão from the city – are thrown into question when Riobaldo undermines this statement by asking, “Acaba?” Can a landscape defined by its boundless expanse ever be said to end, in the spatial or the historical sense?

The possibility that the sertão does not end opens the door to cutting political critiques of the modernity and “civilization” of contemporary Brazil, critiques which are at least as poignant in the 2010s as they were in the 1950s. In his essay on the sertão of Guimarães Rosa fifty years later, Álvaro Andrade Garcia alleges that in the absence of environmental and social protections, the rule of organized crime and the informal economy has turned all of Brazil into one boundless sertão: “Sertão e cidade já não são mundos distintos e distantes, mas a mesma extensão que agora abraça a Amazônia, sua última fronteira geográfica em território brasileiro [. . .] Extensão essa complexa e mutante, fruto de um processo de desenvolvimento predador, invasivo e excludente [. . .]” (38-39).¹⁸⁸ In other words, the city has not put an end to the barbarity of the sertão but thoroughly merged with it. Along the same lines, Luiz Roncari argues that the today’s neoliberal state is disconcertingly similar to the liberal regime of the First Republic, in which *Grande sertão: veredas* is set: both are ruled by private powers, and in both violence is a way of life (360-361). Roncari argues that whereas the “weak” state of the First Republic allowed landowners and *jagunços* to exercise a reign of terror over the backlands, the Brazilian government today fails to offer its citizens protection from urban violence and organized crime, suggesting that not only have the laws and “civilization” of the city failed to “acabar com” the savagery of the sertão, but that “the backlands have invaded the city” (366).

Where these contemporary political critiques differ importantly from Rosa’s critique is that in *Grande sertão: veredas*, the persistence of the sertão into the present signifies far more than the failure of civilization to conquer *barbarie*. The sertão that Riobaldo’s narrative keeps alive is not simply the sertão of Hermógenes, barbaric and lawless; it is also the sertão of Joca Ramiro, governed by quasi-chivalric codes of honor, and the sertão of Diadorim, filled with birds, plants, streams, and serene natural beauty. The *living* sertão conjured by Riobaldo is thus not only a threat to certain nationalistic articulations of Brazilian modernity; it is also, more importantly for Riobaldo and the affective register of the novel, a prized portal into Riobaldo’s personal past: narrating the sertão is a way of honoring by revisiting and re-experiencing (rather than eulogizing) the affective allegiances of Riobaldo’s youth.

In the role of storyteller, Riobaldo becomes our guide through the spatial-temporal landscape of a sertão that is both a physical landscape and a personal history. As Tim Ingold suggests, perceiving the temporality of the landscape becomes “an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past” (152-153). The telling of the story serves as a way of a way of “guiding the attention of listeners or readers *into*” the world narrated, along paths that only a skilled tracker could navigate (ibid 153). Riobaldo thus grants us access to a version of the sertão that *only* still exists for those who know its past and know how to revisit, and in fact, re-inhabit this past through the act of storytelling.

The kind of access Riobaldo provides as he guides us down the winding veredas of his story privileges experiential knowledge (*conhecimento*) over the mastery (and the inevitable reification) produced were the sertão to be treated as the object of rational knowledge (*o saber*).

¹⁸⁸ “City and sertão are no longer distinct and distant worlds but the same extension that now embraces Amazonia, the furthest geographical border of the Brazilian territory [. . .] A complex and mutable extension, the fruit of a predatory, invasive and exclusionary process of development” (my translation).

His sertão is not a territory that can be surveyed from a cartographer's perspective but, rather, a landscape in which to lose oneself. Riobaldo, as our tracker-narrator, is eager to lead us into this landscape, but we have reason to doubt his willingness to guide us *out* again. Like the sertão of which it speaks, Riobaldo's narrative is labyrinthine: it meanders and digresses and appears more interested in losing itself in the past than in reaching its teleological conclusion. Just as mastering the sertão through cartographic perspective would require beholding it from a distance, mastering his narrative would require that Riobaldo end it and look back on it from a distance, something he seems unwilling or unable to do.

As Patricia Carmello argues, the landscape of the sertão is so thoroughly wedded to Riobaldo's memories of Diadorim, who first taught him to appreciate its beauty, that Riobaldo is incapable of objectifying the sertão as the progressive discourse represented by Zé Bebelo does.¹⁸⁹ In contrast, Riobaldo knows the landscape he describes through the affective relationship of *living with*, what Schüler calls *o convívio*:

Convive com a paisagem e com os objetos, não como observador imparcial, mas como homem [. . .] A descrição de Riobaldo está longe de ser realista. Não descreve como quem sente o dever de mostrar o cenário dos acontecimentos. A paisagem, na descrição de Riobaldo, está banhada de amor. Uma pessoa querida, Diadorim, tornou bela a paisagem que lhe era indiferente antes. (Schüler 365)¹⁹⁰

As we have seen in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as well, living with the landscape involves an affective connection that has nothing to do with documenting, mapping, or imparting information. It is an ethos born instead of spending time immersed in the landscape.¹⁹¹ Riobaldo insightfully pronounces that the iterative rhythms responsible for creating such an affective relationship to landscape are at odds with the linear structure of narrative: "A qualquer narração dessas depõe em falso, porque o extenso de todo sofrido se escapole da memória. E o senhor não esteve lá. O senhor não escutou, em cada anoitecer, a lugúgem do canto da mãe-da-lua. O senhor não pode estabelecer em sua ideia a minha tristeza quinhoã" (418).¹⁹² What is lost when a landscape is communicated through narrative structure is precisely the iterative and sensorial nature of experience: how can a singular narrative capture the cumulative affective saturation of hearing the birds sing "em cada anoitecer"? It cannot, and as such every narrative is insufficient, its totality and truth falsified.

The ambivalence with which Riobaldo undertakes his effort to master and explain his story through re-telling mirrors his ambivalence towards Zé Bebelo, a character repeatedly linked to both letters (literacy, book learning) and the state. A paradoxical figure who repeatedly comes from the city to the sertão in order to civilize and "acabar com" the sertão and who fights as a *jagunço* in order to put an end to the barbarity of *jagunçagem*, Zé Bebelo is Riobaldo's role

¹⁸⁹ Drawing on the work of Michel Collot, Carmello sees the landscapes conjured in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as landscapes of experience, subjectively colored and containing temporal elements invisible to the eye, hidden dimensions of the past and the future (63-64).

¹⁹⁰ "He lives with the landscape and objects, not as an impartial observer, but as a man [. . .] Riobaldo's description is far from being realistic. He doesn't describe as someone who feels the need to show the backdrop of events. The landscape, in Riobaldo's description, is bathed in love. A beloved, Diadorim, turned beautiful a landscape that was indifferent to him before" (my translation).

¹⁹¹ As Kay Milton argues in *Loving Nature*, the impulse to protect the natural landscape also arises from the affective dimensions of first-hand experience with such landscapes.

¹⁹² "Any narration gives false testimony, because the extent of everything suffered slips out of memory. And you weren't there. You didn't hear, each nightfall, the *lugúgem* of the song of the *mãe-de-lua*. You can't establish in your idea a share of my sadness" (my translation).

model insofar as Riobaldo, too, is disgusted by the barbarity of the most violent and brutish *jagunços* (namely Hermógenes), and Riobaldo, too, is enticed by the promises of modernity, progress, and urbanity¹⁹³. At the same time though, Riobaldo experiences schizophrenic ambivalence towards Zé Bebelo, whom he never fully trusts not to sell out his own men to the state's army, and whose calculating and conservative model of leadership Riobaldo can never respect as he respected the courage and magnanimity of Joca Ramiro. In a moment of dismay with Zé Bebelo, Riobaldo complains: “Aquele queria saber tudo, dispor de tudo, poder tudo, tudo alterar” (92).¹⁹⁴ Zé Bebelo never denies these ambitions, even as his life is on trial at the hands of the *jagunços* who have captured him, when he famously declares, “A gente tem de sair do sertão!”

As we have seen, however, the desire for the end – in this case a progressive reformer's desire for the historical end of backwards and pre-modern way of life – leads us, ironically, *back* to the center. A similar, though inverse, regressive gesture in Riobaldo's narration expresses his ambivalent desire to “saber tudo, dispor tudo,” while resisting the eventual need to “acabar com” and “sair de” his own narrative web. Whereas Zé Bebelo sees the need to experience the sertão from within as a prerequisite to get out of and “acabar com” the sertão, Riobaldo wants to imaginatively re-enter, re-live, and better understand his story without being forced to make of it a rational, linear narrative that necessarily ends.

II “Para tirar o final . . .”

“No real da vida, as coisas acabam com menos formato, nem acabam. Melhor assim.”
-- Riobaldo (101)

Many readers have noted the confessional quality of Riobaldo's narrative, which, delivered as a one-sided dialog, may evoke the scene of religious confession, the scene of courtroom testimony, or the scene of the psychoanalysis¹⁹⁵. Judith Butler argues that such scenes, in which the subject is compelled to “give an account of oneself,” are what allow a self-knowing narrative “I” to emerge (*Psychic Life*). I would argue that Riobaldo's fraught attempt to give an account of himself throughout his narrative expresses a utopian longing for an alternative to the violence and subjection involved in articulating one's own identity in the available social discourses. In fact, I read Riobaldo's desire for the state of “ficar sendo” as a desire to be allowed to fail in this endeavor, a failure which Butler contends could constitute an ethical gain.¹⁹⁶ Butler argues for the ethical importance of failing to achieve and maintain self-identity: “Suspending

¹⁹³ Riobaldo alludes to his “vontade morar em cidade grande” (262) repeatedly throughout his narration, even though he admits “Mas que cidade mesma grande nenhuma eu não conhecia” (262). “If I could only live in a large city. But I didn't know any really large city” (206). In one moment, while discussing the development of the town of Curralinho, he even fantasizes about one day becoming a beneficiary of modern progress: “então se destinava ser lugar comercial de todo valor [. . .] Eu entrei no que imaginei – na ilusãozinha de que para mim também estava tudo assim resolvido, o progresso moderno: e que eu me representava ali rico, estabelecido. Mesmo vi como seria bom, se fosse verdade” (140). “Curralinho was then sure to become an important commercial center [. . .] I let my imagination take over, falling into that silly illusion that for me, too, everything would be settled by modern progress, and I saw myself rich, well-established. I even saw how good it would be, if it were true” (104).

¹⁹⁴ “He wanted to know everything, to decide everything, to be all-powerful, to change everything” (62).

¹⁹⁵ Joyce Anitagrace reads this narrative as a confession (and as a confession of homoerotic love specifically), but one that brings Riobaldo as much pleasure as shame (117).

¹⁹⁶ See also from *The Psychic Life of Power*: “Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to “be” in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical kind of being, one of or for the future” (131).

the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (*Giving an Account* 42). Riobaldo’s narrative dramatizes the doomed struggle to articulate an internally coherent self, and, as I will argue later in this chapter, exposes the inherent violence of linear narrative, whose teleological structure privileges the emergence of one self, one ending, one history, at the expense of the plurality of selves, endings, and histories that exist in a state of potentiality until all alternate possibilities are foreclosed by the finality of the ending.

As Clara Rowland has argued in *A forma do meio*, Riobaldo’s narrative is one that resists the drive towards closure and, instead, encourages us to dwell in the middle space of the *travessia* itself. Rowland follows Brooks to read Rosa’s work as animated by the perennial tension between, on the one hand, the desire for the closure provided by a proper ending – a desire issuing from the reader and from the silent interlocutor in Rosa’s dialogs – and, on the other hand, the resistance to the death necessitated by closure on the part of the narrator of the Rosean dialog and perhaps, on the part of the narrative itself, which refuses to conform to the teleological structure prescribed to it by the form of the book¹⁹⁷.

Understanding Riobaldo’s resistance to ending (or even truly beginning) his narrative as a way of forestalling the deaths contained in this ending helps to explain why he becomes so flustered whenever O doutor prods him to keep the story moving. At several moments in the second half of the text, Riobaldo reprimands his listener for his impatience: “Senhor, senhor – o senhor não puxa o céu antes da hora! Ao que digo, não digo?” (440).¹⁹⁸ Although we never hear O doutor’s side of the conversation, we must assume he is asking questions about a later point in the narrative, thus getting ahead of Riobaldo. In moments such as these, Riobaldo tries to appease his interlocutor by apologizing and assuring him he will be arriving at the desired point in the narration soon enough: “Falo por palavras tortas. Conto minha vida, que não entendi. O senhor é homem muito ladino, de instruída sensatez. Mas não se aveze, não queira chuva em mês de agosto. Já conto, já venho – falar no assunto que o senhor está de mim esperando. E escute” (506).¹⁹⁹ Deferentially acknowledging that his interlocutor is educated and wise, Riobaldo nevertheless chides him for his wiliness and warns him not to make demands out of turn through the metaphor of wishing for rain in the dry season.

Although Riobaldo claims not to be in full control of his narrative, let alone in a position to understand it, his unwillingness to be rushed through its telling suggests that he is carefully controlling the pace at which he unravels his tale. Although this narratorial gesture of withholding the closure the listener craves succeeds in stoking the listener’s interest and building suspense, I believe we must also read Riobaldo’s foot-dragging as a genuine expression of his

¹⁹⁷ About *Grande sertão: veredas* specifically, Rowland claims: says “A narração de Riobaldo resiste a uma imposição de forma que parece ter a morte como preço” (*A forma do meio* 57) “Riobaldo’s narration resists the imposition of a form that appears to have death as its price,” given that, “Na vida e na ficção, a procura de uma legibilidade teologicamente orientada para um fechamento resulta, inevitavelmente, no encontro com a morte” (58) “In life and in fiction, the search for a legibility teleologically oriented towards closure results, inevitably, in an encounter with death.”

¹⁹⁸ Taylor and Onís do not translate this line. My translation: “Sir, sir –don’t you put the sky before its time! About what I say, don’t I say it?”

¹⁹⁹ “I speak with twisted words. I narrate my life, which I did not understand. You are a very clever man, of learning and good sense, but don’t get impatient, don’t expect rain during the month of August. I’ll soon tell you, I’m coming to the subject that you are waiting for” (398).

reluctance to get to the end.²⁰⁰ The fact that we are *never* given the gratification of full closure (or more precisely, that the closure we are given cannot possibly be satisfying) makes it hard to read Riobaldo's narrative stalling as *merely* a means of generating suspense.

Almost exactly half way through *Grande sertão: veredas*, the narrator, Riobaldo, announces that there is no need for him to continue because his audience already knows everything: "Mas, isso, o senhor então já sabe [. . .] Aqui eu podia pôr ponto" (324).²⁰¹ It is true that we are already familiar with the exploits Riobaldo has been recounting immediately preceding these remarks – the quest to avenge Joca Ramiro's death under the leadership of Medeira Vaz, the moment of meeting his future wife, Otacília, in Santa Catarina, the return of Zé Bebelo, etc. – for these events, although chronologically occurring in the middle of Riobaldo's saga, are among the first he narrates at the opening of the novel. As such, this false ending, when Riobaldo announces he has nothing left to tell, marks the coming-full-circle of his indirect and circuitous narrative. Whereas the first half of the novel consists of many shorter episodes and fable-like intercalated stories woven together in an extremely non-linear fashion, from the half-way point forward, Riobaldo will narrate his story in more or less the order in which it occurred.²⁰² In the second half of the novel, the occasional event narrated out of order will be clearly marked as prolepsis and generally followed by an apology from the narrator, who claims to have a hard time keeping the chronology of his story straight.²⁰³

Yet, whether or not we have read the entirety of the novel, it is apparent that this half-way point, when we return to where we began in the narrative, is by no means a natural conclusion to Riobaldo's story. Neither does this false ending read like a narrative "short-circuit" or premature death of which Peter Brooks claims all narratives run the risk, propelled as they are

²⁰⁰ Elizabeth Freeman's play on "drag" – as both a form of cross-dressing and a force of temporal resistance or lag – may help explain what is so transgressive about Riobaldo's dilatory narration. Freeman understands queer temporality as a belated position that drags with it elements of the past, recognizing that "drag can be seen as the plastering of the body with outdated rather than just cross-gendered accessories"(xxi). I am interested in exploring how Rosa's use of regressive temporal structure, combined with anachronistically archaic language might allow his text to, in Freeman's words, "talk back to history" (ibid).

²⁰¹ "Is there no more? Ah, sir, what I think is that you already know all there is to be known [. . .] I could stop here" (256).

²⁰² This moment is not, strictly speaking, the first time Riobaldo's story appears to snap into linear narrative. After an extremely disorientating opening, where Riobaldo frequently rambles and departs from his own life story to tell other stories he has heard in the community, the *primerio fato* initiates a more-or-less chronological recounting of Riobaldo's early life. This episode, which occurs approximately 100 pages into the novel, centers on a formative event wherein young Riobaldo meets "o menino," and they cross the Rio São Francisco together in a canoe. "O menino," it will later be revealed, is in fact Diadorim. From this episode onward to the half-way point of the novel, Riobaldo narrates his youthful formation and the events that lead to his initiation into a life of *jagunçagem* in roughly chronological order. One notable exception is that he frequently jumps ahead to arriving in Santa Catarina and meeting his future wife, Otacília. This tendency to rush ahead to the marriage plot is significant for my reading of the novel as resisting and lamenting its own teleological drive. By the time he finally arrives at the chronological point where this event takes place, he notes that he has already narrated it, just as he has already narrated the events that follow – the failed crossing of the Liso do Sussuarão, the death of Medeiro Vas, the return of Zé Bebelo, who becomes the new *chefe de jagunços* – for all of these events and more were introduced before the *primeiro fato*. As such, the apparently linear narration that emerges with the *primeiro fato* is revealed to be circular when it returns to the starting point of the novel.

²⁰³ Such disclaimers appear frequently throughout Riobaldo's narrative. For example: "Essas coisas todas se passarem tempos depois. Talhei de avanço, em minha história. O senhor tolere minhas más devassas no contar. E ignorância. Eu não converso com ninguém de fora, quase. Não sei contar direito" (214). "All those things happened times later. I cut ahead, in my story. You'll tolerate my debaucheries in the telling. It's ignorance. I don't converse with anyone from outside, almost. I don't know how to tell straight" (my translation).

by the desire to reach the end²⁰⁴. Riobaldo's statement that all has been told is particularly puzzling because it comes at a moment not of climax but of suspense. At this point Riobaldo has introduced nearly all of the major players in his story, and one of its primary conflicts—the young Riobaldo's torn allegiance between Zé Bebelo's ideals of *ordem e progresso* and Joca Ramiro's order of noble *jagunçagem*—has found resolution of sorts in the scene of the *juízo*, in which, thanks in large part to Riobaldo's intervention, the lives and the dignity of both of his role models are allowed to remain intact. Nevertheless, by the time Riobaldo tells us that his narrative is complete, it is already apparent that any resolution provided by the *juízo* has only forestalled the inevitable conflict to come. Having already learned of Joca Ramiro's death, Hermógenes's mutiny, and Zé Bebelo's return from exile, we can have no doubt that the question of who, and whose set of laws, codes, and values, shall govern the sertão will need to be contested once more. Moreover, the decisive role played by Riobaldo in the scene of the *juízo* has suggested that our narrator-protagonist will likely be at the center of this future show-down. In addition to anticipating that the story of his own rise to the status of legendary *chefe de jagunços* still needs to be told, Riobaldo's audience awaits resolution to (or at least full disclosure of the source of) the inner conflicts that most urgently preoccupy the narrator: his impossible love for his fellow *jagunço*, Diadorim, and his doubts about whether or not he has sold his soul to the devil. In fact, Riobaldo's explicit motive for narrating his story to O doutor is so that he might receive his educated interlocutor's judgment on this latter matter. For all of these reasons, it is perplexing that Riobaldo could declare his narrative complete before he has arrived at either of its two major climaxes: the scene of the dubious pact with the devil and the final battle scene, in which the mortal enemy, Hermógenes, is finally defeated, the beloved, Diadorim, killed, and the novel's greatest secret (the true identity of Diadorim) revealed.

Apparently in response to such objections on the part of O doutor (whose side of the conversation we never hear), Riobaldo insists that there really is no more to tell because “o final” is already contained in what he *has* told of his story:

Só sim? Ah, meu senhor, mas o que eu acho é que o senhor já sabe mesmo tudo – que tudo lhe fiei. Aqui eu podia pôr ponto. Para tirar o final, para conhecer o resto que falta, o que lhe basta, que menos mais, é pôr atenção no que contei, remexer vivo o que vim dizendo. Porque não narrei nada à-tôa: só apontação principal, ao que crer posso [. . .] O senhor pense, o senhor ache. O senhor ponha enredo. Vai assim, vem outro café, se pita com bom cigarro. Do jeito é que retôrço meus dias: repensando. (324-325)²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Brooks posits: “The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the least minimally complicated *détour*, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of the narrative” (336). The text, like the biological organism, however, “must struggle against events (dangers) which would help it to achieve its goal too rapidly – by a kind of short-circuit” (335). The text is propelled by the reader's desire for its conclusion, an illuminating death by which to warm our shivering selves, Brooks paraphrases from Benjamin: “Yet this must be the right death, the correct end. The complication of the *détour* is related to the danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death” (335).

²⁰⁵ “Is there no more? Ah, sir, what I think is that you already know all there is to be known, for I have told you everything. I could stop here. To learn the end, to find out what happened afterwards, all you need to do is to think hard about what I have been telling you, turn it over in your mind, for I have related nothing idly. I don't waste words. Think it over, figure it out. Build your own plot around it. In the meantime we'll have some more coffee, and smoke a good cigarette. This is the way I spend my time: mulling over the past [. . .] (256-257). Here's my attempt at a more literal translation: “That's it? Ah, sir, but what I think is that you already know just everything – that I've confided everything to you. Here I could put a full stop. To tease out the ending, to know the rest that's missing, it would be enough, less than more, to fix your attention on what I've told you, shuffle, alive, what I've been saying.

Coming from a narrator who makes a habit of withholding important information and foreshadowing events-to-come in a manner that is in turn tantalizing and in turn ominous, the suggestion that the narrative be cut-off at its half-way point may seem disingenuous, another coy ploy to pique the interest of his listener and ensure that O doutor asks to hear more.²⁰⁶ I would like to consider the possibility, however, that Riobaldo means what he says: that for him, the denouement of his story *is* already contained in its beginning and middle. As Daniel Balderston has pointed out, Riobaldo *has* already revealed the secret of his story's ending in veiled terms.²⁰⁷ In fact, retrospectively decoding Riobaldo's many enigmatic hints of what is to come is one of the great pleasures of re-reading *Grande sertão: veredas*, but I am ultimately less interested in the truth of Riobaldo's claim that he has already revealed the ending (and to what extent) than in what this claim reveals about the posture he takes towards his narrative. I would submit that Riobaldo is far less interested in the ending of his story than he is in perpetually returning to and in fact losing himself in the middle space of the *travessia*.

In fact, I understand the emergence of linear narrative, undoubtedly welcomed by the reader weary of following Riobaldo's temporal switchbacks, as an inevitability to which Riobaldo surrenders only regretfully. In the self-reflexive pause in the middle of the narrative, Riobaldo is reluctant to proceed because he recognizes that, having introduced all of the major characters and set up all of the principal dilemmas, there is nothing left to do but surrender his story to the teleological narrative structure expected of the novel and watch it hurdle towards its death.²⁰⁸ In other words, whereas Peter Brooks sees narrative detours and circumlocutions as forestalling the desired ending/ death of the narrative so that it does not come too soon, I see Riobaldo's detours and circumlocutions as attempting to forestall the entrance into narrative (and the teleological form expected of the novel more specifically) itself.

“Quando foi que eu tive minha culpa?”

We can read the narrative Riobaldo delivers to O doutor as one of Riobaldo's many attempts to answer the questions not only of *what* went wrong or *whether or not* he is to blame, but, most pressingly, “*Quando foi que eu tive minha culpa?*” (325 emphasis mine).²⁰⁹ The need to ask this question implies that if there is a definitive moment when Riobaldo erred, failed, or

Because I haven't narrated anything just because: only preliminary notes, so far as I can believe [. . .] You think, you believe. You come up with the plot. Do that, have another coffee, pick up a good cigarette. That's the way I rewind my days: re-thinking.” Maranhão suggests that the textile valences of “enredo” also support the translation: “You, sir, please weave things together” (76).

²⁰⁶ See also Rowland's reading of “Uma estória de amor” from *Corpo de baile*, wherein a narrator's story left half-told becomes the motor of desire for the rest of Rosa's story (*A forma do meio*)

²⁰⁷ Balderston reads this moment in the text as referring back to an earlier moment when Riobaldo asks himself how he could have failed to foresee the image that now haunts him: the dead body of a virgin woman he loved: “Como foi que não tive um pressentimento? O senhor mesmo, o senhor pode imaginar de ver um corpo claro e virgem de moça, morto a mão, esfaqueado, tinto todo de seu sangue [. . .] os olhos dum terminado estilo, meio abertos meio fechados? E essa moça de quem o senhor gostou, que era um destino e uma surda esperança em sua vida?! Ah, Diadorim [. . .]” (qtd. in Balderston 99). “How was it that I didn't have a premonition? Even you, you can imagine seeing the pale virgin body of a girl, killed by hand, stabbed, all reddened with her blood [. . .] eyes in a determined fashion, half open, half closed? And this girl whom you liked, who was a destiny and a deaf hope in your life” (my translation). For the reader who has already read the conclusion of this novel, this passage clearly foreshadows the scene of Diadorim's death; for the uninitiated reader, however, this nearly explicit reference to Diadorim being a woman is easy to miss.

²⁰⁸ José Carlos Garbuglio reads the second half of the novel as an initiation into the irreversible flow of events, leading inevitably to death (429).

²⁰⁹ “*When* did I acquire my guilt” (257).

sold his soul, it is not to be found in any of the obvious places where we might look (i.e. the dramatic climaxes of the story). In fact, as Riobaldo's assertion that "o resto que falta" is already contained in the first half of his story suggests, the answers to this text's most urgent questions can be found not by pushing on towards a climactic denouement, but, rather, by doubling back to the middle.

As Rowland points out, by suggesting that *o resto que falta* "could be encountered through a retroactive movement, a hermeneutic movement, through a 'mulling over' of what has already been said," Riobaldo calls into question the difference between forward and backward narrative movement, and thereby negates the "teleologically oriented structure" prescribed by the form of the novel ("I Could Stop Here" 321). If the second half of the novel is a re-reading of the first half, rather than its continuation, then the ending is not a proper ending but only another return to the generative space of the middle.²¹⁰

In the very center of the novel we find a narrative hiatus: after declaring that he could stop here, Riobaldo delivers, in a single, uninterrupted paragraph often referred to as the Gloss of the Song of Siriuz, almost five pages of questions, aphorisms, and linguistic fragments that poetically condense his entire story into a thoroughly non-narrative pastiche. In this barely coherent, guilt-racked speech, Riobaldo obsessively searches for a middle point, a dividing line, a decisive moment or diachronic break that might help him explain his life in terms of the "before" and "after" of a moment of sin or fall. Here are a few key excerpts (including many of the most quotable lines in the novel):

Travessia, Deus no meio. Quando foi que eu tive minha culpa? Aqui é Minas; lá já é a Bahia? (325)

Sertão: é dentro da gente. O senhor me acusa? [. . .] Minha vida teve meio-do-caminho? Os morcegos não escolheram de ser tão feios tão frios – bastou só que tivessem escolhido de esvoaçar na sombra da noite e chupar sangue. Deus nunca desmente. O diabo é sem parar. Saí, vim, destes meus Gerais: voltei com Diadorim. Não voltei? Travessias . . . Diadorim, os rios verdes. (325)

O São Francisco partiu minha vida em duas partes. (326)

Jagunço é o sertão. O senhor pergunte: quem foi que foi que foi o jagunço Riobaldo? (327)

Tudo o que já foi, é o começo do que vai vir, toda hora a gente está num cômputo. Eu penso é assim, na paridade. *O demônio na rua* . . . Viver é muito perigoso; e não é não. Nem sei explicar estas coisas [. . .] O que eu quero, é na palma da minha mão. Igual aquela pedra que eu trouxe do Jequitinhonha. Ah, pacto não houve. Pacto? (328)

Digo ao senhor : tudo é pacto. Todo caminho da gente é resvaloso. (328)

Agora, no que eu tive culpa e errei, o senhor vai me ouvir. (229)²¹¹

²¹⁰ In fact, Rowland reads it as the mirror image of the first (*A forma do meio* 235).

²¹¹ "A crossing with God in the middle. When did I acquire my guilt? Here we are in Minas. Over yonder is Bahia."/ "The sertão – it is inside of one. Do you accuse me? [. . .] Could I have chosen a middle way? Vampire bats did not elect to be so ugly, so cold – it is enough that they choose to fly in the shades of the night and to suck blood. God never goes back on his word. The devil does all the time. I left my beloved gerais. I came back with Diadorim."/ "The San Francisco divided my life in two parts"/ "Jagunço and the sertão are the same thing. You might ask: who was that Jagunço Riobaldo?"/ "All that has been is the beginning of what is to be. We are forever at a crossroads. Living is a dangerous business; and yet, it is not. I don't even know how to explain these things [. . .] What I want is to have things in the palm of my hand. Ah, there was no pact with the devil. A pact?"/ "I tell you, sir, everything is a pact. Every road is slippery."/ "Now you will hear about those matters in which I was at fault and erred." (257-260).

In this passage, as in the novel at large, Riobaldo expresses a desperate desire to draw a dividing line down the middle of his life-story, to locate the “meio-do-caminho” of his life, and to answer the question of *when* he committed his guilty act. The pact would be the most obvious candidate for a narrative event to mark this break, but since its very occurrence is called into question – “pacto não houve. Pacto?” – such a moment remains impossible to locate.²¹² There is also an attempt to map this diachronic break as a spatial border, in the form of the Rio São Francisco, which Riobaldo claims “partiu minha vida em duas partes,”²¹³ but spatial borders, such as that which would divide Minas Gerais from Bahia, are also thrown into question and ultimately seem to dissolve into the undifferentiated space of the diabolic *travessia*: “Aqui é Minas; lá já é a Bahia? [. . .] O diabo é sem parar. Saí, vim, destes meus Gerais: voltei com Diadorim. Não voltei? Travessias . . .”.

While Riobaldo, who wishes he could inhabit a more black-and-white world, would love nothing more than to be able to draw a line down the map of his life that would separate the good from the bad, he is forced to confront, again and again, the impossibility of doing so²¹⁴:

eu careço de que bom seja bom e o ruim ruim, que dum lado esteja o preto e do outro o branco, que o feio fique bem apartado do bonito e a alegria longe da tristeza! Quero os todos pastas demarcados . . . Como é que posso com este mundo? A vida é ingrata no macio de si; mas transtraz a esperança mesmo do meio do fel do desespero. Ao que, este mundo é muito misturado . . . (237)²¹⁵

²¹² José Carlos Garbuglio sees the moment of the death of Joca Ramiro as the chronological point that divides the narrative into before and after and which unleashes the linear development of the plot in the second half of the novel (443). Others, such as Rowland, will make the case that it is the center point of the novel itself that serves as a dividing line. Still others will cite the *primeiro fato* – the crossing of the Rio São Francisco with Diadorim – as that which divides the narrative in two. And others will cite the death of Diadorim. The lack of consensus on this point only confirms that there is no *one* moment in the narrative that changes everything.

²¹³ Antônio Cândido observes that this river does serve to symbolically divide the novel: “Na margem direita a topografia parece mais nítida; as relações, mais normais [. . .] Na margem esquerda a topografia parece fugidia, passando a cada instante para o imaginário, em sincronia com os fatos estranhos e desencontrados que lá sucedem” (“O homem” 297). “The topography of the right bank appears more distinct, relations more normal [. . .] the topography on the left bank appears more fleeting, turning at every instant towards the imaginary, in synchrony with the strange and disjointed events that take place there” (my translation). The right bank is associated with justice, friendship, and the rule of Joca Ramiro and Zé Bebelo; the left bank is associated with irrationality, vengeance, and Hermógenes. Cândido notes that the most mysterious and ominous scenes, including the crossing of the liso do Sussuarão, the apparition of the “diabo na rua, no meio do redemoinho,” the pact with the devil, and the final battle scene, all take place to the left of the Rio de São Francisco (ibid). Nevertheless, the divide is not as clear-cut or absolute as it may appear. Cândido acknowledges that the left bank also contains, “Como compensação,” Riobaldo’s beloved Urucuia and the Fazenda Santa Catarina, beacon of peace and civility, where Riobaldo meets his future wife Otacília.

²¹⁴ Ettore Finazzi-Agrò notes that the text as a whole also yearns for clarity, for distinctions between good and evil, diegetic world and metatext, etc.. He sees the impossibility of achieving such clarity as part of the imperfection of the modern world of fluidity, hybridity and porous borders that is reflected in the text (46-47). As I will discuss, both his and my readings ultimately call into question whether *Grande Sertão: veredas* allows us to uphold the distinction between the pre-modern world and the modern world anymore than it allows us to uphold the other distinctions Finazzi-Agrò discusses. In a novel where the modern and the archaic coexist, temporal borders are rendered as porous and as senseless as any other kind of borders.

²¹⁵ “The one thing I have always insisted on, you know, sir, is that what is good must be good and what is bad, bad; that black be on the one side and white on the other; that ugliness be well apart from beauty, and happiness far from sadness. I want all the pastures clearly staked out. Life is ungrateful at heart, but brings us hope out of the very bitterness of despair. This is a very mixed-up world” (186).

Ultimately, there is no way to locate the line that was crossed nor the moment in which it was crossed. There was no pact and “tudo é pacto”; there is no “meio-do-caminho” and “Todo caminho da gente é resvaloso.” As in the case of the bats who never chose to be monstrous -- “tão feios tão frios” – but only to live in the shadows and suck blood, evil is a slippery slope rather than a decisive fall. It is impossible to narrate an innocent “before” because the past is not a discreet era untouched by the future but merely the beginning of what is to come: “Tudo o que já foi, é o começo do que vai vir.” Even as Riobaldo stokes his listener’s anticipation and promises he is about to tell O doutor of “no que eu tive culpa e errei,” he has just, pages earlier, made a point of insisting that there is no more to tell because he has already confessed everything. The moment of revelation, of confession, of sin that we have been waiting for has always already begun.

While this line of analysis covers only one of many themes explored in this extremely open-ended passage, I highlight it because it seems to offer a meta-reflection on how we are to understand the mid-point of the novel. Structurally located at very nearly the dead center, this moment is frequently read – as in Rowland’s mirror-image reading – as the “fronteira” or dividing point between the two halves of the novel. However, I believe this reading does not escape fully enough from the model of linear diachronic movement that the novel appears intent on disrupting. In this “mundo [. . .] muito misturado,” the duality between *before* and *after* is called into question just as radically as are the oppositions between good and evil, black and white, happiness and sadness, civilization and barbarism, etc.²¹⁶

Instead of reading the Gloss of the Song of Siruiz as the hinge that splits the narrative in two, I read this moment of narrative suspension as the generative core of the story that unfurls from it in every direction. As a poetic condensation of the entire novel, this interlude serves as a pool of images, metaphors, tensions, and paradoxes and as a touchstone of sorts for all of the metaphysical, moral, and epistemological questions elsewhere dramatized through narrative. Here we encounter, in non-narrative form, what *could be* infinitely expounded upon in narrative, or, as Riobaldo’s insistence that he could stop here reminds us, what *could not be* narrated at all.²¹⁷ Otherwise put, this moment in the text gestures towards an outside of narrative, the closest language can come to a state of pure potentiality, a state necessarily foreclosed by the entrance into narrative, at least any form of traditional, written narrative.

When understood as a means of stringing together actualized potentialities into a single, linear path leading towards the closure of an ending, narrative is antithetical to the state of suspension and potentiality Rosa’s text seems intent on preserving. More specifically, teleological narrative structures impose both of the conditions that Agamben laments “temper” theories of potentiality: by positing a unidirectional flow of time, they impose “the principle of the irrevocability of the past (or the unrealizability of potentiality in the past)” (262), and by actualizing just one of a plurality of possible outcomes while denying or killing off the rest, they reinforce the principle that we must choose between a thing and its opposite. Agamben (and Guimarães Rosa as well, I would argue) is interested in questioning both of these principles: in entertaining the possibility that the past can be infinitely re-written through the act of

²¹⁶ After all, the concepts of *before* and *after* are integral to the narratives upon which such moral differentiations rest: original sin as man’s fall from grace and expulsion from paradise, progress as the rise from barbarism to civilization, etc. Calling into question the difference between before and after may be the most radical way to undermine such binaries.

²¹⁷ As Agamben argues with reference to Melville’s *Bartelby*, potentiality only truly exists where the potential not to do, not to will, and not to write also exists (*Potentialities* 250).

remembrance and the possibility that the actualization of one possibility does not necessarily eliminate the potentiality of other possibilities being realized.²¹⁸

Preserving the potentiality of the narratable

D.A. Miller asserts that in classical narratology, the proper ending effectively shuts down any potential plot lines that cannot be accommodated by the novel's implicit ideology or moral code and binds the any "loose, dangerously free-floating energy" that might threaten the achievement of a proper ending (51). Importantly, however, Miller also reminds us that these very potentialities and this very energy form the conditions of possibility for narrative. Narrative is thus always self-annulling: the sources of conflict, tension, imbalance, and incompleteness that constitute what Miller calls the "narratable" make narrative movement possible in the first place, but these forces are so threatening to the genre of the novel and its implicit ideology that they must be, not simply resolved and settled, but actively "put *hors de combat*" and suppressed by the closure of the ending (98).

To put Miller's argument in Rosean terms, we might say that the function of the ending is to allow us to trace a single, linear path through the maze of *veredas* traversed by the narrative. Arriving at an ending allows us to read retrospectively, finding meaning in the events and details that prefigure the *telos* while ignoring those that point towards other potential endings. The proper ending reassures the reader that everything that precedes it has conspired to bring it about, thus sacrificing an infinity of possible stories for the totality and coherence of the singular narrative traced by the novel. Yet, as Miller argues, narrative closure is rarely capable of convincingly and satisfactorily pulling off this great feat; we accept closure as an act of "make-believe" (276), presumably because we are either invested in the ideology that requires this closure, or, as is likely in the case of Rosa's novel, because we are exhausted and welcome an exit from the labyrinth through which we have been travelling. Miller has shown that even "traditional" 19th century novels demonstrate "self-betraying contradictions" with regards to the achievement of closure (281), which, his theory implies, always involves sacrificing imaginable and often alluring possibilities. In my reading of *Grande sertão: veredas*, the tension between the (albeit relatively weak) finality of the ending and the (comparatively strong) lure of the state of suspension and potentiality of the *travessia* inflects *Grande sertão: veredas* with a tenor that is at once utopic and melancholic, a longing to immanently experience that which is always already being foreclosed, killed, and sold out from under us.²¹⁹

The question remains though: given that the Gloss of the Song of Siruiz is an exception to the rule and that Rosa's text takes on a more narrative form than this in nearly every other moment, how does the text resist the pull of teleology and return us again and again to a state of potentiality? For Rowland, the answer lies in the act of re-reading: instead of becoming legible from its teleological conclusion, Rowland argues, the novel becomes *re-readable*; knowledge emerges through recursively revisiting what has come before rather than moving unidirectionally

²¹⁸ Agamben writes: "the fact is that if there is a contradiction between two actual opposed realities (being P and not-being P), nothing keeps a thing from being actual and, at the same time, maintaining its potential not to be or to be otherwise" (*Potentialities* 262).

²¹⁹ This sentiment is articulated in "Os Cimos": "a gente nunca podia apreciar, direito, mesmo, as coisas bonitas ou boas, que aconteciam. [. . .] mesmo enquanto estavam acontecendo, a gente sabia que elas já estavam caminhando, para se acabar, roídas pelas horas, desmanchadas . . ." (33) "you could never, properly, enjoy the things that happened, not even the nice or the good ones [. . .] even when they were happening, you knew they were already moving on and would end up ground own, crumbled away to nothing by the hours that passed . . ." (my translation). Librandi-Rocha identifies this kind of longing as a form of *saudade* ("Sertão" 71).

through the text (“I Could Stop Here” 323). Before returning to the specifics of her reading though, I would like to point out that, on a general level, the enigmatic nature of Rosa’s text – and of non-narrative, “nonsensical” moments such as the Gloss of the Song of Siruiz in particular – necessitates perpetual re-reading. Because every step forward has the potential to throw into question, directly contradict, or re-write what we have just read, we are never finished reading what we have just read. The means by which the text insists that the past is always in the process of being (re)constituted are several: the narrative literally returns to previously narrated moments to narrate them anew; the narrative belatedly reveals information that changes how we read previously narrated moments; and the narrator, Riobaldo, continually undermines the authority and finality of his narration through self-questioning metacommentary, such as: “Conto mal? Reconto.”²²⁰

Rowland focuses specifically on the belated revelations, such as the posthumous revelation of Diadorim’s sex and the arrival of Nhorinhá’s letter eight years after the fact, as the mechanism through which the text compels us to re-read. These belated revelations lead us to try to fill in the holes in what we now realize was, as we were reading it, an incomplete version of the story. Our desire for an impossible, “complete” version of the story wherein everything is revealed on time lures us back away from the ending and into the center of the text. This regressive urge in the text, argues Rowland, allows Rosa to introduce to the form of the book a recursive and generative temporality that is foreign to it and at odds with its teleological structure (*A forma do meio* 122).

To take the most poignant example offered by the text, even the finality of Diadorim’s death is undermined by the posthumous revelation of her sex: the ending does not gratify us with an “at last” – at last Hermógenes is dead; at last Riobaldo can leave behind the life of *jagunçagem*, settle down and marry – but, rather, leaves us wondering, “What if . . .?” – what if Riobaldo had known the truth even a short while before Diadorim’s death made it irrevocably too late for any other version of the story to unfold?²²¹ Whether we literally re-read or simply reflect back on what we have read, the entire novel must now be contemplated as an enigma: in its omissions and lacunae, Rosa’s text contains not only the secrets to be divulged at its conclusion, but also the potentiality for many other possible endings, if only the message had arrived on time. We re-read not only to figure out which clues we missed the first time, but also to dwell for a little bit longer in a space and time *before* all of the text’s latent possibilities have been foreclosed by the death contained in the ending.

To follow the example we have been examining, it is only through such an act of re-reading the past, whether on Riobaldo’s part or on that of the reader, that Diadorim’s life might be extended into the present. For a brief moment immediately after Diadorim’s death and exposure as a woman, it appears as if the narrative is literally about to retrace its steps: Riobaldo expresses the intention to return to Veredas Mortas, the scene of the pact with the devil, possibly in order to make another pact that will restore Diadorim to life. The announced, but never

²²⁰ Other examples include: “Sei que estou contando errado, pelos altos” (114) “I know I’m telling it wrong, extremely”; “Desculpa me dê o senhor, sei que estou falando demais dos lados. Resvalo” (160) “You’ll have to excuse me; I know I’m speaking too much all over the place. I slip”; “Ah, mas falo falso. O senhor sente? Desmente? Eu desminto. Contar é muito, muito dificultoso [. . .] tantas coisas em tantos tempos, tudo miúdo recruzado” (200) “Ah, but I speak false. Can you feel? Do you deny? I deny. Telling is very, very, difficult [. . .] so many things in so many times, all finely mixed up” (my translations.)

²²¹ Maranhão cites the openness “to otherness and to the possibility of alternatives” contained in this hypothetical logic as one of the hallmarks of Rosa’s fiction, which embraces the plurality of meanings permitted by being fiction rather than History and political discourse (65).

realized, doubling of Riobaldo's trajectory back to where it has been (Riobaldo falls ill and is unable to complete the regressive journey) serves as a figure for the act of re-reading that this revelation spurs in the reader. Significantly, in this moment, Riobaldo emphasizes the act of returning, or repeating his steps, rather than any deal with a supernatural power, as that which might bring his beloved back to life: "De volta, de volta. Como se tudo revendo, refazendo, eu pudesse receber outra vez o que não tinha sido, repor Diadorim em vida?" (616-617).²²² Notice how Riobaldo's desire to see again and do again is not the desire to re-live the past as it was, but, rather, to live the past *that never was*, the past in which he would have found out in time that Diadorim was a woman and realized that their love need not be "impossível." This regressive longing, which is expressed by Riobaldo and echoed in the form of the text, and which leads us to retrace our steps, again and again, runs counter to a Hegelian, teleological understanding of history that sees all past events as leading to the present, to the exclusion of what might have been and what Riobaldo (and perhaps the reader as well) desperately hopes might still be.

Riobaldo's decision to withhold the revelation of Diadorim's sex until the moment in the story when he discovered is emblematic of his immersive narratorial style. This moment of revelation is one of the few times Riobaldo owns up to having deliberately withheld information from his interlocutor:

Eu conheci! Como em todo o tempo antes eu não contei ao senhor – e merecê peço: -- mas para o senhor divulgar comigo, a par, justo travo de tanto segredo, sabendo somente no átimo em que eu também só soube . . . Que Diadorim era o corpo de uma mulher, moça perfeita (615)²²³

Riobaldo emphasizes the need for O doutor to discover Diadorim's secret along with the character Riobaldo, thus justifying his decision to focalize his narrative from within the time of its unraveling. Throughout his narrative, he tells his story as if "revendo, refazendo": rather than position himself as an omniscient narrator who might provide O doutor (and us) with an overview of the sertão, he takes us down the winding veredas; we are asked to walk alongside the character Riobaldo, knowing only what he knows in a given moment.

As Patricia Carmello points out, however, we are not submerged in this perspective of within-time *all of the time*: the self-reflexive commentary of the narrator Riobaldo and his references to the time of narration introduce temporal play. Toggling back and forth between immersive and more distant perspectives allows Riobaldo to keep the past open and dynamic, animating it as a dance "nesta alternância entre o ir e vir, entre a proximidade e a distância" wherein "as coisas passadas a se remexerem nos lugares, fazendo balancê, e dá à rememoração seu caráter móvel, plástico, reversível, abrindo-se para a reinvenção" (175).²²⁴ This playful back-and-forth allows the images to resist being too closely bound by language: "Elas mantêm-se insubordinadas, rebeldes ao aprisionamento na linguagem, exatamente como as imagens da memória [. . .]" (178).²²⁵ Nevertheless, even the more distant of the two perspectives that Riobaldo-narrator occupies is never a totalizing vista; it never yields full mastery. As Carmello

²²² "Back, back – as though by seeing it all once more, repeating all, I might have again that which I had not had – Diadorim restored to life" (486).

²²³ "Then I learned what I have been keeping from you – and please forgive me – so you would discover this bitter secret at the same instant that I did. Diadorim's body was that of a woman, a perfect young woman." (485)

²²⁴ "in this alternating between going and coming, between proximity and distance" wherein "past things shuffle places, swinging, gives memory its mobile character, plastic, reversible, opening itself up to reinvention" (my translation).

²²⁵ "They maintain themselves insubordinate, rebelling against imprisonment in language, exactly like the images of memory [. . .]" (my translation).

indicates, just as the immersive perspective is limited by its myopia, the distant perspective is limited by the horizons of forgetting and riddled with holes and points of opacity. It is often impossible to determine which of these represent the limits of Riobaldo's own memory and consciousness and which of these represent deliberately-withheld information. In either case, the distant perspective is rendered incapable of delivering the objective judgment it promises.

“... o que a gente julga é o passado ...”

A narrativa de Riobaldo não é o mero relato de fatos ou eventos remotos ou petrificados num passado, mas antes uma parte de sua vida que continua a pulsar, uma fase em seu crescimento que vem sendo constantemente questionada e reformulada – em suma, um processo dialético sem fim.

-- Eduardo Coutinho, *Grande Sertão: Veredas: Travessias* (92)²²⁶

Riobaldo recusa o passado como passado.

-- João Adolfo Hansen, *O “O”: A ficção da literatura em Grande Sertão: Veredas* (178)²²⁷

Riobaldo's perennially failed attempts to make his life fit a teleological structure confound any attempt on the part of the reader or O doutor to pass judgment on Riobaldo's story, because it affords us no external, temporally stable position from which to judge. Many readers have read the scene of the *juízo*, in which the captured chief Zé Bebelo is put on trial, as a metonym for the judgment solicited by Riobaldo from O doutor or as staging a judgment on the viability of *jagunçagem* in a rapidly modernizing world.²²⁸ As Riobaldo muses in the middle of narrating the *juízo* of Zé Bebelo, however, the problem with judgment is that it applies only to the past, to the dead; the matter of how to make sense of life while we are living it is far more difficult: “Quem sabe direito o que uma pessoa é? Antes sendo: julgamento é sempre defeituoso, porque o que a gente julga é o passado [. . .] Quem julga, já morreu. Viver é muito perigoso, mesmo” (285).²²⁹ The only valid way to know a person or event, we might extrapolate, would need to be from within the experience of the present, when it is least possible to construct an objective overview of the situation.

If Riobaldo appears dismayed that his past confounds the imposition of a rational, chronological narrative, he also defiantly asserts, echoing Benjamin, that if we are to apprehend it at all, we must apprehend it in its fleeting, fragmentary instants rather than as a totalizing narrative.²³⁰ When the instant, the temporal fragment, becomes the one thing of which we can be sure, any attempt to totalize and weave a chronology, a narrative, or a life out of individual instants begins to seem not only futile but laughable. As Riobaldo comments to O doutor when

²²⁶ “Riobaldo's narrative is not a mere story of remote or petrified in the past facts or events, but rather a part of his life that continues to pulsate, a phase in his growth that is constantly being questioned and reformulated – in sum, a dialectical process without end” (my translation).

²²⁷ “Riobaldo refuses the past as past” (my translation).

²²⁸ See, for example, Maranhão's reading of the trial as a convergence of the seemingly irreconcilable paradigms of civilization and barbarism (66) and as putting on trial not only the literal defendant Zé Bebelo but also the old world order represented by Joca Ramiro: “the world of the rural oligarchy and the ‘archaic men’” (88-89).

²²⁹ “Who knows for sure what a person really is? Then, if no one knows, a judgment is always faulty, because what one judges is the past.” (224) Taylor and Onís do not translate the last lines. My translation: “Who judges/ whom we judge, has already died. To live is very dangerous indeed.”

²³⁰ Benjamin writes, “The 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 [. . .] To articulate the past historically [. . .] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (“Theses” 255).

attempting to narrate the relatively uneventful interval of time before he makes his dubious pact with the devil, the urge to sum up mere moments or days into something more meaningful comes from an outsider's perspective; the impossibility of succeeding in this endeavor is neither strange nor sad to those who live day-to-day: "Cada dia é um dia. E o tempo estava alisado. Triste é a vida do jagunço – dirá o senhor. Ah, fica me rindo. O senhor não diga nada. "Vida" é noção que a gente completa seguido assim, mas só por lei duma ideia falsa. Cada dia é um dia" (414).²³¹ The lack of temporal continuity in Riobaldo's narrative might then be understood as an expression of his commitment to inhabiting each day or instant he recounts; he refuses to produce a coherent whole because doing so would constitute a betrayal of his commitment to the singularity and truth of the fragment.

The fragmentation and incessant temporal play of the narrative make it particularly difficult to judge who was/ is *o jagunço* Riobaldo, even though the narrator Riobaldo repeatedly asks us to do so: "O instante que é, é --- o senhor nele se segure. Só eu sei [. . .] E é preciso, por aí, o senhor ver: quem é que era e que foi aquele jagunço Riobaldo!" (487).²³² "*O jagunço* Riobaldo" whom we are asked to "see" in this moment spans the present, the imperfect, and the preterit, suggesting that the identity of the narrator both is and is not continuous with that of the *jagunço* Riobaldo whose story he tells.

The tautological assertions "O instante que é, é" and "Cada dia é um dia" refuse to abstract the experience of any given moment in time to a stage of teleological development; they refuse to make the day or the instant signify within a larger structure of meaning. The singularity of the day or the instant and the non-uniformity of time in Riobaldo's narrative constitute another way in which the text pushes back against normative narratives of modernity. By using the present tense to insist that "O instante que é, é . . ." and "Cada dia é um dia" Riobaldo rejects a historicist view of the past as a "progression through a homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin "Theses") or a "sequence of events like beads of a rosary" (ibid 263) wherein past events are treated as inert in their pastness, retroactively shaped to fit a particular explanatory narrative of the present, and calcified into a singular and ideologically convenient version of history (namely that of the victors).²³³

Moreover, the narrator's questioning of whether or not the *jagunço* Riobaldo can even be narrated in the past tense has the effect of throwing into crisis what Leo Bersani calls the model of the divided subject, wherein the conscious mind in the present is perceived as separate from the past (as well as the unconscious) and therefore capable of objectifying, knowing, and judging it (68). Memory, in the traditional, narrative sense depends upon the model of the divided self, which "allows us to sequester the past in the past" (ibid). Bersani suggests, however, that an

²³¹ "Each day is another day. And the weather had cooled off. Sad is the life of a jagunço, you will say. It makes me laugh. Don't tell me that. Because of a false idea, we got the notion that "Life" is a continuous something. Each day is a day by itself" (326).

²³² Taylor and Onís do not translate the first lines cited My translation: "The moment that is, is – you can be sure of it." Taylor and Onís translate the later lines: "And from this you will have to see, sir, who that jagunço Riobaldo really was, and what he was like!" (383). This translation irons out the temporal confusion of the original: "who is and who was that jagunço Riobaldo!" This sentiment is echoed throughout the text: in a later moment, Riobaldo exclaims, "O jagunço Riobaldo. Fui eu? Fui e não fui! – porque não sou, não quero ser. Deus esteja!" (232)

²³³ This is Benjamin's critique of historicism, but it also resonates with Bolle's reading of *Grande Sertão: veredas* as a re-writing of Brazil's national foundation narrative: Riobaldo's narrative, while still written from the point of view of a victor, in that Riobaldo successfully rises to the class of the landholding elite, demystifies the narrative of the triumph of *ordem e progresso* over *barbarie* and backwardness, suggesting that it veils "uma história culposa e escondida" ("a guilty and hidden history") of a pact between power and crime ("Um romance de formação do Brasil" 281).

alternative relationship to the past might be healthier: if, instead of binding each moment into place within a chronological narrative, we could experience it immanently, as part of the present, we might allow each moment to retain its potentiality; we could explore possible realities in the present instead of foreclosing all but the realized acts we locate in the past by narrating them.

Bersani notes that, in spite of neurobiological evidence that suggests that “the past does not persist in the form of unchanged foreign objects buried within the psyche” and that mental time is more likely experienced as a “spiraling movement” than as a linear trajectory, most models of memory and history find it extremely difficult to move beyond the model of the divided self and to close the distance between present and past, between knowing mind and object of knowledge:

It is difficult to collapse the distance over which knowledge exercises its illusory mastery of otherness. In particular, the persistence of record, of textual or documentary past, serves the belief in the reality of the past as akin to a distinct, bounded, knowable object. (68-69)

It is, of course, this classical, archival notion of memory and history, upon which the nation state relies when it attempts to produce a national past through positivistic documentation, that Guimarães Rosa’s text upends. The repercussions are radical, both for the ethical question of how we relate to and (fail to) judge Riobaldo and for the political question of how we view the sertão and the unruly way of life it represents: both Riobaldo and the sertão cease to be a “distinct, bounded, knowable object[s]” capable of being sequestered in the past.

By refusing to produce *o jagunço Riobaldo* nor his story as a reified other, the text makes it impossible for us to judge him, as we are asked to do. As such, it may also solicit a different kind of ethical recognition, one that does not hinge upon viewing Riobaldo’s life from a detached and objective vantage point. Judith Butler writes that whereas judgment “inevitably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged,” a less than fully “successful” and totalizing account of oneself may, in suspending judgment, enable other forms of recognition and relationality that may close this distance and counter the violence entailed in the production of the self as a fully coherent and self-identical subject.²³⁴

In other words, the seemingly erratic temporality of Riobaldo’s tale has ethical and political stakes as well as formal ones. As Dantas Lima has argued, the very errancy and lack of directionality with which the narrative moves poses a challenge to progressive narratives of modernization (122-123). More specifically, the text poses a challenge to the notion of the past as a reified other to be apprehended and bound through narrative and, instead, allows past moments, treated as irreducible to stages of a teleological progression leading to the present, to occupy the present and be relived and reinvented in the present. The distance between the present and the past, between the narrator and his past selves and lost loves is constantly being collapsed:

²³⁴ “In fact, recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other” (*Giving an Account of Oneself* (44-45). In contrast, “narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others. To hold a person accountable for his life or her life in narrative form may even be to require a falsification of that life in order to satisfy the criterion of a certain kind of ethics, one that tends to break with relationality [. . .] Indeed, if, in the name of ethics, we (violently) require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us by offering a narrative account or issuing a confession, then, conversely, if we permit, sustain, and accommodate the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence may follow. If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require. This failure to narrate fully may well indicate the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others.” (ibid 63-64)

everything that has been (and been lost) and everything that might have been continues to inhabit a narrative that is powerless to (or perhaps refuses to) master them, lay them to rest, or bind them into a totalizing narrative. Doing so would, of course, consummate a death that the openness of the narrative seeks to indefinitely forestall. In Rosa's text, meaning and identity, rather than being teleologically determined from the end-point of the narrative, are constantly being negotiated through the re-telling of a past that is never fully past, never fully separate from the subject doing the telling, and therefore never fully knowable.

To return to Brooks's terminology, Riobaldo's challenge as a narrator lies in how to gain the mastery over his story that he ambivalently craves through the iterative work of re-telling, and "binding" meaning through repetition without having to produce a narrative per se: a teleological form whose inevitable end threatens to enclose and ossify the middle space – *the travessia* – which Riobaldo yearns to keep open, living, and in fact, inhabitable. As such, despite all of his apologizing and self-deprecation, Riobaldo's failure to make his story fit the teleological structure that he intuitively expects of it is a victory for him. Not only does his narratorial style of immersing us in each moment as it is unfolding thwart any attempt to pass judgment on his actions; it also makes it nearly impossible to draw any hard lines between before and after, allowing him to indefinitely forestall the closure of his narrative and, as such, to keep the sertão, the unbounded way of life represented by *jagunçagem*, and its delightfully torturous ambiguity (as epitomized by Diadorim's gender) alive long after these have been literally or figuratively killed: enclosed, "civilized," decided, brought under federal jurisdiction, mapped out, taxonomized, disambiguated.

Preserving the potentiality of language

As many readers have observed, Rosa's sertão is a linguistic space and a temporal expanse as much as it is a geographic referent or a political territory; preserving its openness is thus as much a matter of insisting on the multivalence of language and the nonlinearity of narrative time as it is about resisting physical enclosure or the imposition of federal rule. Although I have been focusing primarily on the chronological structure of *Grande Sertão: veredas*, the drive I am describing as a narrative forestalling of closure in an attempt to preserve openness and potentiality and avoid reifying the past or congealing the significance of events can also be observed in Guimarães Rosa's treatment of the Portuguese language.

Rosa has famously declared that the model of commitment he espouses takes the form of a quest to revitalize the Portuguese language: "Somente renovando a língua é que se pode renovar o mundo" (Lorenz 88).²³⁵ Even in this quest for renovation, Rosa rejects the teleological language of revolution and views his work instead as regressive or restorative; the work he urgently undertakes is not that of reinventing language, but rather, that of sharpening a dulled instrument or polish a tarnished treasure: "O idioma é a única porta para o infinito, mas infelizmente está oculto sob montanhas de cinzas. Daí resulta que tenha de limpá-lo [. . .]" (Lorenz 83).²³⁶ For Rosa, revitalizing language might even be seen as a reactionary gesture in that it involves tracing language back to an originary state:

"Não sou um revolucionário da língua [. . .] Se tem que haver uma frase feita, eu preferia que me chamassem de reacionário da língua, pois quero voltar cada dia à origem da língua, lá onde a palavra ainda está nas entranhas da alma, para lhe dar luz segundo a

²³⁵ "Only by renovating language can one renovate the world" (my translation).

²³⁶ "Language is the only doorway into infinity, but unfortunately it is hidden under mountains of ashes. Hence we have to clean it [. . .]" (my translation).

minha imagem. Veja como se tornam insensatas as frases feitas, tais como ‘revolucionário’ ou ‘reacionário’ [. . .]” (Lorenz 84).²³⁷

It is important to point out that the originary language Rosa seeks is not an essentializing state of stable truths nor fixed meaning of words; to the contrary, Rosa pursues a state of potentiality, of infinite possibility, where words and their meanings are still “in the entrails of the soul.” Rosa laments that the Portuguese commonly spoken has fallen to a state where conventionalized usage produces only the congealed and empty significations of clichés and “frases feitas.” In this fallen state, Rosa considers language dead: “O que chamamos hoje linguagem corrente é um monstro morto. A língua serve para expressar ideias, mas a linguagem corrente expressa apenas clichês e não ideias; por isso está morta” (88).²³⁸ To combat this “monstro morto”, Rosa treats language as a living, breathing being, rather than as a set of pre-defined words and rules, which Bolle argues allows him to keep language “num estado de suspensão” (*Grande sertão: veredas* 442-443).

Rosa’s quest to revitalize the Portuguese language through linguistic innovations such as creating neologisms, fusing existing words into *portmanteau* words, borrowing foreign and archaic words, and reconfiguring conventional syntactical patterns is the subject of extensive scholarship, and a thorough treatment of this topic lies beyond the scope of this project²³⁹. I would like to dwell for a moment, however, on an important point that critic Eduardo F. Coutinho makes about how we are to understand Rosa’s linguistic innovations. In keeping with Rosa’s own insistence that he is not creating something new but, rather, restoring the original power of existing language, Coutinho sees Rosa’s exercises in the defamiliarization of the Portuguese language as a way of returning to language the expressive *potential* that is lost when the meanings of words and phrases become ossified:

O escritor não inventa ‘significantes’ inteiramente novos, dissociados das formas existentes em sua língua; ele não cria uma língua própria, independente da sua. Ao contrário, sua tarefa é *explorar as possibilidades latentes* dentro do sistema da língua com que está lidando e conferir existência concreta àquilo que existia até então *como algo meramente em potencial* [. . .] Este processo de alteração do ‘significante’ não se restringe, entretanto ao nível puramente vocabular. Sintagmas e às vezes sentenças inteiras, que se haviam tornado clichês, são frequentemente alterados pelo artista com o fim de recobrar a sua expressividade originária. (“Processo” 205, emphasis mine)²⁴⁰

We might think of Rosa’s de-conventionalized language as an attempt to bring back the play and ambiguity that is lost when we fall into the habit of merely reproducing conventional usage and syntax. In excess of the denotative meaning of a word or phrase is “toda uma rede semântica” (Coutinho 206), whose nuances are lost and whose latent potential is foreclosed when “normative” usage goes unquestioned. Coutinho cites the appropriation of the word “sertão” by

²³⁷ “I am not a revolutionary of language [. . .] If there must be a ready-made phrase for it, I would prefer that they called me a reactionary of language, since I want to return each day to the origin of language, there where the word is still in the entrails of the soul, to illuminate it according to my image. See how ready-made phrases become senseless, just like “revolutionary” and “reactionary””

²³⁸ “What we today call common language is a dead monster. Language is good for expressing ideas, but common language only expresses clichés, not ideas; this is why it is dead” (my translation).

²³⁹ In addition to Coutinho’s article, see Mary Daniel’s *João Guimarães Rosa: travessia literária*.

²⁴⁰ “The writer doesn’t invent entirely new ‘meanings,’ dissociated from existing forms in the language; he doesn’t create his own language, independent of it. To the contrary, his task is to explore the latent possibilities within the system of language with which he is dealing and confer concrete existence on that which existed until then as mere potential [. . .]. This process of alteration of ‘meaning’ isn’t restricted purely to the level of vocabulary. Syntax and sometimes entire sentences that have become clichéd are often altered by the artist in order to recover their original expressivity” (my translation).

regionalist literature as one example of a one-dimensional cliché – the sertão as an inhospitable enemy of man, or, conversely, as a picturesque refuge -- usurping the wider potential of a word (*Grande sertão: veredas* 23, 28). This wider potential is what Rosa will seek to restore.

Rosa's critique of the dead monster of "linguagem corrente" recalls Benjamin's critique of historicism: what is lost when living, breathing language is reduced to "frases feitas" or when scintillating flashes of the past are reduced to an ossified narrative of history are all of the latent possibilities in excess of the one meaning, one narrative, or one history that emerges. This potentiality of less-than-fully-realized narrative and less-than-fully-exhausted signification is what Rosa seeks to keep alive in *Grande Sertão: veredas*. As such, his experiments with narrative chronology cannot be fully separated from his experiments with language, nor can these formal decisions be treated as separate from the implicit politics of the novel. As Bolle argues, Rosa's treatment of language as a perennially contested ground on which cultural and class conflicts play out is what allows him to re-write Brazilian history and give voice versions of the past that have been silenced by official history and which cannot be voiced in standard Brazilian Portuguese.

III. O sertão é uma espera enorme

"A modo que o resumo da minha vida, em desde menino, era para dar cabo definitivo do Hermógenes – naquele dia, naquele lugar." --Riobaldo (590)²⁴¹

Riobaldo seems convinced that we ought to read his narrative teleologically even as he thwarts any attempt to do so by delivering a digressive and regressive narrative that seems to veer always away from the promised ending. One of the most obvious obstacles to reading Riobaldo's life story as all leading up to the climactic moment when he achieves his destiny by killing Hermógenes is the fact that Riobaldo does not kill Hermógenes; Diadorim does, in a mutually fatal duel. Because Riobaldo is Diadorim's *chefe* at this point, the victory over Hermógenes' band is attributed to Riobaldo, but the shameful truth is that Riobaldo's principle role in the final battle at Paredão is that of an observer who impotently looks down upon the action unfolding below from a safe distance. He does not even technically witness the deaths of Hermógenes and Diadorim because he loses consciousness at this moment. By obscuring the supposed *telos* of Riobaldo's story in this way, Rosa undermines the ability of the ending to bestow totalizing meaning on the meandering tale that precedes it.

I argue, furthermore, that the narration of this scene belies Riobaldo's ambivalence about the act of witnessing, which underlies the entirety of his first-person narration. As Patricia Carmello has argued, and as my reading also supports, Riobaldo's mode of *testemunho* is one that alternates between the perspective of a subject submerged in the events as they unfold and the perspective of a divided subject who looks back upon his life from a remove (140-141). Moreover, I submit, the temporal remove of his position as a retrospective narrator is linked Riobaldo's sense of survivor's guilt. Narrating from a vantage point "depois das tempestades" necessarily implies having survived, having made it to the far side of the *travessia* and thereby having abandoned it. My reading of the scene of the final duel links Riobaldo's tortured ambivalence about finding himself looking down/ looking back upon his life from a remove to his guilt over being a survivor of the events he recounts.

²⁴¹ "you might say the sole purpose of my life, from the time I was a boy, was to put an end to Hermógenes – on that day, in that place" (465).

As he sets up his account of the final duel, which he witnesses from a window overlooking the street where Diadorim and Hermógenes will have their fateful knife-fight, Riobaldo includes seeing from a safe distance along with killing and not dying as actions he must own up to: “Não morri, e matei. E vi. Sem perigo de minha pessoa” (605).²⁴² Riobaldo emphasizes that his decision to remove himself from the fray of the final battle was difficult but ultimately describes it as the recognition of his duty as commander: “E eu, hesitado nos meus pés, refiz fê: teve o instante, eu sabia meu dever de fazer. Descer para lá, me ajuntar com os meus, para ajudar? Não podia, não devia de; daí, conheci. Ali, um homem, um chefe, carecia de ficar – naquele meu lugar, no sobrado” (606).²⁴³ The word “conheci” will echo throughout the narration of the final battle scene, morphing from a recognition of Riobaldo’s duty, to a recognition of his destiny, to a recognition of what is about to happen – “Conheci o que estava para ser” (609) – to, finally, a recognition of Diadorim’s true identity as a woman, which is first narrated with the simple phrase, “Eu conheci!” (615).

In the moments of anticipation leading up to the dramatic climax, Riobaldo’s repetition of “conheci” becomes a performance of the confidence, courage, and certainty that he has craved yet lacked throughout most of the narrative. Protesting too much, Riobaldo confidently asserts that he is finally seeing his destiny clearly: “E conheci: officio de destino meu, real, era o de não ter medo. Ter medo nenhum. Não tive! Não tivesse, e tudo se desmanchava delicado para distante de mim, pelo meu vencer: ilha em águas claras . . . Conheci” (607).²⁴⁴ Just as Riobaldo’s assertions that he is not afraid will promptly be called into question by the involuntary paralysis and shaking that take over his body during the duel, his confidence that he can finally see his destiny lucidly, cartographically, as if staring down at an island in clear waters, is called into question by the visual opacity – “um pano de nuvens” – that will eclipse his view of the deaths that take place below him.

Before analyzing the dissolution of vision in this scene, however, it is worth contextualizing Riobaldo’s assertions about destiny. Riobaldo has always wished that fulfilling his destiny were as clear-cut as acting out a pre-scripted role in a play, but this ideal is always presented in tension with a more confusing reality. Looking back on the tumultuous time he spent fighting under Hermógenes, Riobaldo reflects: “Em desde aquele tempo, eu já achava que a vida da gente vai em êrros, como um relato sem pés nem cabeça, por falta de sisudez e alegria. Vida devia de ser como na sala do teatro, cada um inteiro fazendo como forte gosto seu papel, desempenho. Era o que eu acho, é o que eu achava” (260-261).²⁴⁵ As suggested by Riobaldo’s strange insistence on the temporal continuity of his beliefs – “it was what I believe and it is what I believed” – the gap between the mad, senseless activities of living and the ideal of wholeheartedly acting out one’s destiny has consistently plagued his sense of well-being. It is curious, moreover, that in a text often described as embodying the flux, branching digressions, and perpetual revision of oral story telling, the narrator longs for the fixity and singularity of a

²⁴² “I killed but was not killed. And I saw. Without danger to my person” (478).

²⁴³ “And I, hesitating on my feet, regained my confidence: instantly I knew where my duty lay. Was it to go down into the street and join my men? I could not, should not, do it; I saw that. A man, a chief, has to remain there, in that place on the top floor” (478).

²⁴⁴ “[. . .] I recognized that my real duty was not to be afraid. To have no fear whatever. And I had none! Let me have none, and all would give way before me. I was sure of it” (479). Taylor and Onís do not translate the image of “an island in clear waters.”

²⁴⁵ “Ever since that time, I have thought that people’s lives, for want of common sense and zest, flow aimlessly, like a story without head or tail. Life should be lived as on a stage, each on playing his part with great gusto. That is what I thought, it is what I still think” (204).

written script to follow: “Só o que eu quis, todo o tempo, o que eu pejei para achar, era uma só coisa [. . .] que existe uma receita, a norma dum caminho certo, estreito, de cada uma pessoa viver [. . .] E que: para cada dia, e cada hora, só uma ação possível da gente é que consegue ser a certa [. . .]” (500).²⁴⁶ Rather than abandoning his faith that such a script exist, Riobaldo laments that the script is never disclosed, leaving human actors to err, live false lives, and long for access to the true scripts from which they ought to be reading: “aquela outra é a lei, escondida e vivível mas não achável, do verdadeiro viver: que para cada pessoa, sua continuação, já foi projetada, como o que se põe, em teatro, para cada representador – sua parte, que antes já foi inventada, num papel . . .” (500).²⁴⁷ Riobaldo yearns for a “papel,” both in the sense of a theatrical role to be assigned rather than invented in the moment and a literal paper, script, or law from which to read.

Curiously, in the scene of the duel, Riobaldo insists that he is not only awaiting his destiny—“Esperando meu destino” – nor glimpsing the script for the first time, nor even reading from it but, more precisely, copying it out: “eu estive, copiando o meu destino” (608).²⁴⁸ This strange phrase evokes the passage from Walter Benjamin’s “One Way Street” that multiple critics, myself included, have cited as an apt metaphor for Riobaldo’s style of narration: in the meditation titled “Chinese Goods,” Benjamin contrasts the experience of walking along a country lane with the experience of looking down on a landscape from an airplane. So convenient and portable is this metaphor that its original context is often ignored, but we would do well to remember that Benjamin elaborates it to explain what makes the Chinese copyist the “supreme guarantor of literary culture”:

The force exerted by the country lane varies according to whether one walks along it or flies over it in an aeroplane. Similarly the force exerted by a text varies according to whether one is reading it or copying it out. The person in the aeroplane sees only how the lane moves through the landscape, unwinding in conformity with the laws of the surrounding terrain. Only someone walking along the lane will experience its dominion and see how, from the selfsame countryside as for the flyer is simply the unfolding plain, at every turn it summons up distances, views, clearings, and outlooks as the commanding officer calls back soldiers from a front. Likewise, only the copied-out text commands the mind of the person reproducing it, whereas the person simply reading it never gets to know the new aspects of his inner being that the text, that lane through ever-denser internal jungle, opens up: the fact is, the reader yields to the movement of his “I” in the open air of daydream while the copyist enables that movement to be directed. (52)

Though it is easy to read this passage as simply prizing the immersive experience of the ground traveller over the distant perspective of the airplane passenger, Benjamin’s emphasis is on the relative difference in autonomy between the copyist and the reader: whereas the reader’s subjectivity hovers above the text, retaining command over its own movements, the inner being

²⁴⁶ Only, what I wanted all the time, what I strove to find, was just one thing [. . .] that there exists a formula, a norm for a right and narrow path for every person to live by[. . .] Every day, at every hour, there can be only one possible step which is the right one” (393-394).

²⁴⁷ “the law – obeyable but hard of discovery – of true living. For every person, for his continued existence, a part has been planned for him to play, as for actors on the stage, whose parts are thought out beforehand and written down on paper” (394).

²⁴⁸ Taylor and Onís translate “esperando” as “Sweating out my destiny”(480), apparently playing on the sonic resonance with “suar”; Rosa’s neologism also combines the verb “esperar” (to wait or hope) with its noun form “esperança” (a hope). They translate “copiando” as “following out”: “I stayed where I was, following out my destiny” (480).

of the copyist is disclosed through directed movement through the dense landscape of the text. In Benjamin's bellicose imagery, the copyist submits to the movements of the text as to a superior officer who commands, summons, and directs. As such, experiencing the "dominion" of a text and the "force" it exerts is not simply cast as the Romantic experience of being overwhelmed by a powerful or sublime landscape; it is, rather, a matter of yoking oneself to the text moment by moment and ceasing to wander independently from the shifting landscapes it presents. In other words, it is an exercise in subjection: when the "I" no longer soars above the text but emerges through the text's meanderings, it is master of neither the landscape nor itself.

This passage thus suggests a limit to the liberating potential of immersing oneself in the *travessia*. As Butler's theory would predict, claiming an identity, "um papel," and a destiny, is inescapably contingent upon an act of subjection, for the coherent self only emerges as constructed by social discourses. Yet, the impossibility of narrating himself as an autonomous and self-determined "I" is in itself liberating to the guilt-racked narrator of *Grande sertão: veredas*. In submitting to his destiny as a copyist to the text copied out or a pedestrian to the landscape traversed, Riobaldo relieves himself of the doubt and moral angst that accompany free will and self-determination. In other words, the narrator's renunciation of the distant, cartographic perspective he might claim over his story is a form of allegiance to the world he narrates *and* an attempt to rid himself of the guilt of having outlived this world. Paradoxically, however, this model of submission requires renouncing the clear overview from which Riobaldo claims to finally recognize his destiny in the scene of the final battle (607). Rather than granting him mastery of a clear and distant landscape, living the never-disclosed master script – "a lei, escondida e vivível mas não achável" – requires an immersive blindness: "Eu atravesso as coisas – e no meio da travessia não vejo!" (51). Submitting oneself to destiny is an act of faith rather than an act of self-mastery; it entails accepting an embodied and relational existence rather than seeking out the detached and totalizing positionality that Riobaldo-narrator persistently reminds us he has failed to achieve.

It is therefore fitting that the novel's climatic scene is narrated both as a scene of the gradual unveiling of the truth *and* as a scene of the disintegration of vision and comprehension, as the act of witnessing becomes a fully embodied experience. The repetition of the word "vi," which appears six times in two pages, punctuates Riobaldo's account and sonically resonates with the other revelations recounted in the preterit: "Entendi;" "Conheci" (609). Yet these repetitions culminate in the sudden eclipse of Riobaldo's vision at the moment when Diadorim falls. After a vivid description of the knife fight and what looks to be a fatal blow to Hermógenes, Riobaldo's previously lucid vision gives way to clouds and chaotic sounds as he seems to lose consciousness:

Gemidos de todo ódio. Os urros . . . Como, de repente, não vi mais Diadorim! No céu, um pano do nuvens . . . Diadorim! Naquilo, eu então pude, no corte da dôr: me mexi, mordi minha mão, de redoer, com ira de tudo . . . Subi os abismos . . . De mais longe, agora davam uns tiros, esses tiros vinham de profundas profundezas. Trespassei.

Eu estou depois das tempestades. (611)²⁴⁹

After the duel, Riobaldo will be found by his men, having passed out, his eyes still closed (612). The fact that this crucial moment remains unwitnessed and unnarrated by Riobaldo suggests that

²⁴⁹ "Cries of utter hatred. Howls. Suddenly, I could see Diadorim no longer! In the sky, a blanket of clouds. Diadorim! Now, in a paroxysm of pain, I found I was able to move. I stirred myself, I bit my hand in fury. I rose out of the abyss. I could hear firing in the distance, shots coming from great depths. Then I passed out. I have outlasted the storms" (482).

he is psychologically incapable of seeing Diadorim die, thus lending support to my reading of Riobaldo as avoiding coming to terms with or laying to rest the death of his beloved by refusing to consummate it in narrative.²⁵⁰ It is also significant, however, that Riobaldo proves incapable of witnessing, let alone participating in the death of Hermógenes, the death towards which he claims his entire life story has been oriented. Absenting himself from the *telos* of his story in this way calls into question how this moment, which turns out to be one of opacity rather than revelation, can lend meaning to the preceding narrative, let alone provide it with proper closure.

Riobaldo's role as an effectually blind witness is closely linked to his impotence in this scene. Though he justifies his position – looking down on the fighting from a safe distance – as necessary and proper to his role as commander, the company he keeps in his lookout – the blind man Borrromeu and the child Guirigó – suggests that he has been sequestered away with those who are unfit for battle. Riobaldo was once a celebrated marksman, but as his arms begin to quake and fatigue near the climax of this scene, he finds he cannot support the weight of his rifle, let alone shoot, and he becomes as useless as the blindman Borrromeu, who, in a superfluous gesture, closes his eyes just before the action begins. For Riobaldo in this scene, witnessing becomes a full-body experience, one so absorbing and paralyzing that he can neither act nor speak. During the knife duel Riobaldo sweats and shakes, becomes nauseous and suffers a headache. By the end, his mouth can do nothing but quiver and drool: Rosa specifies that throughout this episode he remains incapable of cursing, screaming, praying, drinking, and smoking. No longer an actor in the world and not yet a retrospective narrator capable of imposing coherence on his perceptions, he merely registers sounds in onomatopoeia: the “tá-tá, tiro,” the “vuvú, vavavá de conversa ruim” (609). Meanwhile, his speech and mental lucidity appear to disintegrate. Convinced that the devil is laughing at him, Riobaldo attempts to address Borrromeu, but he has lost the ability to form words: ““Voxe, uai! Não entendo . . .” – tartamelei. Gago, não: gagaz. Conforme que, quando ia principiar a falar, presenti que a língua estremecia para trás, e igual assim todas as partes de minha cara, que tremiam – dos beijos, nas faces, até na ponta do nariz e do queixo.” (607-608).²⁵¹ Curiously, Riobaldo's momentary speech impediment leeches into the language of the narrator as well; his language becomes performative rather than denotative as he misforms the verb *tartamudear*, “to stammer,” and appears to stumble and choke over the verb *gaguejar*, “to stutter.”

In fact, I submit, the proximity between Riobaldo the character and Riobaldo the narrator is as great in this scene as in any moment in the narrative. Following Patricia Carmello and João Adolfo Hansen, I read the moment in which Riobaldo crosses over from actor to narrating subject as taking place in this scene, which culminates in a sense of remove from the events narrated as Riobaldo begins to lose consciousness: “Subi os abismos . . . De mais longe, agora davam uns tiros, esses tiros vinham de profundas profundezas. Trespassei./ Eu estou depois das tempestades” (611).²⁵²

²⁵⁰ In fact, Riobaldo attempts to negate this death as he finally announces it: “Não escrevo, não falo! – para assim não ser: não foi, não é, não fica sendo! Diadorim . . .” (614) “I don't write, I don't speak! – so that it won't be: it wasn't, it isn't, it doesn't keep being! Diadorim . . .” (my translation).

²⁵¹ “‘I don't understand,’ I stammered. Stammered, no; I gagged – for when I started to talk, I felt my tongue drawing back, and my whole face trembling, my cheeks, lips, even the tip of my nose and my chin” (479). Taylor and Onis do not reproduce Riobaldo's malformations of “stammered” and “gagged.”

²⁵² Patricia Carmello suggests that the narrative *travessia* must be read in part as Riobaldo's crossing-over from character to narrator in a through-the-looking-glass moment where the text constitutes the mirror (135). Hansen reads Riobaldo's narrative discourse as issuing from the silence and opacity of the vertiginous time-space of the duel as witnessed by Riobaldo, a moment he characterizes as a “vórtice, redemoinho em que a linguagem se ausenta;

“Quando foi que minha culpa começou?”

As I have already emphasized in my reading of the Gloss of the Song of Siruiz, the narrator Riobaldo is deeply preoccupied with the impossibility of condensing the source of his pervasive sense of guilt into discreet, locatable, narratable events. Did he sell his soul to the devil? Did he transgress by desiring someone he believed to be a man? Did he prove a coward after all? Did he betray Diadorim and the “free” lifestyle they shared by choosing to marry Otacília, by desiring a more settled life, and by letting Diadorim die? Did he betray his solidarity with his fellow *jagunços* by rising to power as a *chefe*? Did he betray his own values by seizing power when the opportunity presented itself? Did he buy his way into the ruling class through acts of violence?²⁵³ While it seems that, on some level, that the answer to all of these questions is “yes”, they are impossible to definitively lay to rest because it is impossible to locate a *single* decisive moment, a *single* discreet action in which such a sin, betrayal, or transaction takes place. At the end of the Gloss of the Song of Siruiz, Riobaldo announces, “Agora, no que eu tive culpa e errei, o senhor vai me ouvir” (329). But when do we finally hear the guilty acts Riobaldo has promised to narrate? In the supposedly climactic scenes that seem like the most obvious candidates, the scene of the pact, and the scene of the final battle, Riobaldo does very little, sees very little, and reports very little. In these anti-climactic climaxes, the screen goes dark, as it were, leaving us empty-handed.

I would like to suggest that the hollowed-out final battle scene invites us to read backwards from this point in search for the answer to the question of when Riobaldo committed his cardinal sin or betrayal. As Riobaldo himself says when recounting the fateful moment in which he became chief, the narration of such climactic moments is never satisfying nor complete, in part because important events and transformations cannot be confined solely to their moments of culmination:

O senhor, mire e veja, o senhor: a verdade instantânea dum fato, a gente vai departir, e ninguém crê. Achem que é um falso narrar. Agora, eu, eu sei como tudo é: as coisas que acontecem, é porque já estavam ficadas prontas, noutra ar, no sabugo da unha; e com efeito tudo é grátis quando sucede, no reles do momento. Assim. Arte que virei chefe. Assim exato é que foi, juro ao senhor. Outros é que contam de outra maneira. (453-454)²⁵⁴

Even as he stands behind the details of his account of this event, Riobaldo suggests that we put too much faith in so-called fateful events, the details of which depend on the subjective experience of the witness recalling them. Besides, it is not the climactic event itself that is decisive, Riobaldo implies; nothing happens without first being primed to happen; nothing

nele, o sentido se efetua como acontecimento vazio, nonsense” (*O “O”* 152) “vortex, whirlwind in which language absents itself; in it, meaning is brought about as an empty event, nonsense.” The moment when Riobaldo steps into this nothingness and reemerges “despois das tempestades” thus constitutes his passage from character to self-reflective narrator charged with giving order (and linearity specifically) to events he experiences as an endless circle: from the moment of Diadorim’s death, he is compelled to relive everything that lead to Diadorim’s death, and from there, to start over again (ibid 154). In a circular way, this moment thus both initiates the narrative and serves as the culmination towards which it builds (ibid 126).

²⁵³ See Bolle for an elaboration of this last thesis.

²⁵⁴ “Now, just see how things are: you try to tell about how quickly a thing happened, and nobody believes you. They think you are making it up. Now me, I know: things happen, it’s because they had been made ready elsewhere and their time had come, so in effect every occurrence is a spontaneous one. That was the way I became Chief. That’s exactly the way it was – I’ll swear it to you – though some tell it differently” (356).

comes from nothing; it must first be present, even if as an invisible potentiality, in the air, in the quick of the nail. This state of invisible potentiality on the eve of momentous occasions recalls the definition of latency with which I have been working: Marília Librandi-Rocha defines latency as “a state of suspension, silent and hidden, prior to any enactment, when nothing occurs and anything is possible” and a “simultaneous time in which the past and the future are inside of every present moment” (“Nuvens” 1,9).

Indeed, fateful events-to-come often lurk in the quiet intervals of Riobaldo’s narration in the form of premonitions. Immediately before the final duel between Diadorim and Hermógenes, Riobaldo claims that he knows what is about to happen: “Conheci o que estava para ser” (609).²⁵⁵ Earlier that day, when the first shots ring out announcing the coming battle, Riobaldo describes feeling the latent presence of future deaths: “Tudo ali era à maldição, as sementes de matar” (597).²⁵⁶ Earlier still, on the eve of the final battle, he describes the silence before the storm as “uma paz gritável” (594), a silence filled with potential noise, a peace filled with potential horror. Of course, one could argue that as a narrator who *does* know what is to come, even if he does not let on or choose to share this knowledge with his audience, Riobaldo retrospectively inflects his narrative with an ominous tone. Ultimately, I am less concerned with whether or not the character Riobaldo actually experiences these premonitions in the moment than in the way the narrator Riobaldo describes the future as an opaque or latent presence haunting the present. Take for example, the way he senses the approaching enemy to be near-at-hand but still invisible on the eve of the eve (*a antevéspera*) of the battle of Tamanduá-tão:

Porque era dia de antevéspera: mire e veja. Mas isso, tão em-pé, tão perto, ainda nuveava, nos ocultos do futuro. Quem sabe o que essas pedras em redor estão aquecendo, e que em uma hora vão transformar, de dentro da dureza delas, como pássaro nascido? Só vejo segredos. Mas que o inimigo já estava aproximado, eu pressenti: se sabe, pela aperreação do corpo [. . .] (578)²⁵⁷

Rosa imagines a world in which the most inert-seeming objects like rocks gestate future life, in which the seeds of future events are always present if not yet recognizable. In other words, he imagines a world pregnant with latent potential, a present pregnant with other times, which haunt the moment, barely perceptible around its edges and never fully discernable or legible.

According to Librandi-Rocha, remaining “hidden, unseen, unsaid” is the very nature of latency: “The space of latency is thus the interior, the inside, encapsulated like something that pulses and vibrates in silence” (1). This description of latency echoes Riobaldo’s unexpected admission, after he kills one of his own men, having mistaken him for the devil, that he is horrified by the sight of blood: “Ah, não, pois, ali me salteou o horror maior. Sangue . . . Sangue é a coisa para restar sempre em entranhas escondida, a espécie para nunca se ver” (530).²⁵⁸ If latency is that which pulses unseen beneath the surface, where, according to Riobaldo, blood should always remain, then the activation of narrative potential might be likened to the spilling

²⁵⁵ “I saw what was about to take place” (481).

²⁵⁶ “Everything there carried a curse, the bullets were seeds of death” (471).

²⁵⁷ “For it was the eve, as you will see. But this thing, so alive, so close, was still hidden behind the clouds of the future. Who knows what these rocks about us are sitting on, and what, in a given hour, they may hatch out, like birds from within their hardness? But the enemy was near, I knew; you can tell by the fretting of the body[. . .]” (455).

²⁵⁸ My translation: “Oh no, well, there the greatest horror assaulted/seared me. Blood . . . blood is a thing that should always stay hidden in entrails, the kind of thing to never be seen.” Taylor and Onís only partially translate these lines and depart so far from the syntax of the original that the connection between original and translation is hardly recognizable: “And what did I see? Blood on my knife – shining bright like satiny varnish” (416).

of blood. Laying bare what has been present but hidden in a state of latency might be seen as a transgression in that it involves piercing, puncturing, or violating the surface of the visible.

In fact, I believe that we can read Riobaldo's cardinal sin / pact with the devil, which may or may not take place solely in the scene of the pact, as the sacrifice of the state of latency – choosing instead action and teleological narrative momentum – in order to finally achieve the goal of ending (*dar cabo de*) Hermógenes.²⁵⁹ In order to succeed in this endeavor, which, in tragic irony, is undertaken on Diadorim's behalf, Riobaldo has to forego the quiet suspension of the pastoral intervals he once enjoyed with Diadorim in order to enter into narrative structure that can only bring Diadorim closer and closer to death. The price of this entrance into teleological narrative is not only Diadorim's death, but also the eventual deaths of the no-longer-infinitely-expansive narrative, *travessia*, and sertão. In the reluctance on the part of narrator and narrative to arrive at these deaths – of Diadorim, of *jagunçagem*, of Brazil's wild sertão – lies a desire to continue to dwell in the latent potential of a less-than-fully-expended narrative, to regressively return to and indefinitely inhabit the space of suspension represented by the *travessia*.

“Ali eu tive limite certo”

In what follows of this section, I argue that Riobaldo's cardinal sin does not take place only in the scene of the dubious pact with the devil, but rather, has always already been in the process of being committed. More specifically, I suggest that we might understand the crime or sin that causes Riobaldo so much guilt as the cowardly betrayal of his love for Diadorim and of the related openness of the sertão and the *travessia*. This reading leads us towards seeing Riobaldo's intolerance for ambiguity and suspension as the failing that costs him the blissful state of “ficar sendo” for which he yearns.²⁶⁰ Producing the narrative of his life is the consummation of this “sell-out,” insofar as it represents an attempt to bind the meaning of his life events into a self-justifying narrative. Simultaneously though, the ambivalence and self-annulling drive of this narrative represent an attempt to undo this transaction by thwarting its teleological impulses and suspending the story, once again, in the *travessia*.

Attempting to locate the scene of Riobaldo's trespass compels us to double-back through the narrative in search of an original moment of sin, which recedes further and further into the past, ultimately proving impossible to locate. Rosa presents a narrative in which Riobaldo has always already been becoming the *pactário* and sell-out he fears he has become by the end of his story, and in which he has always already been betraying Diadorim out of cowardice and inaction. Because we cannot locate such a crime in any single, past event, however, it remains impossible to judge Riobaldo and, perhaps even more problematically, it remains impossible for Riobaldo to locate and expiate his moment of transgression.

²⁵⁹ José Carlos Garbuglio notes that Riobaldo becomes an axis of action in the second half of the novel, where moments of action come to outnumber moments of digression, inverting the pattern of the first half of the novel (429,437).

²⁶⁰ For this articulation of Riobaldo's intolerance for uncertainty, I am indebted to Walnice Nogueira Galvão's reading of Riobaldo's deal with the devil as an attempt to impose certainty on the inherently uncertain flux of life: “Tentar parar esse fluir através de uma certeza é a tarefa do Diabo [. . .] A essência da vida é o movimento e a mudança [. . .] Querer ter alguma certeza no sítio do movimento e da mudança é atentar contra a desordem natural das coisas [. . .] Querer subjugar o mundo e fazê-lo curvar-se às suas ordens pode redundar em danação. Assim agiu Riobaldo, vendendo sua alma e perdendo Diadorim” “Trying to stop this flow with certainty is the Devil's work [. . .] The essence of life is movement and change [. . .] Wanting to have some certainty in a space of movement and change is against the order of things [. . .] Wanting to subjugate the world and make it curve to one's orders can result in harm. This is how Riobaldo acted, selling his soul and losing Diadorim”) (“O Certo no Incerto” 419).

The abundant scholarship on *Grande sertão: veredas* has demonstrated that there are seemingly endless possibilities for how to interpret Riobaldo's pact with the devil.²⁶¹ For our current purposes, I am content to understand it as functioning on multiple levels, the most general of which being an archetypal Faustian pact: the betrayal of moral scruples in order to attain victory and status. Whether or not the devil ever materializes (or even exists) does not seem to change the way that, for Riobaldo, simply seeking out such a pact somehow empowers him to oust Zé Bebelo as leader and assume power himself. It would seem obvious that if Riobaldo has sold his soul for this power, this sin is consummated during the scene of the pact at Veredas-Mortas. Riobaldo builds up to this scene, announcing that this is the time and the place when he definitively crosses a limit: "Uma encruzilhada, e pois! – o senhor vá guardando . . . Aí mire e veja: as *Veredas Mortas* . . . Ali eu tive limite certo" (418).²⁶² And, indeed, immediately after this scene, we are introduced to a new version of Riobaldo, now dubbed Urutú-Branco: in place of the indecisive, doubt-ridden *jagunço* of torn loyalties, we meet a confident, outspoken, and alarmingly unscrupulous leader who inexplicably inspires fear and respect in others and leads his men to victory, seemingly against all odds. Even Diadorim notices a worrying change in Riobaldo and fears for the state of his soul (484-485).

However, before assuming that this transformation is sealed during the scene of the pact, I think we need to bear in mind Riobaldo's question – *Quando foi que eu tive minha culpa?* – and consider all of the ways that Riobaldo "crosses over" before the supposedly fateful scene where he calls to the devil in the dead of night. The strongest support for reading the sale of Riobaldo's soul as taking place elsewhere and *in other times* than during the scene of the pact comes from the fact that nothing seems to happen in this scene. The devil refuses to appear (or to exist), and Riobaldo is left alone with the night air, with his own impatient cries, and with his own inarticulate memories:

Sapateei, então me assustando de que nem gota de nada sucedia, e a hora em vão passava. Então, ele não queria existir? Existisse. Viesses! Chegasse, para o desenlace desse passo. Digo direi, de verdade: eu estava bêbado de meu. Ah, esta vida, às não vezes, é terrível bonita, horrorosamente, esta vida é grande. Remordi o ar:

--"Lúcifer! Lúcifer! . . ." – aí eu bramei, desengulindo.

Não, Nada. [. . .]

-- "Lúcifer! Satanaz! . . . "

Só outro silêncio. O senhor sabe o que o silêncio é? É a gente mesmo, demais.

-- "Ei, Lúcifer! Satanaz, dos meus Infernos!"

Voz minha se estragasse, em mim tudo era cordas e cobras. E foi aí. Foi. Ele não existe, e não apareceu nem respondeu – que é um falso imaginado. Mas eu supri que ele tinha me ouvido. Me ouviu, a conforme a ciência da noite e o envir de espaços, que medeia. Como que adquirisse minhas palavras todas; fechou o arrocho do assunto. Ao

²⁶¹ Some of these include: as a realistic depiction of the superstitious beliefs *os sertanejos*, as an allusion to the literary Faustian pact, as an expression of Riobaldo's guilt for loving Diadorim, as an expression of Riobaldo's guilt for becoming a *jagunço* and committing violent crimes, and as symbolic re-birth (Bolle *Grande sertão: veredas* 146-147). Bolle reads the pact as "uma representação criptografada da modernização no Brasil" ("an encrypted representation of the modernization of Brazil") (148): an allegory for the social contract of the institutionalization of law (156). Coutinho reads it as a more general way of coming to terms with the evil within the self (*Grande Sertão: Veredas: Travessias* 92).

²⁶² "A crossroad! Just be patient. Remember: Veredas-Mortas. There I came to a dead end" (328).

que eu recebi de volta um adêjo, um gozo de agarro, daí umas tranquilidades – de pancada. Lembrei dum rio que viesse adentro a casa de meu pai. (438)²⁶³

Where Riobaldo seeks a climax, a confrontation, and a transaction, he finds only silence and the echoes of his own voice. He must admit that the greatest beauty and horror lies in “as não vezes” of life, in this case in the vast absence of an event or a response. The event or realization that “foi aí” is a negative one: the nonexistence, non-appearance, non-response of the devil. In the end, he is met only with pregnant, agitated silence. The inarticulate sounds that fill the night ultimately remit back to Riobaldo’s past: “Lembrei dum rio que viesse adentro a casa de meu pai.”

So, too, might this scene spur us to turn our eyes backwards to the events leading up to it. Doing so, we realize that, far from being a spontaneous decision or an instantaneous moment of possession, the pact with the devil has been exerting a pull on Riobaldo for some time. He describes this unarticulated plan as something *copied out* from a dream and compares its call to action to the unseen forces that cause the river current to eddy back upstream:

Tudo o que mi vinha, ero só entreter um planejado. Feito num traslo copiado de sonho, eu preparava os distritos daquilo [. . .] aquele projeto queria ser e ação! E, o que era, eu ainda não digo, mais retardo de relatar. Coisa cravada. Nela eu pensava, ansiado ou em brando, como a água das beiras do rio finge que volta para trás, como a baba do boi cai em tantos sente fios. (418-419)²⁶⁴

The narrator has been putting off speaking of these dark forces, which, when they finally erupt into the narrative, at first appear veiled in ambiguity and might be interpreted as madness, depression, or suicidal thoughts:

Vai, um dia, eu quis. Antes, o que eu vinha era adiando aquilo, adiando. Quis, assim, meio às tantas, mesmo desfazendo de esclarecer no exato meus passos e motivos. Ao que, na moleza, eu Tateava. Digo! Comecei. Tinha preceito. O que seja – primeiro, não se coma, não se beba, e é, se bebe cachaça . . . Um gole que era fogo solto na goela e nos internos. Não quebrava o jejum do demo. No que eu confiei que estava pronto para ir avante: no que eram obras de chão e escuridão [. . .](419).²⁶⁵

²⁶³ “I stamped my feet, then was surprised that not a hint of anything happened. The hour was passing in vain. Well, did he not wish to exist? Let him exist. Let him come! Let him come, for the final issue. I’ll tell you the truth: I was drunk with myself! Ah, this life, at one time or another, is terribly beautiful; in a horrible way, life is great. I filled my lungs:

‘Lucifer! Lucifer!’ I called out, at the top of my voice.

Nothing. [. . .]

“Lucifer! Satan!”

Only another silence. Do you know what silence is? Silence is only ourselves.

‘Hey, Lucifer! Satan of my Hells!’

It was then that I knew – he does not exist. He neither appeared nor answered – just a figment of the imagination.

But I was satisfied that he had heard me. He heard me – as if he had taken in all my words, and closed the deal.

Whereupon I received in return, all of a sudden, a fluttering, a paroxysm of pleasure, then calm – like a blow.” (344-345). Not translated: “I remembered a river that came into my father’s house.”

²⁶⁴ “Everything that occurred to me, I fitted into a sort of plan. Like something copied from a dream, I laid it all out [. . .] a project that had to be carried out. What it was I won’t tell you just yet. Something that had been driven into me. I dwelt upon it, uneasily, as the water at the edges of a river swirls backwards; or calmly, as the threads of slobber fall from a steer’s mouth” (329).

²⁶⁵ “The day came when I was willing. Up until then, I had kept putting it off and putting it off. I had wanted it more or less, but had avoided facing the steps I had to take and my motives. I had merely been feeling my way. But now I started. There was a definite procedure. The first step: neither to eat nor drink anything but cachaça. A swallow of it was like fire let loose in your gullet and insides. It does not break the demon’s fast. I was confident that I was ready to go ahead with my plans of stealth and darkness” (329).

Having already read what is to come, it is easy to interpret these lines as containing the moment when Riobaldo decides to make the pact. If we cannot be sure that any transaction is sealed in the scene of the pact itself, then Riobaldo's willingness to sell his soul, rather than the dubiously consummated sale itself, appears to be the real sin. If he had been secretly harboring this decision for days, or even weeks, before going to the crossroads in the middle of the night, then is the moment of sin the moment in which he calls out to Satan or the moment in which he succumbs to the desire to do so – “um dia, eu quis” – or an earlier and still harder to pin-point moment when he first lets these thoughts into his mind, into his dreams, into his fate? Has the compulsion to become a *pactário* always lain latent in Riobaldo as silent potentiality? Is it possible to isolate the moment when this potentiality is realized?

There are other signs that whatever pact Riobaldo makes, he starts making it before the scene of the pact. In Willi Bolle's reading of the pact as Riobaldo's way of assuring his rise from “slave” to “senhor” (*Grande sertão: veredas* 288), Riobaldo clearly sells out his solidarity with the common man/*jagunço* when, immediately before the pact, he forms an alliance with the local oligarch São Habrão by revealing that his own father is also a landowner.²⁶⁶ Bolle also points out that as a “filho de casa grande”, Riobaldo has *always* borne the potential to rise to the dominant class (ibid 320). If, taking a slightly different tack, we read the pact as a means of attaining power and usurping his mentor Zé Bebelo, then likewise, we see that Riobaldo has been harboring this idea for as long as Zé Bebelo has been chief. We might also recall that this is not the first time Riobaldo betrays Zé Bebelo²⁶⁷. In other words, the seeds of this betrayal as well have always already been planted.

If we are to believe that Riobaldo has always carried the potential to become *um pactário* within him, can he be blamed for submitting to this destiny? While the inevitability of copying out one's destiny might alleviate the guilt that comes with embracing one's *papel*, it does not, as Butler reminds us, mitigate the poignancy of what is lost or sacrificed in the act of subjection that is required in order to emerge as a social subject. In Butler's discussion of the construction of gender identities, that which must be abandoned and disavowed includes homosexual attachment; in Riobaldo's emergence as *pactário* – the ambivalently-embraced role of victor, survivor, former *jagunço*, landowner, and a retrospective narrator – I would argue, that which must be abandoned and disavowed includes the openness and potentiality of the sertão and, even more specifically, the pleasurably torturous ambiguity of his attraction to Diadorim. The fact that, as a narrator, Riobaldo is unwilling to fully consummate this sacrifice is both what assures he will never fully master his narrative and what calls into question his status as *pactário*. To gloss

²⁶⁶ Bolle points to the significance of the fact that the pact takes place immediately after Riobaldo realizes São Habrão is talking to him and the other *jagunços* as slaves and decides he does not want to accept this social position of subjection: “Riobaldo, então, se dá conta de sua real condição de raso jagunço: longe de estarem acima dos pobres, ele e seus companheiros fazem parte da plebe rural, são mão-de-obra a ser usada conforme as necessidades dos poderosos. Nessa situação, o pacto com o Diabo, nas Veredas-Mortas, se lhe apresenta como o meio mágico para passar para o outro lado da máquina social” “In this moment, Riobaldo becomes aware of his real condition as a mere *jagunço*: far from being above the poor, he and his fellow *jagunços* are part of the rural common people, they are work hands to be used according to the needs of the powerful. In this situation, the pact with the Devil, in Veredas-Mortas, presents itself to him as a magic means of passing from one side to the other of the social machine” (*Grande sertão: veredas* 113). In fact, the last interaction Riobaldo has before going to Veredas-Mortas to make the pact is the conversation with São Habrão in which he asks the latter if he by chance knows his father “Senhor Coronel Selorico Mendes, do São Gregório” (432), thus identifying himself as part of the landed class.

²⁶⁷ Riobaldo deserts Zé Bebelo early in the novel, only to end up fighting for his adversary, Joca Ramiro, who eventually captures Zé Bebelo.

Butler, Riobaldo's self-beratement and guilt at having turned his back on the object of his attachment ensures the preservation of that which has been renounced (*Psychic Life* 140-145).

Riobaldo's cardinal betrayal

“A história [de Riobaldo] é a de um homem que deixou morrer o grande amor de sua vida” (Bolle 258).²⁶⁸

I believe the text encourages us to read Riobaldo's cardinal transgression is as a betrayal of Diadorim; Riobaldo abandons his place at Diadorim's side when he chooses to marry Otacília, to become chief, and to let Diadorim fight the final duel on his own, ultimately sacrificing his life. This loss compels the endless work of mourning that is Riobaldo's narrative, and it also seems to be a major source of the guilt that permeates this narrative. If we understand Diadorim, at least in part, as a figure for the uncertainty, unknowability, and danger of the sertão, the *travessia*, and the “muito provisório” (429) life of *jagunçagem*, then Riobaldo's betrayal and abandonment of him is a failure of courage.²⁶⁹ Riobaldo chooses the relatively safe and settled life of being a *fazendeiro* when he chooses the his socially condoned love for Otacília, symbol of feminine purity and daughter of a landowner, over his “impossible” love for Diadorim, transient *jagunço* and illegitimate “son” of Joca Ramiro.

The narrator feels particularly poignant regret about the last missed opportunity to express his love for Diadorim on the eve of the fatal duel. The *véspera*, the suspenseful wait or the calm before the storm, rather than the disastrous finale itself, is here emphasized as the moment to which Riobaldo most desperately longs to return and to re-write (603-604). If this scene on the eve of the battle is singled out as the last time Riobaldo betrays his love for Diadorim, it is certainly not the first. There have been countless earlier moments when Riobaldo notices himself pulling apart from Diadorim and suspecting that they are heading different directions, only to find this distance intolerable.²⁷⁰ The rift between the two friends can be traced back at least as far back as the disastrous “*dádiva daquela pedra*”, which Riobaldo suspects continues to pain Diadorim up until the final battle. This consequential yet relatively understated episode, when Riobaldo presents Diadorim with a semi-precious stone only to have his gift rejected, is tucked away in between the high-drama siege at the Fazenda dos Tucanos and the misguided expedition that leads Zé Bebelo's gang to the “fundo do sertão” and eventually to Veredas-Mortas. Like many of the most important moments between Riobaldo and Diadorim, it takes place at a moment of narrative suspension, in this case when the men are plodding along on foot and waiting for new horses.

I read this scene as a pre-figuration of the scene of the pact at Veredas-Mortas. While Riobaldo builds the latter scene up as a momentous and fateful occasion, it is infamously difficult to decipher: *nothing seems to happen*; Riobaldo's interlocutor (the devil) never seems to materialize, leaving Riobaldo (and us) to forever wonder if any transaction at all takes place. In the scene of the *dádiva da pedra*, in contrast, we are given five pages of detailed dialog between Riobaldo and Diadorim, in which we can observe all of the seeds of Riobaldo's future betrayal

²⁶⁸ “His story is the story of a man who let the love of his life die” (my translation).

²⁶⁹ For more on this betrayal as the choosing of certainty over Diadorim, see Walnice Nogueira Galvão's “O Certo no Incerto: Pactário”.

²⁷⁰ In the events leading up to the final battle, we might cite the moment when Riobaldo suspects Diadorim's courage and commitment is greater than his own (550-551), and the moment when they split up, each accompanying a different part of Riobaldo's band (561).

already sewn into their fraught relationship. In both scenes, Riobaldo attempts to initiate a transaction of sorts: the gift of a stone as a token of his affection for Diadorim in the first, and the sale of his soul in exchange for the ability to defeat Hermógenes in the second. In both cases, Riobaldo is motivated by his desire to help Diadorim, who has become despondent since the death of his father, Joca Ramiro. In both situations, I argue, what matters is not the response (or lack thereof) of Riobaldo's interlocutor nor the result of the transaction; what is important is that Riobaldo has broken the silence in an attempt to externalize or realize what has, up until that point, been held within himself in a latent state: his love for Diadorim in the first case and, in the second, his desire to become a the leader and hero he has long suspected he could be.

The gift of the stone, here described as a sapphire, is presented as the literal and metaphorical unwrapping and laying bare of emotions that have been kept safe and hidden, barely breaking the surface of conscious thought:²⁷¹

O que brotava em mim e rebrotava: essas demasias de coração. Continuando, feito um bem, que sutil, e nem me perturbava, porque a gente guardasse cada um consigo sua tenção de benquerer, com esquivança de qualquer pensar, do que a consciência escuta e se espanta; e também em razão de que a gente mesmo deixava de excogitar e conhecer o vulto verdadeiro daquele afeto, com seu poder e seus segredos. (388-89).²⁷²

Riobaldo suddenly breaks the unbearable silence of unspoken secrets with a gesture of goodwill that seems intended as a substitute for everything he cannot say and cannot do; he announces he has a gift for Diadorim:

--“Diadorim, um mimo eu tenho, para você destinado, e de que nunca fiz menção . . .” – o qual era a pedra de safira, que do Arassuaí eu tinha trazido, e que à espera de uma ocasião sensata eu vinha com cautela guardando, enrolada num pouco de algodão, dentro dum saquitel igual ao de um breve, costurado no forro da bolsa menorzinha da minha mochila. (389)²⁷³

Carefully secreted away in a hidden compartment of Riobaldo's backpack, the stone stands in for the “demasias de coração” that Riobaldo carries within him. Riobaldo does not give Diadorim the stone in that moment, however; instead he waits until the silent transaction can take place in private: “Aí, quando ninguém não viu, eu saquei a mochila, desfiz a ponta de faca as costuras, e entreguei a ele o mimo, com estilo de silêncio para palavras” (389).²⁷⁴ The silent opening of what has been sewn shut and revelation of what has been kept out of sight seems to be the closest Riobaldo can come to externally manifesting the excess of unexpressed emotions that he has come to feel as a burden.

This revelation does not have the desired effect, however; instead it sparks an argument between the two friends. The argument escalates to the point that Riobaldo declares his intention

²⁷¹ At later points, the stone will be referred to as topaz and as amethyst. Cleusa Rios Pinheiro Passos counts this inconsistency among the “lapses” – the seemingly intentional slips – that she argues underscore the mutability of the relationship between signs and their referents in the text (263-264).

²⁷² “Such vagaries of the heart arose in me time after time, giving me subtle satisfaction, nor did they disturb me, for each of us kept his emotions to himself, giving no thought to anything which might trouble his conscience; moreover, we ourselves were not aware of the truth and nature of that affection” (305).

²⁷³ “Diadorim, I have a gift that I have been keeping for you and which I have never mentioned. It was the sapphire pebble which I had brought from Arassuarí and which I had been carefully guarding for a suitable occasion. I kept it rolled up in a bit of cotton, inside a little bag like an amulet, sewed in the lining of the side pocket for my knapsack” (305-306).

²⁷⁴ “There, when no one was looking, I took the knapsack, picked out the stiches with the point of a knife, and handed him the present without saying a word.” (306)

to leave behind Diadorim, the quest for vengeance for Joca Ramiro's death, and the life of *jagunçagem* at the earliest opportunity; Diadorim in turn accuses Riobaldo of cowardice and lack of resolve and bitterly suggests that he should give the sapphire to Otacília instead as an engagement gift.²⁷⁵ This is of course what Riobaldo ultimately decides to do, but not until after the pact with the devil, when he charges São Habão with delivering it to Otacília. Upon doing so, he realizes the pain he has caused Diadorim:

Mas vi um adêjo sombrio no meu amigo, condenado que era de tristeza que não quer ceder suas lágrimas. O quanto, por causa da pedra de topázio? – eu reconheci. Eu não tinha tido dó de Diadorim. “Dei stá, tem tempo, Diadorim, tem tempo . . .” – pensei, a meio. (458)²⁷⁶

In between the scene where Diadorim initially rejects the stone and suggests it would be a better present for Otacília and the scene where Riobaldo acts on this suggestion, only to realize how much he has hurt his friend, lies the scene of the pact with the devil. In other words, one tortured transaction – the gift of the stone as a lover's promise – spans another equally tortured transaction – Riobaldo's attempt to sell his soul to the devil. A certain equivalency between the two transactions is further suggested by the repetition of the word, “adêjo”, which seems a curious choice in both cases. When Riobaldo calls out to the devil, all he receives in response is a fluttering sensation: “Ao que eu recebi de volta um adêjo, um gozo de agarro, daí umas tranquilidades – de pancada” (438).²⁷⁷ Similarly, when Riobaldo looks over at Diadorim after giving away the stone, he sees only “um adêjo sombrio no meu amigo” (458). This inarticulate response, which is linked to the devil's refusal to show himself (or to exist) and Diadorim's refusal to express his sorrow through tears, only makes Riobaldo's outspoken behavior – shouting “Lúcifer! Satanaz! . . .” into the night (438) and ordering the landed São Habão to act as his messenger in front of Diadorim – seem more brazen.

Did Riobaldo overstep or violate the terms of an unspoken agreement with Diadorim when he unveiled the stone in the first place? In doing so, did he set into motion the hurtful transactions and betrayals to come? In other words, does unveiling the stone and making visible what has always been latent but invisible somehow activate narrative potential that Riobaldo later regrets letting out of the bottle? To answer these questions, it might help to examine Diadorim's response to Riobaldo's gift when he first unveils it. Diadorim sees no fault in the gesture itself, but he insists that Riobaldo has made it in an untimely fashion: “Deste coração te agradeço, Riobaldo, mas não acho de aceitar um presente assim, agora. Aí guarda outra vez, por um tempo. Até em quando se tenha terminado de cumprir a vingança por Joca Ramiro. Nesse dia, então, eu recebo . . .” (390).²⁷⁸ Perhaps Diadorim recognizes the gift as a gesture of closure, as his later suggestion that it ought to seal Riobaldo's engagement suggests, and for him, this

²⁷⁵ In Anitagrace's reading, Diadorim rejects the gift because it represents “um compromisso de noiva” more appropriate to a “kept woman” like Otacília. She points out that the gift Diadorim finally accepts from Riobaldo (a talisman to protect him from harm) is more appropriate to a warrior, if also an ominous sign foreshadowing how Diadorim's body too will be reduced to a fetish object in death (125).

²⁷⁶ “But I saw a dark shadow [*um adêjo*] cross my friend's face, filled with unhappiness, fighting back the tears. I saw that it was because of the topaz. I had not considered Diadorim's feelings. “Never mind, Diadorim, there is time, there is time,” I thought, half aloud” (360).

²⁷⁷ “Whereupon I received in return, all of a sudden, a fluttering [*um adêjo*], a paroxysm of pleasure, then calm – like a blow” (345).”

²⁷⁸ ““From my heart I thank you, Riobaldo, but I cannot accept a gift like this, now. Put it back and keep it for a while – until we have achieved vengeance for Joca Ramiro. Then, on that day, I will accept it”” (306).

gesture has come too soon. Whether we read Diadorim as being too single-mindedly focused on avenging his father to address his relationship with Riobaldo in this moment or as planning on revealing his true identity only after he has finished his work as a (necessarily male) *jagunço* by killing Hermógenes, he makes it clear that he imagines a future time in which he will be able to receive the gift. As such, he essentially asks Riobaldo to suspend the gesture and to defer the transaction it symbolizes. In this sense, Diadorim's response is not unlike that of the *moça* in "Nenhum, Nenhuma," who refuses the proposal of the *moço* on the grounds that it is too soon to consummate their love and that they must wait, instead, until death.

Riobaldo makes no explicit statement about how he understands this request for deferral, but his words to Diadorim, as well as his subsequent actions, suggest that he is impatient: "— Escuta, Diadorim: vamos embora da jagunçagem, que já é o depois-de-véspera, que os vivos também têm de viver por só si, e vingança não é a promessa a Deus, nem sermão de sacramento . . ." (390).²⁷⁹ It is obvious why Diadorim, who takes his vow of revenge more seriously than anything else, is provoked by Riobaldo's words, but what is more curious is why Riobaldo is suddenly so eager to turn his back on *jagunçagem*. The sentiment is not a new one, but neither has he expressed any particularly strong wavering in his commitment to *jagunçagem* in the recent narrative. It seems instead that Diadorim's suggestion that he wait until an unspecified future date of (dis)closure in order to give his gift spurs Riobaldo's impatience. His enigmatic declaration "que já é o depois-de-véspera" suggests that the waiting period for him is over. Yet, he does not walk away from the quest for revenge as he threatens to do; instead he redoubles his commitment by making a pact with the devil and by becoming chief. Only, to Diadorim's chagrin, whatever catalyzes these steps to action also seems to accelerate Riobaldo's engagement to Otacília. Realizing narrative potential and actively pursuing closure in one plot line (the quest to kill Hermógenes) seems to have the universal effect of activating the latent potential in all closure-oriented plot lines (i.e. the marriage plot between Riobaldo and Otacília).

What are we to make then of Riobaldo's wish, upon realizing that he has hurt and betrayed Diadorim by sending the stone to Otacília, that he could reassure Diadorim that there is still time: "tem tempo, Diadorim, tem tempo . . ." (458)? It would seem that his actions and words all suggest that there is *not* time: it is already the time of action, "o depois-de-véspera," and Riobaldo is hurrying to set his life into motion. We see that in the immediate aftermath of the pact, Riobaldo is at his most restless: "Eu queria a muita movimentação, horas novas. Como os rios não dormem. O rio não quer ir a nenhuma parte, ele quer é chegar a ser mais grosso, mais fundo [. . .] Eu caminhei para diante. Em, ô gente, eu dei mais um passo à frente: tudo agora era possível" (450).²⁸⁰ Where, in the new action-oriented narrative he is launching will there be time for the love between himself and Diadorim? As an "impossible" love that can exist only in the

²⁷⁹ "Listen, Diadorim: let us give up this bandit life, for it is later than we think, and the living must live their own lives. Vengeance is not a promise to God, nor a sacrament" (306).

²⁸⁰ "I wanted lots of movement and change. Like rivers, which never sleep. A river does not want to go anywhere; what it wants is to grow bigger and deeper. I walked forward. Then – oh, man – I took one more step: now anything could happen" (354)

The second half of this passage suggests that, contrary to the way they are commonly figured, rivers are not teleologically oriented; their drive is not to arrive at the sea but to increase in volume and in expansiveness. Guimarães Rosa has elsewhere written that he is drawn to rivers as symbols because he associates them with eternity: "Sim, rio é uma palavra mágica para conjugar eternidade" "Yes, "river" is a magic word for conjuring eternity" (Lorenz 72). The paradox is that the closer a river comes to being an infinite expanse (the wider and deeper and more voluminous it grows), the closer it comes to reaching the sea (to ending). Of course, in typical fashion for Guimarães Rosa, this paradox dissolves itself: when the river ends, it merges with the sea, becoming the expanse it has pursued; its teleological end or death is also how it realizes its ambitions of eternity.

time of suspension, of fantasy, and of indefinite deferral, its place is in the endless *véspera* and the “espera enorme” that is the sertão. Their love has always flourished in the pastoral interludes in between battles and decisive events. This temporal quality of Riobaldo’s love is certainly part of what makes it impossible: Riobaldo has, by vowing to avenge Joca Ramiro, by making a pact with the devil, by finally deciding to rush headlong towards the denouement of the story, traded in the peaceful pastoral genre characteristic of much of the earlier part of the story for that of the novel.²⁸¹

While it remains impossible to locate a single moment when this transaction transpires, this act of crossing over seems to be the sin or trespass for which the regressive temporality of Riobaldo’s narrative continually repents. How to restore the openness and boundlessness of the *travessia*, the suspense of the *véspera*? How to undo the fateful entrance into teleological narrative? When the entrance cannot be located, when the narrative has always already been betraying the timeless return of poetry by *being narrative*, can any amount of retracing one’s steps and self-consciously doubling back on one’s words bring back the boundless expanse of time – “tem tempo” – that Riobaldo wishes he could promise Diadorim?

In the end, the listener, be it O doutor or the reader, is not the only one who is guilty of compelling a narrative, of needing an ending. Riobaldo, too, has desired to *sair do sertão*, to settle down, to *acabar com* the openness and uncertainty of his life of *jagunçagem*. As he anticipates the final battle, Riobaldo admits to longing for a rapid conclusion and the closure it promises him: “Também eu queria que tudo tivesse logo um razoável fim, em tanto para eu então poder largar a jagunçagem. Minha Otacília” (590).²⁸² Yet this desire to reach the end, settle down, and leave behind the sertão and the life of *jagunçagem* appears ambivalent, or perhaps merely futile: “Sensato somente eu saísse do meio do sertão, ia morrer residido, em fazenda perto de cidade. O que eu pensei . . . rio Urucúia é o meu rio – sempre querendo fugir, à volta, do sertão, quando e quando; mas ele vira e recai claro no São Francisco” (590).²⁸³ Riobaldo senses that his efforts to achieve this end, to escape the sertão to live near the city are in vain; “o meio”, the middle of the sertão and of his narrative seems to exert an insuperable force upon him. Just as the Urucúia River, which Riobaldo associates with home and with the peaceful and civilized life on the edges of the sertão, seems to flee the sertão only to turn and empty again into the Rio São Francisco, which cuts through the heart of the sertão, Riobaldo senses that he cannot escape. Nor is it clear that he unambivalently wants to; even in the act of narrating his past, he expresses a longing to linger in the time-space of the sertão. As we have seen, the distance that would separate the narrator Riobaldo from *o jagunço Riobaldo* whose life he recounts continually collapses, submerging the story in the perspective of one immersed in the events as they unfold and renouncing the distant overview promised from the temporal remove of being “depois das tempestades.”

²⁸¹ One of the characteristics Paul Alpers attributes to the pastoral is the predilection for stasis over action, for framing a moment over capturing progression, for “dissipating dramatic expectation and enabling set piece” (382), for enumeration and parataxis over metonymy and plot advancement (343). In its aversion to getting to the ending or denouement, the pastoral mode might be understood as an exercise in suspension, its “unwillingness to declare the encounter complete” in tension with the narrative movement and eventual resolution characteristic of the novel (311).

²⁸² “I was also hoping that everything would be over fairly soon, so I might then give up my life as a jagunço” (465).

²⁸³ “The only sensible thing would be for me to get out of the sertão, and go to live on a fazenda near town. I thought about my river, the Urucúia, forever trying to escape from the sertão, twisting and turning, but in the end pouring its clear waters into the São Francisco” (465). Recall that the Rio São Francisco is where Riobaldo meets Diadorim and first feels the magnetic pull of attraction for him that will eventually lead him to take up a life of *jagunçagem*.

Conclusions

Paradoxically, the guilt Riobaldo bears for having abandoned his participatory proximity to his story in order to give it form that comes with the boundedness of an ending compels him to continually re-enter the labyrinthine time-space of the sertão. In fact, the endless, regressive search for the moment of sin is the means through which the sertão is kept alive and the *travessia* held open as a space of latency— where past, present, and future intermingle, and where everything that never was retains its potentiality.

Whereas Brooks asserts that “all narrative may in essence be obituary” (95), *Grande sertão: veredas* aspires to be a living exploration of, not simply the sertão that was, but of the sertão that is perennially being re-imagined and re-configured by the act of remembrance.²⁸⁴ As readers, we are invited to dwell not only in a specific narrative but also in a suspended state of narratable possibilities and to experience the past as not simply foreshadowing what *is* but also opening out to everything that *might have been*, including nostalgic, utopic, and transgressive possibilities: a Brazilian interior that remains wild and lawless, governed only by pseudo-chivalric codes; the triumph of a just leader capable of representing his people; a homoerotic love story, ending with two *jagunços* riding into the sunset hand-in-hand²⁸⁵. We get the sense that if the sertão were to be developed and enclosed, as it already has been by the time of Riobaldo’s telling his story to O doutor, if the *travessia* were to be bounded by a beginning and an end, as it is ultimately by the covers of Rosa’s book, if the narrator or the listener were to “pôr ponto” and bring the story to its conclusion, an inevitability to which we and Riobaldo must resign ourselves, it would mean not only the ending and the death of the story that *was* but also the foreclosure of all of the unrealized possibilities that remain in a state of potentiality as long as we are suspended in the experience of the *travessia*. Yet, as long as we can dwell in the within-timeness of the story and experience it immanently, the utopic possibilities that glint fleetingly off of a myriad of small moments in Riobaldo’s narrative retain their potentiality.

As we have seen most poignantly in the obscurity of ostensibly climactic scenes such as the pact and the final battle, Riobaldo’s reluctance to fully consummate the act of narration by getting to the end manifests both as a recursive eddying of the novel’s temporality and as a reluctance to make fully visible the world narrated: by withholding a cartographic overview of the sertão, the dramatic events he promises to narrate, the truth about Diadorim’s identity, and, much of the time, the temporally detached perspective provided by the model of the divided self, the narrator Riobaldo manages to arrest the development (in both historical and photographic terms) of the sertão that his narrative purports to chart for his listener. Instead of painting a romantic landscape or contributing to the positivistic mission to fill the *vazios* – the epistemological void for which the sertão stands – the novel leads us down its labyrinthine *veredas* as if through grass taller than our heads, and insists that we know the sertão blindly from

²⁸⁴ I am thinking here of Agamben’s gloss of “the task of redemption” that Benjamin “assigned to memory”: “What research has established can be modified by remembrance. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and the complete (pain) incomplete’ [. . .] Remembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again” (*Potentialities* 267).

²⁸⁵ The first possibility is foreclosed by the signs of historical “progress” to which Riobaldo alludes; the second, according to Willi Bolle’s reading, is sacrificed when Riobaldo makes the pact with the devil, representing the “false” or unjust social contract by which Brazil is governed to this day; the third, in obedience to the social mores of the time, is retroactively taken out of play (but only after it has been vividly conjured and sustained for 600 pages) by Diadorim’s death, Diadorim’s “true” sex, and Riobaldo’s marriage.

within the time-space of Riobaldo's experience of it. Neither a territory to be mapped nor a teleological narrative to be plotted, the sertão unfolds as a fluid and undemarcated *travessia*. The possibility and desirability of arriving at its ending has been thoroughly thrown into crisis.

In addition to undermining the myth of Brazilian history as a teleological march of progress that leads always out of the sertão, Rosa's novel refuses to be inserted into a teleologically-oriented literary historiography that treats regionalist literature as anachronistic or pre-modern. To treat regionalism as progressive reformers have treated the sertão – as something to be left behind, something that *can* be left behind– is to learn nothing from the underlying structure of Rosa's text, which renders porous the boundary between past and present. After over six-hundred pages of being immersed in a narrative which resists consummating the finality of the "end" and refuses to mourn the sertão as dead, the reader should emerge skeptical of any narrative that proclaims the death of what was and the dawning of a new era. As such, I contend, the ever-proliferating taxonomies that would sequence the stages of Brazilian regionalism cannot accommodate the work of Guimarães Rosa until they stop opposing the regionalist tradition to the modern.

Chapter Four

Regionalism in the Wake of Arguedas's Foxes

Published posthumously in 1971, the last novel of José María Arguedas, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, represents both a departure from and a self-reflexive interrogation of the author's preceding literary corpus. Whereas most of Arguedas's literature is set in the Andean highlands, *Los zorros*, as Arguedas referred to his last project, announces itself as an attempt to paint a literary portrait of the rapidly industrializing port city of Chimbote, which became the central hub of the global fishmeal economy in the 1960's. The fictional *relato* depicting life in Chimbote is regularly interrupted by *diarios*, seemingly autobiographical diaries written in the voice of an author figure who chronicles his struggle with suicidal thoughts, his embattled attempt to complete what he feels to be an impossible project, and his fraught relationship with prominent intellectual figures of the so-called Latin American 'boom.' The two eponymous *zorros* (foxes), minor deities from Andean mythology, span the *relato* and *diario* sections and exchange perspectives on their respective worlds: the more traditional highland world of the *sierras* up above, which remains dominated by indigenous culture, and the urbanized coastal world of down below, which is the domain of *mestizos*, foreigners, and international corporations.

The culturally heterogeneous subject matter of this last novel complicates Arguedas's legacy: the Peruvian writer and ethnologist is renowned for his commitment to bringing the lives and traditions of Quechua-speaking Andean indigenous communities to urban, *criollo*, and (eventually) international audiences. Though during his lifetime he was often read as an *indigenista* writer, Arguedas was hesitant to identify as such.²⁸⁶ His literary representations of indigenous culture do indeed differ from traditional Andean *indigenismo* in at least two important respects: whereas *indigenismo* was historically written "desde afuera, desde lejos, desde encima, desde Lima," Arguedas seeks to provide a perspective from inside Quechua culture, and whereas *indigenismo* tended to focus exclusively on autochthonous communities, Arguedas seeks to depict a complex and heterogeneous Peruvian social reality in which Indians play a central role (Rojas 51, 55).²⁸⁷ Accordingly, Arguedas's novels have been heralded as offering an alternative to positivistic, colonialist ethnology and for providing a literary model for how disparate cultures might coexist in Peru and in Latin America more generally. This second assertion lies at the heart of Ángel Rama's theory of transculturation, which he elaborates using Arguedas's 1958 novel *Los ríos profundos* as his primary case study. Rama claims that Arguedas's literature achieves the dual goals of protecting and preserving an endangered cultural tradition and inscribing it into the "dominant modern cultures" that threaten to obliterate it (*Writing Across Cultures* 118). Rama thus sees Arguedas as offering a model for how Latin

²⁸⁶ Arguedas vehemently resisted the label "indigenista," which he believed marginalized what was in fact a central question of Peruvian identity: the Indian experience (Rojas 55). It should be noted that *indigenismo* has taken on different meanings at different points in time: originally associated with its colonialist function as an orientalist "discourse by non-Indians about Indians," it was subsequently reclaimed by Juan Carlos Mariátegui as a socially progressive, even revolutionary brand of thought aimed at benefitting and empowering Indians (Tarica vi-xi). Arguedas embraced the spirit of Mariátegui's *indigenismo* but continued to feel the stigma of the label "indigenista."

²⁸⁷ "from without, from afar, from above, from Lima." Unless otherwise noted, all translations of secondary sources are my own.

American culture can become universal and modern without abandoning its roots in the regional and traditional.

Los zorros throws a wrench in this optimistic narrative by asserting – explicitly in the metadiscursive *diario* sections, implicitly through the metaphor of the failed dialog of the titular foxes, and formally in the fissures introduced on the level of narrative structure and language – that the central work of Arguedas’s intellectual career, that of bringing opposites together, would in the end prove too great a feat to be carried off successfully. Attributing his suicidal impulses in part to this demoralizing defeat, Arguedas would take his life in 1969, leaving the unfinished manuscript of *Los zorros* along with instructions for its publication as a form of suicide note.

The novel contains five chapters, sections, or “hervores” that elaborate a fictional version of Chimbote and trace the interactions between the diverse populations that make up its social fabric: Indian immigrants from the highlands working as fishermen, prostitutes, and open-air market vendors, capitalist industrialists running the fishmeal plant, mafiosos facilitating the exploitation of the former group by the latter group, foreign clergy men and non-profit workers struggling to make sense of and intervene in this intricate web of economic and power relations. Before pulling together these various narrative threads nor completing any form of narrative arc, the novel ends abruptly in the *Último diario?*, in which the author figure announces his intention to kill himself and reveals the endings that lie in store for each of his characters, lamenting that the foxes will not be able to finish narrating their story. Critics remain divided on whether the novel in its published form can be considered complete or not.

As such, *Los zorros* confronts Arguedas’s readers with a number of vexing questions: should this last novel be overlooked as a failure, the aborted project of a sick man, and not be allowed to tarnish the legacy of the celebrated author of *Los ríos profundos* and *Todas las sangres*? Or is it an integral part of his corpus, perhaps even indispensable for understanding the political and aesthetic problems that preoccupied Arguedas throughout his career? Can the radically experimental form of *Los zorros* be celebrated as an avant-garde breakthrough, or is it more properly read, as the author figure of the *diarios* declares it, as a realist novel that fails to achieve coherence and completion? Do the metatextual reflections of the *diario* sections allow us to read the novel as an avant-garde performance of success-in-failure? Or does its fragmented, incoherent, and incomplete form resist even these readings, leaving us not with a politics of resistance nor an ethos of failure but, rather, with an unredeemable abyss of meaning? As one might expect, most critics who invest their time and energy in analyzing the novel, myself included, tend to find its failure to cohere as a novel meaningful, but it remains difficult to make the case that *Los zorros* fully succeeds as an aesthetic or political project.

I. Breaking the regionalist mold

It is important to note, moreover, that Arguedas, who began writing in the 1930’s under a strong regionalist influence, never aspired to be an avant-garde writer. In spite of feeling deep affinity with Juan Carlos Mariátegui, César Vallejo, Juan Rulfo, and João Guimarães Rosa, he consistently professed himself to be a technically naïve writer, more committed to bearing witness to the fate of Peru’s indigenous communities than to stylistic innovation. Nevertheless, he understood that giving voice to the modern-day experience of Quechua-speaking Indians would necessitate forging a new literary language. Many readers have seen *Los zorros* as both

the culmination and the apotheosis of this project, and critics across the board, when they do not dismiss the novel as an utter failure, tend to treat it as an avant-garde work.²⁸⁸

Unlike studies such as Rama's that seek to establish Arguedas as a central figure in the emergence of the modern Latin American novel, critical studies that take *Los zorros* as their point of departure tend to emphasize Arguedas's chosen marginality to movements such as *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana* and the 'boom,' and to see the breakdown of meaning and communication in this last novel as a form of critique. For example, in *Cultura Andina y forma novelesca: zorros y danzantes en la última novela de Arguedas*, Martin Lienhard argues that whereas Arguedas's treatment of Andean aesthetic and cultural forms such as orality, music, and dance in earlier novels may be read as a politically innocuous form of transculturation, *Los zorros* radically subverts dominant discursive practices: in this avant-garde novel organized by an Andean cosmovision, Lienhard argues, the form of the novel is thoroughly infiltrated by oral culture, and the dominant culture (that of the coast) is represented from an indigenous perspective (22-23). Building off of Lienhard's reading, William Rowe locates the politics of *Los zorros* in a paradigm shift away from rational knowledge grounded in sight, language, and abstract reason and towards a more intimate form of 'conocimiento' grounded in sound, music, and nature ("El nuevo lenguaje" 199-200).

Alberto Moreiras implicitly challenges such readings – those that grant *Los zorros* the power to resist and subvert the dominance of western culture – by taking Rama on directly and arguing that *Los zorros* reveals transculturation to be no different than acculturation, ultimately a renunciation of cultural difference rather than a means of preserving it. Accusing Rama of being overly optimistic in dwelling in the celebratory possibilities of transculturation, Moreiras counters: "both appropriation and transculturation are purchased at the price of service to historical hegemony: not so much an overcoming of modernization as a submission to it" (193). Moreiras ultimately reads *Los zorros* as staging an "implosion of meaning" that calls into question the politics of difference celebrated not only in Arguedas's earlier novels but also in Latin American magical realism as a whole (190).

Drawing in particular on the work of Moreiras and Rowe, this chapter asks how the dissolution of the line between distinct cultural identity categories (above and below, tradition and modernity, Indians and *criollos*, local and global, country and city, etc.) and the espousal of an inarticulate, embodied form of knowledge in *Los zorros* reconfigures the national landscape of Peru, as well as the reader's relationship to this landscape. In doing so, I argue, *Los zorros* radically breaks with traditional regionalism while advancing a form of political commitment that is not ideological nor identitarian in nature; instead, the mode of commitment Arguedas practices is a commitment to knowing the local through a close, immersive, and vulnerably personal perspective. The subjectiveness and vulnerability of this position are central tenets of what Estelle Tarica, borrowing a phrase from Arguedas, dubs "intimate indigenism." Unlike

²⁸⁸ For Arguedas, the stakes of his linguistic alchemy could not be higher. Estelle Tarica reads Arguedas as attempting to repair through literary language, and specifically, through the act of translating indigenous experience into the written, Spanish language, a tragically divided modern Peru (136). Such an act of translation seeks to reintegrate a rent community, but the breakdown of legibility in *Los zorros* suggest that the lost community cannot be restored through language (105-106). As Enrique Cortez argues, Arguedas undertakes this work with deathly seriousness: far from representing an instance of poststructuralist play, the self-referentiality and linguistic experimentalism of *Los zorros* represents an earnest attempt to "lograr un discurso que vincule las palabras y las cosas [. . . y] un reencantamiento de un mundo desencantado; es la lucha por una palabra ontológica en un mundo secular" (334) "to achieve a discourse that links words and things [. . . and] a re-enchantment of a disenchanted world; it is the fight for an ontological word in a secular world."

Tarica who, based on a reading of *Los ríos profundos*, locates in Arguedas's bilingual *language* the hopeful possibility of bridging Peru's divided cultures, I focus on the prevalence of extralinguistic experiences – including music, inarticulate sounds, and embodied movement – in *Los zorros* as an emphatically tenuous means of transmitting indigenous rural life in the form of the novel.

In Arguedas's last novel, I argue, conjuring the embodied experience of place emerges as a strategy to avoid commodifying local lives and experiences as objects of exchange on the global literary market. Far from celebratory in tone, however, *Los zorros* suggests that trading in identity politics for an ethos of embodiment – in fact, an ethos of psychic and bodily merging with the environment – comes at great peril to the self, which becomes incapable of separating itself from the violence and toxicity of the environment depicted. Taken to its extreme, as it is in *Los zorros*, this form of commitment proves self-annihilating: collapsing body and text renders the former lifeless and the latter mute. Yet, this sacrifice, akin to public self-immolation, may be deemed necessary as a form of protest, a way of drawing attention to the crisis that haunts the success stories of modern Latin American literature.

The most obvious example of such a success story is that of the 'boom': the explosion of international interest in and publication of Latin American authors in the 1960's, which is often attributed to the emergence of a 'new,' modern, and innovative kind of Latin American novel (commonly referred to as *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana*). The acclaimed novels of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, João Guimarães Rosa, and Alejo Carpentier are said to have emerged out of the tension between what Moreiras calls "the centripetal forces of regionalism/ nationalism and the centrifugal forces of the artistic avant-garde" (184). By drawing on the formal techniques of Latin American, European and North American avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, the story goes, Latin American literature finally comes of age, leaving behind the infantile stage of cultural underdevelopment often signified by the term "regionalism," and, to varying degrees, transcending its provincial roots to join the ranks of the universal modernists.

I read Arguedas's *Los zorros* as interrogating such celebratory narratives, both those that would cast Arguedas's literature to the sidelines of modernity and those that would grant it a central position in the emergence of *la nueva narrativa*. Beyond the explicit remarks on this topic made in the metatextual *diario* sections, I argue, the narrative fissures and linguistic opacity of the *relato* sections plant urgent and critical questions: Whose experiences and which kinds of perspectives are granted the ability to transcend the regional and be read as universal? At what cost is such transcendence achieved? Can the literary 'boom' be separated from other, more blatantly destructive and exploitative developmentalist projects of the 1950s and 1960s? Is there a language of alterity or an outside site of enunciation capable of resisting the commodification of Latin American experience in an increasingly professionalized and market-driven literary world? Is such a position capable of being sustained and heard? Without offering itself as a fully viable alternative, I believe *Los zorros* offers a powerful critique of the predominant narrative of how the heroes of the so-called 'boom' have risen above Latin American literature's regionalist roots.

Los zorros reminds us that Latin American regionalism's encounter with the avant-gardes has yielded more than just the most marketable forms of magical realism; it has also given rise to a negative poetics that questions not only the politics of transculturation but the very possibility of transmitting the experience of Latin America's most subjugated peoples within the dominant cultural forms. Beyond embracing avant-garde poetics as a form of regional resistance, *Los*

zorros reveals the self-destructive potential of such a tactic. Nevertheless, I insist, Arguedas's last novel does not simply stage an "implosion of meaning" as Moreiras has claimed (190). To the contrary, *Los zorros* dramatizes the struggle to reimagine regional landscapes at a historical moment when rural-urban migration and increasingly complex economic structures collapse the geographic and cultural distance between above and below, between city and country.

Beyond "utopía arcaica"

In spite of crediting *Los ríos profundos* with transcending the "primitive" novel, Vargas Llosa's critiques of Arguedas's other works suggest that he continues to see his compatriot as a "primitive" writer.²⁸⁹ For example, he criticizes *Todas las sangres* for being simplistically ideological in the contrasts it draws between Andean and coastal life (1981). He also characterizes Arguedas as a naïve writer who wrote from personal experience and was unconcerned with literary technique and theory: "Arguedas fue sobre todo un intuitivo, que construyó sus ficciones de acuerdo a un modelo simple y convencional" (1981, 8).²⁹⁰ While such remarks from as prominent an intellectual as Mario Vargas Llosa undoubtedly propagated the stereotype of Arguedas as a naïve writer, Arguedas himself is largely responsible for reinforcing the myth of himself as "el indio, el intérprete del mundo indígena, el auténtico representante" (Galindo 189).²⁹¹ Contrary to what this image would suggest, Arguedas had been to Europe and the United States and read European and North American authors, including modernists such as Joyce and Faulkner. As numerous critics have observed, his work belies careful attention paid to form and far more editing and re-writing than Arguedas's comments would suggest: "No es un autor elemental o primitivo. Por más que se presente como absolutamente espontáneo, ha reflexionado sobre sus problemas bastante más de lo que él mismo supone o sugiere" (Galindo 189).²⁹² Yet, as Estelle Tarica points out, Arguedas seems to have intentionally created the persona of himself as an intellectual innocent; his own remarks about his approach to literature present some of the greatest obstacles to critics who wish to celebrate the author's "technical complexity" and "reclaim Arguedas as a master narrator who belongs in the same 'universal' category as Rulfo, García Márquez, and Cortázar" (89). Arguedas explicitly addresses his ambivalence towards being included in this group in the diario sections of *Los zorros*, but, as we will see, it is by no means obvious that these diarios can be read as the transparent confession of the author's true feelings rather than as themselves a self-consciously public performance of his role as "provincial writer."²⁹³

The meta-textual *diario* sections of the novel display Arguedas's complex and contradictory attitude towards being associated with the technical innovation and critical and commercial success of *la nueva narrativa*. Enrique Cortez reads *Los zorros* as being decidedly

²⁸⁹ For Vargas Llosa's use of "primitive", see his 1968 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Primitives and Creators" and my discussion of it in the introduction.

²⁹⁰ "Arguedas was above all an intuitive, who constructed his fictions in accordance with a simple and conventional model."

²⁹¹ "the Indian, the interpreter of the indigenous world, the authentic representative."

²⁹² "He isn't an elemental or primitive writer. As much as he presents himself as absolutely spontaneous, he has reflected on his problems a great deal more than he himself supposes or suggests."

²⁹³ Arguedas has been criticized, most prominently by Vargas Llosa, for constructing and disseminating what John Landreau calls "autobiographical legends," including the image of himself as a Quechua-speaking Indian (his claims that he was raised by Indians and spoke only Quechua until adolescence have been largely debunked) (Tarica 83). Tarica proposes that much of the autobiography with which Arguedas's literature is infused ought to be understood as rhetorical positioning aimed at establishing him as a privileged insider to the world he represents, rather than as fact.

“contra el boom y un campo de batalla por la representación realista” (333). There is evidence, however, that early on in the composition process of *Los zorros*, Arguedas hoped the forthcoming novel would be an international success on the level of *Cien años de Soledad*.²⁹⁴ Yet in the final form of the novel, he disavows any such aspirations and only once admits the possibility that doing without the erudition of ‘los cortázares’ might prove a handicap:

Yo no puedo iniciar el capítulo V de esta novela porque me ha decaído el ardor de la vida y porque, quizá, me falta más mundo de ciudad que, en cierta forma, significa decir erudición, aunque la erudición y la técnica pueden llegar a ser la “carabina de Ambrosio” o un falso desvío para resolver ciertas dificultades, especialmente para los que buscan el orden de las cosas a lo pueblo y no a lo ciudad o a lo ciudad recién parida, a lo cernícalo y no a lo jet (252).²⁹⁵

Even sensing that he is underequipped for the task at hand, Arguedas remains wary of “la técnica” as a frivolous distraction and refuses to budge from his identity as a provincial committed to working with rustic tools. Yet, as Stephan Gruber has argued, *Los zorros* is no less formally complex nor technically accomplished than the most experimental works of Vargas Llosa or Cortázar (386).

While professing to admire Arguedas’s work, Vargas Llosa nevertheless diminishes the achievements of his compatriot by characterizing Arguedas, fifteen years his senior, as naïve, nostalgic, and not fully of the present moment. Vargas Llosa sparked an ongoing debate about Arguedas’s politics when, in the essay “José María Arguedas: entre la ideología y la arcadia,” he coined the term “utopía arcaico” to describe the return of an Andean cosmovision to modern Peru in *Todas las sangres* (1964). In a strange and condescending move, Vargas Llosa attempts to rescue Arguedas from being read as an ideologue (and a mouthpiece for leftist, *indigenista* politics in particular) by arguing that Arguedas was far more conservative than he realized. The worldview expressed in Arguedas’s novels, argues Vargas Llosa, is informed less by the leftist politics with which Arguedas claims affiliation and more by a vain and nostalgic longing for a “utopía arcaico”: “una nostalgia desesperada por un mundo perdido [. . .] en parte arcaico, en parte utópico” (42).²⁹⁶ The lost world that Arguedas longs to restore through literature is, according to Vargas Llosa, not only a world dominated by an Indian worldview, but an insular world untouched by modernity and cosmopolitan culture: “Este mundo está incontaminado de modernidad, alejado de la costa y de todo lo que es extranjero [. . .] Un mundo no corrompido, virginal, casto, mágico, ritual, que hunde sus raíces en el pasado peruano. Un mundo que se ha preservado de manera casi milagrosa, gracias al espíritu de resistencia de los indios contra las

²⁹⁴ See Arguedas’s 1967 letter to his editor at Losada. Galindo claims that Arguedas aspired to be an internationally acclaimed writer like Gabriel García Márquez, although his work was rarely read outside of Peru during his lifetime. Galindo sees Arguedas as internally divided on this matter: on the one hand, “quiere ser aceptado por el mundo culto y erudito [. . .] quiere hacer una novela que tenga tanto éxito como las novelas del boom” “he wants to be accepted by the highbrow and elite world [. . .] he wants to create a novel as successful as the ‘boom’ novels”; on the other hand, he believes himself to be a fundamentally different kind of author, one whose primary aim is to bear witness to the historical events impacting his community (182).

²⁹⁵ “I cannot begin chapter V of this novel because my zest for living has waned, and perhaps because I need more city world, by which, in a certain way, I mean to say more erudition, although erudition and technique can come to backfire or be a false detour for resolving certain difficulties, especially for those who seek a small-town order of things (and not a city or a new-born city order), one appropriate to a kestrel rather than a jet plane” (188-189). All translations of *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* are by Frances Horning Barraclough from: *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*. University of Pittsburgh Press/ Colección Archivos.

²⁹⁶ “archaic utopia”: “a desperate nostalgia for a lost world [. . .] in part archaic, in part utopic.”

invasiones, presiones y expoliaciones de que ha sido objeto” (43).²⁹⁷ Vargas Llosa argues, moreover, that because this worldview values tradition and “la antigüedad” above all else, it is inherently hostile to not only foreign exploitation, technology, and industrialism (explicit objects of critique in Arguedas’s work) but to progress more generally (44-45). What is couched as a progressive, socialist critique of capitalism, claims Vargas Llosa, is actually a profoundly conservative tribute to an “ideal arcaico” (46). This same characterization of Arguedas as a conservative with delusions of being a leftist revolutionary will inform Vargas Llosa’s reading of *Los zorros*.²⁹⁸ Vargas Llosa’s critique of Arguedas as reactionary and traditionalist is puzzling, especially coming from an intellectual whose politics are far to the right of Arguedas’s, and some critics suspect that the attempt to discredit Arguedas’s leftist politics is in fact driven by Vargas Llosa’s more conservative political agenda. Rojas notes, for example, that Vargas Llosa uses some of the same rhetoric to critique Evo Morales (Rojas 61).

Arguedas’s champions have been persistently (and rightly) incensed with what they see as Vargas Llosa’s insulting attempts to deny Arguedas his modernity (Vigil 96). His “utopía arcaico” reading has become a favorite target and has been so repeatedly and thoroughly rebuffed that it would not be worth discussing except that the debate it has provoked has forced Arguedas’s defenders to probe deeper into the complex relationship between indigeneity and modernity in his work. For example, María José Barros points out that Vargas Llosa’s reading fails to take into account the centrality of dialog between cultures and times in Arguedas’s work (155). Julio Ortega likewise insists that Arguedas’s celebration of Andean culture does not fetishize a pure, autochthonous identity uncontaminated by western culture, and that his critiques of modernization target specifically the exploitation and disruption of Indian communities. Such protest, argues Ortega, should not be misconstrued as generalized hostility towards progress:

Evidentemente, son las fases de explotación (minería, pesca masiva) las que significan una violencia disruptiva, contraria a los principios de convivencia, a las fuentes de la memoria colectiva, y a los procesos de cohesión étnica. Sería un error confundir ese

²⁹⁷ “This world is uncontaminated by modernity, removed from the coast and all that is foreign [. . .] An uncorrupted world, virginal, chaste, magic, ritual, whose roots plunge into Peru’s past. A world that has been preserved almost miraculously, thanks to the spirit of resistance of the Indians against invasions, pressures and pillaging of which it has been the object.”

²⁹⁸ In, “Literatura y suicidio: El caso de Arguedas (*El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*)”, Vargas Llosa argues that Arguedas’s attempts to position himself as a leftist revolutionary are disingenuous, discounting the time Arguedas spent in prison and his enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution: “Que emocionalmente estuvo siempre del lado de las víctimas y que toda su obra rezuma horror a la injusticia, es indiscutible. Pero siempre fue hostil a tomar parte en acciones políticas [. . .] su crisis no era la de un hombre de acción que prefiere morir antes que ser mero testigo de l lucha por la revolución, pues no fue otra cosa toda su vida” (11-12). “It is indisputable that emotionally he was always on the side of the victims and that all his works boil down to horror at injustice. But he was always hostile to taking part in political actions [. . .] his crisis was not that of a man of action who prefers to die before being a mere witness to the fight for the revolution, for he never was anything else in his life.” According to Vargas Llosa, Arguedas’s obsession with his idealized version of indigenous life made him hostile to all forms of modernization and progress, including a socialist revolution: “Arguedas no aceptó nunca en su fuero interno que el precio del progreso fuera la muerte de lo indio, la sustitución de su sociedad rural y arcaica, transida de tradiciones quechuas, por una sociedad industrial y urbana occidentalizada” (13). “Arguedas never accepted in his internal jurisdiction that the price of progress was the death of the Indian, the substitution of his rural and archaic society, worn out by Quechua traditions, for an industrialized and westernized urban society.” Vargas Llosa reads the modern dystopia of Chimbote as depicted in *Los zorros* as confirmation of Arguedas’s mistrust of modernity.

debate con un anticapitalismo romántico o un colectivismo anacrónico, y mucho menos con una agenda neoprimitivista reacia a la modernidad (2006, 89).²⁹⁹

William Rowe goes a step further, suggesting that Arguedas's use of archaic and mythic forms is a way of insisting on the continued presence and relevance of such forms in modern Peru: instead of rendering Indian ways of life ahistoric, his literature announces the return of the past in the present (Rojas 112). In a similar vein, Estelle Tarica argues that whereas previous incarnations of *indigenista* literature may have denied the coevalness of Indian culture by pining nostalgically for a pre-modern, pre-European past, Arguedas, in a far more radical gesture, underscores the contemporaneity of indigenous culture by emphasizing the time-space shared by Indians and non-Indians (5).

In other words, the prolific attempts to rescue Arguedas from Vargas Llosa's "utopía arcaico" reading suggest that, rather than simply taking a stance against modernization, as Vargas Llosa alleges, Arguedas undermines the teleological model of history that insists that the archaic and the indigenous must be displaced into the past in order to make room for modernity. Nowhere is this subversion more pronounced than in *Los zorros*, which Andrea Hibbett reads as liberating Peru from the myth of progress.³⁰⁰ Yet, whatever utopian visions offered by *Los zorros* will be countered elsewhere in the novel by profoundly dystopian scenes of violence, degradation, and exploitation, suggesting that while the convergence of Indian and coastal culture and the leveling of hierarchies between the archaic and the modern may have liberating potential, a haphazard postmodern mash-up of cultures governed only by the economic logic of global capitalism cannot insure a just outcome.

When the country collapses into the city

Alberto Flores Galindo understands *Los zorros* as Arguedas's response to charges that the author's nostalgic idealization of Indian culture prevented him from grappling with the realities of modern Peru. The publication of *Todas las sangres* in 1964 spurred many such allegations, including but not limited to Vargas Llosa's now infamous "utopía arcaico" reading. Galindo sees *Los zorros* as Arguedas's defense against those who charged that the Peru depicted in *Todas las sangres* was an anachronism, a caricature of a feudal world that no longer existed: by taking on decidedly modern subject matter, including urban life and globalized industrial capitalism, Arguedas attempts to prove that he understands that the Peru of the 1960s is no longer the Peru of the 1920s and that he is capable of representing the former as well as the latter (178-179). Whereas critics such as Ángel Rama and Julio Ortega would, by the 1980's, attempt to rescue Arguedas from the backwaters of literary regionalism by insisting upon the modernity of his work, Arguedas's self-defense against charges of anachronism, if we are to understand *Los zorros* as such, is far less triumphant. In his last novel, Arguedas performatively distances himself from the success of the Latin American 'boom' and openly and honestly questions whether his writing *can* account for the disheartening realities of modern-day Peru, and, ultimately, whether he can survive the attempt to do so.

²⁹⁹ "Evidently, it is the phases of exploitation (mining, massive fishing) that signify a disruptive violence, contrary to the principals of coexistence, to the sources of collective memory, and to the processes of ethnic cohesion. It would be mistake to confuse this debate with a romantic anticapitalism or an anachronistic collectivism, and much less with an neoprimitivist agenda hostile to modernity."

³⁰⁰ See section III for a more complete discussion of Hibbett's reading.

Having touched on what might account for Arguedas's seemingly anomalous departure from rural subject matter in his last novel, I have yet to address the question of why, in a project ostensibly about experimental narratives of *non-urban* places, I am writing about Chimbote, a large and rapidly industrializing urban center. In answer to this question, I propose that Arguedas's portrait of Chimbote offers a model of what regionalism might look like in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the center and the periphery are not always geographically separated, but rather, precariously layered one on top of another – sometimes quite literally – more distant from one another in vertical elevation than in lateral miles, as we see, for example, in the differences between La Paz and El Alto in Bolivia, or in the difference between the coastal neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro and the *favelas* in the surrounding hills. As has only become increasingly apparent since Arguedas's time, pockets of underdevelopment, poverty, and cultural otherness are to be found in the midst of the world's most modern, wealthy, and cosmopolitan cities.

As much as immigrant ghettos, *favelas*, *villas miserias*, and other types of *barriadas marginales* are seen as sights of suffering, violence, and degradation, Arguedas's final novel helps us to see, without in any way denying or downplaying the misery of urban poverty, that these marginal communities are also strongholds of vanishing cultural traditions. In an age when autochthonous indigenous communities as well as the “untouched” rural landscapes and “authentic” lifestyles with which they have historically been associated are increasingly rarified if not extinct, marginalized urban sub-cultures such as the ones Arguedas depicts in *Los zorros*, come to occupy the cultural place of the region: it is the enclaves of cultural otherness within the city limits that have the best hope of re-enchanting the modern city. At once the hidden underbelly of modern progress and its hope of redemption, at once an other to urban modernity and thoroughly integral to it, the slums of Arguedas's Chimbote point to the complex and precarious fate of regional cultures in an industrialized and globalized world. Representing this new, hybrid landscape requires moving beyond binary discourses of the city and the country, which, even by the time *Los zorros* was composed, had been rendered nearly senseless by the mass immigration of peasants to the city.

In the Andes, this urban-rural dichotomy has historically been racialized, with the *criollo* elites of Spanish descent associated with coastal cities such as Lima and the typically poor and uneducated Indians of Quechua and Aymara descent associated with the rural highlands. Whereas the most positivistic veins of regionalist and indigenist literature have tended to reinforce such binary divides by treating indigenous rural communities in isolation, Estelle Tarica stresses that a key feature of the “intimate indigenism” of figures such as Arguedas and Jesús Lara is its depiction of the intersection of “multiple ethno-racial categories often shading ambiguously into one another,” revealing “the porousness of racial boundaries” (xvi). Such a pluralistic approach, argues Tarica, proves more relevant for understanding the demographic shifts that come with rural-urban migration, globalization, and increased social mobility (xvii). Tarica also notes that this new indigenism is marked by a shift from defining indigeneity in racial terms as indianness to thinking of indigeneity as being native to a given place and connected to the local land (7). This evolving notion of indigeneity allows someone like Arguedas, who is racially white, to identify with Peru's indigenous communities by virtue of having spent much of his youth in the highlands among Indians.

As we will see in *Los zorros*, even the geographic categories of “up above” and “down below” cease to be fully stable and separate: Arguedas's last novel imagines a Peru where the landscapes of the highlands are brought to the coast in the songs, memories, and affective

experience of *serrano* immigrants, and where the previously walled-off and protected communities and natural environments of the highlands are increasingly implicated in the economy of the coast and thus increasingly at risk of being eroded and contaminated. Traditional notions of the region as a discreet territory that can be located on a map and studied in isolation cease to be relevant to this re-configured reality.

This turn towards understanding regional life as relationally constituted and always imbricated in larger networks of culture, commerce, and power has become a hallmark of Critical Regionalism. Though rarely invoking the term, a number of critics have analyzed *Los zorros* in terms resonant with if not identical to those of this emerging field. For example, Lucas Izquierdo's reading of Arguedas's Chimbote as a relative and relational space – a community generated through movement, networks, communication, and circuits – echoes Vizcaíno-Alemán's definition of critical regionalism: "Critical regionalism reframes the West in terms of routes—not roots—to underscore the shifting and unfixed place of regions in late capitalism." (201). In a similar vein, Claudette Kemper Columbus sees in *Los zorros* a movement towards a postcolonial hermeneutic, where the point of view is always temporal and contingent, transitory and circumstantial, where the human is imbricated in a web of interdependencies and the individual is not autonomous from the environment (369).³⁰¹ Because such a point of view denies the viewer autonomy from the world viewed and refuses to bestow a sense of totality or fixity upon this world, she argues, it escapes being oppressive or imperialist.

This positioning, which in its intimacy and proximity forecloses the violence of positivistic representation and orientalist othering, is at the heart of what Tarica dubs "intimate indigenismo": "Intimate indigenista enunciations work from a sense of affinity rather than difference, from a subjective position that seeks shared communication and experience rather than an external, objective position vis-à-vis Indians. But although such rhetoric is distinct from more paternalist or positivist *indigenista* tendencies, it cannot be truly separated from them" (xxiii). I read the self-annulling impulses expressed in *Los zorros – I must represent Chimbote, I can't represent Chimbote* – as a reaction to the impossibility of any *indigenista* or regionalist project truly separating itself from what Tarica calls the "positivistic representational apparatus necessary to frame and pathologize an indigenous Other" (xxv): recognizing that the violence of representation is never fully avoidable, the text turns this violence instead on itself. In its incessant slippage between an internal and external perspective on the world it narrates, *Los zorros* fulfills Adorno's injunction for the thinker to be "Both within things and outside of them," which Temple Herr has offered as a possible definition of Critical Regionalism (Herr 22).

Los zorros, far more so than *Los ríos profundos*, calls into question the stability and separateness of the categories of above and below, Indian and *criollo*, *serrano* and *costeño* as well as its own ability to represent the heterogeneous and ever-evolving social landscape encountered in Chimbote. The narrator of the *diario* sections both laments that he is too much of an outsider to truly and intimately know the world he is charged with capturing *and* decries the impossibility of lifting himself out of the fray enough to gain an overview of this tumultuous landscape and present it as a panorama.

³⁰¹ Temple Herr defines postcolonial hermeneutics as the work of "layering indigenous and historical experience into previously colonized spaces," and sees it as continuous with the work of Critical Regionalism (8). We will return at a later point in the chapter to the interdependency of humans with the non-human landscape, a feature of Arguedas's writing that can be traced throughout his career and which has generated ecocritical readings of his work. The relationship between ecocriticism and Critical Regionalism merits further attention.

Arguedas repeatedly reminds his reader that he feels himself to be an outsider in Chimbote, and the ensuing difficulty of perceiving and transmitting Chimbote's reality becomes a major theme of the *diario* sections of the novel. Importantly, Arguedas positions himself as an outsider not to the Indian culture that has migrated into Chimbote and with which he has publically identified throughout his career but, rather, with the urban environment itself. Aligning himself with the perspective of the displaced highland immigrants of whom he writes, Arguedas's narrator emphasizes how out of place he feels in cities in general. In the second *diario*, he admits that although he has spent over thirty years in cities, he has never understood them, identifying as he does with the *indio* and *serrano* culture of the rural highlands: "Yo soy 'de la lana', como me decías; de 'la altura', que en el Perú quiere decir indio, serrano, y ahora pretendo escribir sobre los que tú llamabas 'del pelo', zambos criollos, costeños civilizados, ciudadanos de la ciudad" (119-120).³⁰² In large part because Arguedas's narrator feels himself to be an outsider in the city, Chimbote perennially eludes his attempts to grasp it, map it, know it, or write it, much like the titular *zorros*, which he laments near the end of the novel "se han puesto fuera de mi alcance; corren mucho o están muy lejos" (252).³⁰³

The presence of an autobiographical "yo" in the *diario* sections would seem to mark the narrator's struggle to make sense of Chimbote as Arguedas's own. As numerous critics have observed, however, it would be too simple to reduce the narrator (of these sections or of the work as a whole) to Arguedas himself.³⁰⁴ The "yo" of the *diario* sections quite obviously refers to Arguedas in many respects: in addition to reflecting at great length on the difficulty of completing the work in front of him, he identifies himself as the author of *Todas las sangres*, as the intellectual embroiled in a polemic with Julio Cortázar, as the psychiatric patient of Dr. Laura Hoffman, and as the man who has recently attempted suicide and who intends, at the conclusion of the *Último Diario?* to succeed in ending his own life. The non-fictional, autobiographical dimension of the *diarios* allows *Los zorros* to be read as a form of *testimonio*, a work that bears witness not only to the historical transformation of Chimbote, but also to the fraught process of its own composition, to the personal, aesthetic, and political crisis this struggle engenders in its author, and, ultimately, to the death of this author.³⁰⁵

Complicating though not completely undermining such readings, the autobiographical and fictional levels of the text interpenetrate one another, much as the once-separate worlds *de*

³⁰² "I am 'de la lana' [of the wool], as you used to tell me; that is, from 'the high country,' which in Peru means an Indian, a highlander, and now I'm attempting to write about those you used to call 'del pelo' [of the hair], talking about *criollos zambos*, civilized coastal people, citizens of the city" (87).

³⁰³ "These Foxes have gotten out of range; either they run a lot or else they're far away" (189).

³⁰⁴ Fernando Rivera's explains how the polemic between Arguedas and Cortázar solidifies for many readers the reading of the *diarios* as autobiographical because this is how Cortázar treats them, in spite of the fact that they were published as fiction, and Arguedas never corrects him (190). Rivera argues, however, that presenting the *diarios* as autobiographical could be a literary strategy to produce the illusion of the real (191). He points out that Arguedas never refers to himself by name in the diaries and that their status as intimate personal diaries is questionable given that their author is clearly conscious that it could be read by others (192).

³⁰⁵ Enrique Cortez, for example, asks what prevents *Los zorros* from being read as *testimonio*. Alberto Flores Galindo sees Arguedas's last work as an attempt to fuse the genres of the novel and *testimonio* (182). Manuel Pantigoso Pecero argues that the use of the autobiographical narrator, the narrator protagonist, and the slippage between the two is intended to "desficcionalizar la narración" – to make the reader receive his stories as first person testimonies (317). The author's suicide ultimately conjoins the levels of autobiography and fiction: "lo cierto es que el suicidio en Arguedas – en los escritos que lo contextualizan – selló con sangre esa forma personal de vincular su literatura y su vida con la realidad" (317) "What's sure is that the suicide in Arguedas's work – in the writings that contextualize it – sealed with blood that personal form of linking his literature and his life with reality."

arriba and *de abajo* begin to do. The autobiographical voice we might attribute to Arguedas shares the narration of the *diarios* with the voices of the two mythical foxes: in the first *diario*, the italicized and dated diary entries give way to the dramatic dialog of the foxes; this dialog continues at the end of the first chapter, this time interrupting the fictional narrative with metafictional questions about the difficulty of narrating both worlds and even a reference to “El individuo que pretendió quitarse la vida y escribe este libro [. . .]” (73); in the final diary, Arguedas will refer to the foxes as the narrators who will never be able to narrate the final fates of the characters because he intends to kill himself and leave the novel incomplete.³⁰⁶ These foxes, who express meta-awareness not only of the process of composing the story but also of the fate of its real-world author, also appear in the fictional world of the novel, as mysterious visitors who call upon the residents of Chimbote.

In addition to representing the binary division between the two cultural worlds that have historically been said to coexist in Peru, these elusive foxes represent the possibility of dialog between cultures. According to a Quechua myth translated by Arguedas in his compilation, *Dioses y hombres de Huarochiri*, the two foxes have met regularly for 1,500 years to exchange knowledge of their respective worlds. In the dialog at the end of the first chapter, the *zorro de abajo* explains this mythic backstory and the binary worldview it has engendered (72-73). Though the events discussed by the two foxes in this second encounter – namely the rapid industrialization of Chimbote – bear little resemblance to the mythic events of fifteen-hundred years ago, the two-part division of the world persists, as does the form of the dialog as a means of bringing these two worlds together. It becomes quickly apparent that comparing the two worlds is a more complex task than it used to be. The fox from down below begins to stress the interdependent nature of these two worlds even as he contrasts them: “Este mundo de abajo es el mío y comienza en el tuyo, abismos y llanos pequeños o desiguales que el hombre hace producir a fuerza de golpes y canciones; acero, felicidad y sangre, son las montañas y precipicios de más profundidad que existen (72-73).”³⁰⁷ The low-lying world he claims as his own begins in the world of his interlocutor – “en el tuyo” – in the man-made chasms and abysses of the mines up above. As the boring of the Andes mountains for steel creates vertiginous downwards channels and precipices towards the lower elevations, so too does the introduction of the mining industry precipitate social and economic change that will eventually collapse some of the distinctions between the long-isolated autochthonous cultures of the highlands and the internationally “contaminated,” or hybrid cultures of the coast.

From identity politics to an ethos of embodiment and sacrifice

The globalized nature of Arguedas’s Chimbote is apparent in the strange equivalency established between Arguedas, who has come to Chimbote to conduct sociological research, the Indian immigrants who have come in search of work in the fishmeal industry, and the foreign priests and aide workers who have come on humanitarian missions: all are outsiders. I am particularly interested in the character of Maxwell, the North American Peace Corps volunteer, who has been read as an avatar for the author, and whom I read as exemplifying (albeit problematically) the ideal of embodied knowledge towards which Arguedas aspires in his last

³⁰⁶ “The individual who attempted to take his life and who writes this book [. . .]”

³⁰⁷ “This world of down below is mine and it begins in yours, abysses and small level or uneven places that man makes produce by dint of blows and songs; steal, joy, and blood, they are the deepest precipices and mountains in existence” (53).

novel.³⁰⁸ Maxwell and his story are integrally woven into Arguedas's portrait of the fishing port. In fact, *Los zorros* begins and ends with Maxwell: the fisherman discuss the conflict between the gringo and El Mudo in the first scene, and the second scene takes us to the brothel to witness this conflict play out. The last words that Arguedas writes about the diagetic world of the novel in the *Último Diario?* are addressed to Maxwell: "En la voz del charango y de la quena, lo oiré todo. Estará casi todo, y Maxwell. Tú, Maxwell, el más atingido, con tantos monstruos y alimañas dentro y fuera de ti, que tienes que aniquilar, transformar, llorar y quemar" (346).³⁰⁹ The work of singing this world and transforming its evil and suffering into art thus falls to the gringo musician, the unlikely bard of the story. Contrary to what we might expect, Maxwell is linguistically and culturally coded less as a foreigner (as the North American priests are represented) and more as a highlander: he plays the *charango* and sings in Quechua; as both the narrator and Father Cardozo observe, he speaks Spanish not in the stilted way of foreigners but with musical, almost magical intonation, displaying perfect fluency in popular speech (306, 311).

At least initially, Maxwell appears to be better positioned to make sense of Chimbote than Arguedas's narrator is. Unlike Arguedas/the narrator, who feels at home amongst the highland Indians but not in Chimbote, Maxwell appears capable of fully merging with the local culture wherever he is. Maxwell has so successfully assimilated to the indigenous community of Paratía, where he lived on Lake Titicaca, that his life in Chimbote more closely resembles that of the *serrano* immigrants than that of a foreign aide worker or tourist. After leaving the Peace Corps in order to more fully participate in the local culture, he goes into business with the bricklayer don Cecilio, takes up permanent residence in the impoverished *barriada* La Esperanza Baja, which he claims is "mi lugar, mi verdadero sitio" (311), and plans to wed a neighborhood woman, Señora Fredesbinda.³¹⁰

More of a cultural chameleon than an ethnographer, Maxwell studies local culture by immersing himself in it and embodying it. It is as a musician that Maxwell has proved most accomplished at assimilating to Andean culture, and he emphasizes the time, study, and personal connections that have lead him to this point: he apprenticed with a famous *charangista* "en muchas horas y semanas, mientras bebíamos pisco y cerveza" (310), and he takes modest pride in embodying the music as he plays it: "No las interpreto [las canciones] como los nativos, pero ya en muchos de esos cantos yo me vivo, yo me hago" (314).³¹¹ Above all, Maxwell takes great pride in having arrived at his deep knowledge of traditional music through *living with* musicians as opposed to studying the subject academically. When he describes the music of the *ayarachis*, he attributes his authority to do so to the time he has spent among them:

Y dije esto no porque haya estudiado musicología. Tú lo sabes. En la Casa de la Cultura de Lima pude tratar directamente con los bailarines; pasé noches enteras en el internado del Colegio Militar Leoncio Prado donde estuvieron alojados. Me aceptaron bien desde el

³⁰⁸ José Luis Rouillón reads Maxwell as a heroic avatar for Arguedas: as one who has been purified by the world above, he is tasked with battling the chaos of down below (344).

³⁰⁹ "In the voices of the charango and the quena, I shall hear everything. Almost everything will be there, and Maxwell will, too. You, Maxwell, the one is most troubled by so many monsters and predatory creatures – both within and without – which you must annihilate, change, shed tears for, and burn" (260).

³¹⁰ "my place, my true place" (234).

³¹¹ "during many hours and weeks, while we drank pisco and beer"/ "I don't interpret them [the songs] the way the natives do, but now in much of that singing I come alive; I make myself" (236).

principio [. . .] Estuve con ellos seis meses. Pastores de alpacas, trabajé en lo que trabajaban, comí lo que comían, dormí en las *puñunas* en que dormían. (304-305)³¹²

Maxwell attributes his nearly universal acceptance among the highlanders to the music which unites them, but it is also clear that he has committed himself to an ethics of *living with* – working, eating, and sleeping along side of – rather than simply studying the culture out of which this musical tradition has emerged.

Maxwell's modesty vanishes when comparing his ability to understand the highlanders to the inferior, superficial understanding of foreigners like Padre Cardozo. In this contrast, we can discern the value that Arguedas places on embodied, experiential knowledge of cultural otherness. When describing an episode involving an Indian at a dance festival in Puno, Maxwell claims to understand the man even though they do not speak the same language:

Me habló en su lengua, sonriendo, abriendo la boca tan exageradamente, que ese gesto le daba a su cara una expresión como de totalidad; le escuché, en la sangre y en la claridad de mi entendimiento. Tú [Cardozo] no puedes comprender esto.

-- ¿Por qué? – preguntó Cardozo --. ¿Por qué no puedo? Entiendo. Te oigo bien.

--No; bien no entiendes. Tú andas nadando en las cáscaras de esta nación. No lo digo con desprecio. En Paratía aprendí a usar bien las palabras. Estás en la cáscara, la envoltura que defiende y oprime. (307)³¹³

Maxwell differentiates his deep knowledge from that of Cardozo, who is fluent in Marxist ideology but not in the local culture and thus stands accused of swimming around in the outer layers of the nation, confined to the global, ideological knowledge that Maxwell compares to the rind of a fruit, a superficial layer that both protects and oppresses but is not the thing itself. Maxwell later elaborates on what he means when he claims that he has learned to use words well:

“—Oír la misa es entender a la gente en lo que tienen de particular; oír y saber lo que ellos oyen, saben y obedecen o niegan. “Cavar el corral” es trabajar, por ese entendimiento, al modo y manera de ellos, nativo” (311).³¹⁴

Learning to use words well includes mastering colloquial idioms like “cavar el corral,” but it also entails *hearing* well. Whereas Cardozo speaks mass, just as he pontificates about liberation theology, Maxwell puts himself in the position of those *listening* to the mass in order to experience the world as the Indians do. As suggested by his musical propensities, Maxwell hears far more than words; he hears melody and timbre and emotion, and, as in the episode where he understands the Indian in Puno in spite of not having a shared language, he listens with more than just his ears: “en la sangre y en la claridad de mi entendimiento.” Like Arguedas in the

³¹² ““And I didn't say this because I had studied musicology. You know that. In the Casa de la Cultura in Lima I was able to deal directly with the dancers; I spent whole nights in the dormitory at the Leoncio Prado Military School, where they were staying. They accepted me from the very beginning [. . .] I spent six months with them, They were alpaca herders, I did the same work they did, ate what they ate, and slept on the *puñunas* [adobe benches] they slept on.” (229)

³¹³ ““He spoke to me in his language, smiling, opening his mouth in such an exaggerated way that the gesture gave sort of an expression of totality to his face; I heard him out, in the blood and clarity of my understanding. You won't be able to comprehend this,’ ‘Why not?’ asked Cardozo. ‘Why won't I understand? I do understand. I hear you well.’ ‘No, you don't. You don't understand me well. You go swimming around in the outer layers of this country. I'm not saying that contemptuously. In Paratía I learned to use words well. You're in the outer layers, the shell that defends and oppresses . . .” (231).

³¹⁴ ““To hear mass is to understand people— what's special about them; to hear and know what they hear, know, and obey, or deny. ‘To dig the yard’ is to work for that understanding, in the natives' manner of doing and being,” (234).

polemic with Julio Cortázar elaborated in the *diarios*, Maxwell thus becomes a spokesperson for the value of experiential knowledge of the local, as opposed to academic, theoretical knowledge, which may circulate globally but remains ungrounded in an ethos of living with, listening to, participating in, and embodying.

Importantly, neither Arguedas nor Maxwell has been born into the indigenous culture with which he identifies. In the contrast between Padre Cardozo and Maxwell, Arguedas suggests that one's ethnic identity counts for less than one's willingness to immerse oneself in the local culture: we see that Cardozo, a North American Latino, struggles far more than Maxwell, a 'true,' racial gringo, to attain cultural and linguistic fluency in the indigenous communities of Chimbote.

Following a similar logic, Arguedas suggests that being Latin American by birth does not alone qualify one to write Latin American literature. Arguedas targets Julio Cortázar, the Argentine writer living in exile in France, as a representative of an entire cadre of Latin American intellectuals whose authenticity and commitment he calls into question. My reading of *Los zorros* suggests that the primary grounds on which Arguedas criticizes "los cortázares" is their ignorance of and lack of concern for *what it feels like*, on an affective and corporeal level, to immersively inhabit the communities they purportedly represent. Arguedas objects to the presumed superiority of the technical sophistication and the dislocated cosmopolitan aesthetics he associates with "los cortázares" because he feels that the critical and commercial success of their style implicitly devalues the unstudied, lived knowledge that he feels authenticates his own work.

In the *Primer Diario*, Arguedas infamously distances himself from many of the most celebrated practitioners of *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana* (he names Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, and Julio Cortázar among others), whom he accuses of artifice and professionalism. Arguedas makes little attempt to veil the sense of insecurity (admitting he lacks the technical genius of these "great" authors) and defensiveness (sensing that these globally renowned writers perceive him and his work as provincial) from which these comments issue. Indeed, in Cortázar's article in *Life*, written in response to the publication of Arguedas's *Primer Diario*, Cortázar does belittle what he calls "los intelectuales de escarapela y banderita," among whom he includes Arguedas and sees regionalist literature as the domain of those who fail to achieve a more totalizing view of global culture (qtd. Moraña 105).³¹⁵

Needless to say, the heated exchanges of this debate oversimplify and mischaracterize the work of both authors. The polemic between Arguedas and Cortázar sparked by the *Primer Diario* remains worthy of examination, though, as it dramatizes an ongoing debate that had divided the Latin American left: whether Latin America was best represented on the global literary stage through an international, urban, and "planetary" style exemplified Cortázar – which

³¹⁵ In his 1967 open letter to Roberto Fernández Retamar, Cortázar explains in more detail, but still in condescending terms, how he sees authors who identify with regional rather than global culture as propagating narrow nationalistic sentiments: "puedo comprenderlo [el telurismo parroquial] y admirarlo, en quienes no alcanzan, por razones múltiples, una visión totalizadora de la cultura y de la historia, y concentran todo su talento en una labor de "zona", pero me parece un preámbulo a los peores avances del nacionalismo negativo cuando se convierte en el credo de escritores [. . .]" (Pecero 322). "I can understand it [parochial tellurism] and admire it, in those who do not achieve, for various reasons, a totalizing vision of culture and history, and concentrate all of their labor in the "zone", but it seems to me a preamble to the worst advances of negative nationalism when it becomes the credo of authors." See my chapter on Juan José Saer for an example of a Latin American author writing at this time who writes almost exclusively about a single "zona" yet comes out against identitarian nationalistic and regionalistic politics both in his essays and his refusal to essentialize his "zona" in his fiction.

avoids reinforcing primitive stereotypes of Latin America but stands accused of consolidating the hegemony of western modernity – or through works grounded in local and national tradition, as exemplified by Arguedas – which have the potential to give voice to the experiences of colonized peoples but stand accused of exoticizing their subject matter and propagating parochial regionalist and nationalist allegiances (Moraña 105-107).

While Arguedas's acerbic attacks against Cortázar hardly rise above the level of personal insult, his defense of his own approach to literature – as well as his championing of those he considers fellow “non-professional” writers, including Juan Rulfo, João Guimarães Rosa, and César Vallejo – reveal much about what Arguedas seeks to achieve in *Los zorros* and why he feels incapable of pulling it off. In fact, Cortázar's response to Arguedas in *Life* seems to have been at least one factor triggering Arguedas's final and most debilitating relapse into his depression and accompanying writer's block. In the *Tercer Diario*, he claims that he was feeling optimistic about the advancement of the novel and celebrating “la salida del pozo” (243) when the heated debate with Cortázar flared up again:

Mientras tanto, y desde la grandísima revista norteamericana *Life*, Julio Cortázar, que de veras cabalga en flamígera fama, como sobre un gran centauro rosado, me ha lanzado unos dardos brillosos. Don Julio ha querido atropellarme y ningunearme, irritadísimo, porque digo en el primer diario de este libro, y lo repito ahora, que soy provinciano de este mundo, que he aprendido menos de los libros que en las diferencias que hay, que he sentido y visto, entre un grillo y un alcalde quechua, entre un pescador del mar y un pescador del Titicaca, entre un oboe, un penacho de totora, la picadura de un piojo blanco y el penacho de la caña de azúcar: entre quienes, como Pariacaca, nacieron de cinco huevos de águila y aquellos que aparecieron de una liendre aldeana, de una común liendre, de la que tan súbitamente salta la vida. Y este saber, claro, tiene, tanto como el predominantemente erudito, sus círculos y profundidades. (244)³¹⁶

Beyond doubling down on his assertion that book knowledge pales in comparison to lived experience (and sensorial experience in particular), Arguedas displays his own erudition, redefining the term to apply not only to Western culture but also to Andean vocabulary and mythology. The reader who does not know that “grillo” is slang for a dandy or who cannot conjure the image, much less the tactile feel, of a *totora* reed will not be able to comprehend the differences of which Arguedas speaks. In spite of his polemical tone, Arguedas makes an earnest case for the importance of embodied knowledge: it is only from physically inhabiting a space that one learns to discern between the feel of insects and vegetation on the skin or, Arguedas implies, between what is sacred and what is profane, what is revered and what is mocked in a given culture.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ “Meanwhile, and from the greatest American magazine, *Life*, Julio Cortázar, who really rides out on the flaming horse of fame as if he were on a pink centaur, has cast some gleaming darts at me. Don Julio has tried to trample me underfoot and make a nobody out of me; he is extremely annoyed because in the First Diary of this book I say – and I repeat it now – that I am one of the provincial people of this world, that I have learned less from books than from the differences that exist – differences I have felt and seen – between a cricket (a loquacious dandy) and a Quechua staff-bearing leader, between a deep-sea fisherman and one from Lake Titicaca, between an oboe, the plume of a *totora* reed, the bite of a white louse, and the feathery plume of the sugar cane, between those who, like Pariacaca, were born from five eagle eggs and those who appeared out of a village nit a common nit, from which life so suddenly springs. And indeed, this kind of knowledge has its circles and depths, just as the predominately erudite lore has” (182-183).

³¹⁷ William Rowe points out that Arguedas contrasts the erudition of Cortázar with a more natural kind of knowledge, a “conocimiento vinculado con la naturaleza” (“El nuevo lenguaje” 200).

The arrogance for which Arguedas cannot forgive “los cortázares” lies in what he perceives as their unconcerned ignorance of these differences. As such, Arguedas challenges Cortázar’s authority not on artistic or intellectual grounds but, rather, on ethical grounds: as a person who chooses to live amid Andean culture and to take the subtle differences between local plants, between insect bites, between linguistic variants as serious objects of study, Arguedas asserts, he is better qualified to represent Latin America than an internationally acclaimed author living in Paris. Arguedas radically upends essentialist notions of identity and authenticity by positing willingness to immerse oneself, linguistically, bodily, spiritually, in a culture as that which allows one to understand a given culture and become an authority on it.³¹⁸ It is in this commitment to corporally inhabiting, rather than simply representing, the provincial space of the region that I locate the power of resistance as well as the self-annihilating propulsion of *Los zorros*.

The fatality of embodied knowledge

If the source of Arguedas’s authority to represent this world lies in his embodied knowledge of it, this intimate proximity between author and subject matter also proves to be his undoing. Throughout *Los zorros*, embodied knowledge is depicted ambivalently, always tinged with toxic, possibly fatal potential. For example, don Ángel recalls a high school Spanish teacher who was so contagiously enthusiastic that his teachings seemed to adhere in the body:

Me acuerdo de un profesor de castellano que tuve en el colegio. Se enredaba un poco al hablar, como yo, pero el entusiasmo o la inspiración con que hablaba se le contagiaba a uno para siempre y creo que el fondo de lo que decía de autores y obras más que en el cerebro se le quedaba a uno en la memoria y en . . . en . . . no es la ética, ni la estética, ni la fritanga . . . Bueno, digamos en los riñones. Así es. (140)³¹⁹

Imagining a body that imbibes literature and has organs for processing aesthetics and ethics, don Ángel locates the impact of this inspirational teacher in the kidneys. Though the influence of this teacher appears to be positive, its permanence in the bodily organs evokes toxicity, particularly given the multiple references to poisoning that circulate in the novel: the author-narrator of the *Primer diario* attempts to kill himself with an unspecified “veneno”; don Esteban de la Cruz is slowly dying of toxic build-up in his lungs, a result of having worked in the mines. These examples highlight the dangers of the model of embodied knowledge Arguedas so clearly prizes: experiences that live in the body can be fatal for those who have no way to dislodge them.³²⁰

As Antonio Cornejo Polar has observed, don Esteban’s belief that if he coughs up, spits out, and accumulates enough of the black substance in his lungs, he will be saved echoes Arguedas’s hope that writing will save him. In both cases, the afflicted man has been promised

³¹⁸ Likewise, the shift Tarica observes from an *indigenismo* grounded in racial identity to an *indigenismo* grounded in a sense of local belonging demands re-evaluating received notions of authenticity and who is authorized to represent indigenous communities.

³¹⁹ “I remember a Spanish teacher I had in school. He used to get sort of tangled up when he talked, the way I do, but he was so enthusiastic and so inspired when he was talkin’ that it was contagious, and it stayed with a person forever and I believe the deepest part of what he had to say about the authors and their works, instead of stickin’ in a person’s brain, it sticks in your memory and in . . . in . . . it’s not in your ethics, nor your aesthetics nor you epizootics – well, shall we say *in* your kidneys? That’s the way it is” (104).

³²⁰ For the continuity between education/ communication and fatal contamination in the novel, I am indebted to Catalina Ocampo, who writes: “la contaminación industrial funciona como una metonimia de la muerte, metida dentro del cuerpo peruano como lo está en el cuerpo de Esteban de la Cruz [. . .]”. “The industrial contamination functions as a metonym for death, inserted into the body of Peru like it is in the body of Esteban de la Cruz” (129-130).

(Arguedas by his therapist and don Esteban by an Andean sorcerer) that drawing the poison outside of the body and producing something with it (a novel in Arguedas's case and five grams of coal in don Esteban's) will reverse the death sentence.³²¹ The perversity of this logic of production-as-salvation is apparent in don Esteban's case: having sacrificed his health to extract coal for the mining industry, he now turns his efforts to extracting and weighing the coal produced by his lungs. By reproducing the capitalistic logic of the mining industry, where progress is measured in units of weight extracted, the cure maintains don Esteban as a complicit victim in this system. For Arguedas, who expresses open contempt for the "professional" writer and his need to produce for a market, mining his experience for literary fodder, extracting this experience from the body, and amassing it in words on the page seems like an equally dubious road to salvation. Yet, like don Esteban, he persists in following this advice; whether out of hope or fatalism it is hard to say.³²² As becomes increasingly apparent throughout the novel, don Esteban's death is imminent; so too, it turns out, is that of Arguedas.

Maxwell, too, will ultimately meet a tragic end, murdered by El Mudo in an act of violence that seems to punish the foreigner for knowing the local community too intimately, too corporeally. The conflict between the two men first erupts in a brothel, where El Mudo is quite literally at home (his mother is a prostitute there), and where Maxwell attracts unusual attention, as foreigners do not normally come to the brothels frequented by the fishermen. Coming to the brothel serves as a rite of initiation for Maxwell: it is literally the first thing he does after quitting the Peace Corps in order to participate more fully and authentically in the local community. Rowe observes that in the world of the novel, as in the myth of Tutaykire, which it cites, sexual relations are represented as a way to authentically relate to local culture (in this case the culture of the coast) and as one of the only ways for an outsider to penetrate it.³²³

Admitting that carnal knowledge is the ultimate form of embodied knowledge already belies the impossibility of pursuing such knowledge innocently, an impossibility underscored in a world where sexuality is associated almost exclusively with prostitution and rape. Even when undertaken with the purest of motives, as in Arguedas's quest for "un lenguaje que penetra hacia las 'entrañas' de las cosas" (Rowe 1978, 209) and Maxwell's parallel quest to shed his outsider status and become an integral member of Chimbote's slum-dwelling community, no outsider's desire to fully penetrate this world can be completely separated from the violence and exploitation associated with the economic "rape" of the Bay of Chimbote by foreign capitalists. Ultimately this violence is turned against Maxwell, whom Gonzalo Portocarrero reads as a

³²¹ Arguedas's psychiatrist is said to have advised him to write to stay alive: "escribe para no morir, lo mejor que puedes hacer, es escribir" "write in order not to die, the best thing you can do is to write" (Rojas 114).

³²² As Catalina Ocampo argues, separating the "yo" of the author, who sees himself on a linear trajectory towards death, from the "yo" of the narrator, who tries to write anyway, may be helpful in making sense of this ambivalence: "Mientras el yo fatal de los diarios repite una y otra vez su incapacidad de escribir y su deseo de muerte, el él narrador ejerce su voluntad al escribir el paisaje de Chimbote, tratando de encontrar una esperanza en ese delirante abismo. Pero a pesar de la resistencia que ejerce la narración con su tiempo circular y ambiguo, la temporalidad de los diarios es implacablemente lineal: primero, segundo, tercero, último" (127). "While the fatalistic "I" of the diaries repeats again and again his incapacity to write and his desire to die, the "he" of the narrator exercises his will to write in the landscape of Chimbote, trying to find hope in this delirious abyss. But in spite of the resistance mounted by the narration with its circular and ambiguous time, the temporality of the diaries is implacably linear: first, second, third, last."

³²³ This myth is included in the collection *Dioses y hombres de Huarochiri*, compiled and translated by Arguedas. Tutaykire was a warrior from the world up above who, when he descended the mountain, was detained from fulfilling his mission by a virgin with her legs open. Rowe notes that in *Los zorros*, seduction is linked with the dispersion and loss of *serrano* identity and culture ("El nuevo lenguaje" 206).

sacrificial lamb: his martyrdom, argues Portocarrero, parallels that of Arguedas as the author turns the violence and humiliation he has been chronicling against himself (115). Though I would agree that Maxwell might be read both as a martyr and as a figure for the author, whose best attempts to penetrate and know the world of Chimbote are ultimately doomed to fail violently, neither is presented as being as innocent as a sacrificial lamb. To the contrary, I read the self-annihilating violence of Arguedas's last text as an expression of the impossibility of representing this world to a global audience in a non-exploitative, non-violent way.

II: To know Chimbote is to dwell in Chimbote

The city of Chimbote remains opaque and incoherent to Arguedas and his novel in large part because it cannot be apprehended as a stable visual landscape; the only ways to know it are to *traverse* it and to *hear* it. It is only through voices, through music, and through the sensorial experience of moving through the landscape that Chimbote will be made known to us. As we might expect, the landscape that is conjured through these means is cacophonous, vertiginous, and precarious. Rather than being a stable visual scene represented from an external point of view, it is a landscape in Tim Ingold's sense of the term: a place constituted through movement, relationships, and "dwelling activities." Arguedas, like Ingold, appears invested in representing this landscape from the dwelling perspective, which requires perceiving it with all of our senses and not with vision alone. The landscapes conjured in *Los zorros* are not only seen but also heard, sung, smelled, breathed in, and felt in the body. Taking this perspective involves renouncing the panoramic visual perspective, which grants the viewer a sense of mastery over it and which has been historically implicated in colonial ideologies.³²⁴

Even when embraced by travel writers, ethnographers, and *indigenista* writers sympathetic to the plight of the indigenous community, a totalizing panoramic representation remains freighted with imperialist power dynamics. "Traditional" regionalist and *indigenista* literature has often been charged with objectifying local landscapes in this way: reducing lives lived in time and space to visual tableaux and local color reifies the region, mystifying its discursive creation as a site of projection of the "authentic" and quaint and treating it as isolated from the historical, political, cultural, and economic forces that shape modernity. Shifting from a cartographic mode of representation that pursues an objective overview of its object of study to an immersive, dwelling perspective that prizes experiential knowledge of place involves not only positioning oneself in closer proximity to the world depicted but also embracing the relationality and interdependence between viewer and landscape.

The majority of *Los zorros* seems intent on embodying this ethos, but the desire for a stable overview keeps returning, oftentimes linked to the narrator's desire to give the novel more coherence. The narrator of the *diarios* is perennially dismayed and disheartened by the overwhelming fluidity of this world, where familiar binaries – between land and human actors, between individual and community, between *sierras* and coast, between tradition and modernity – dissolve. Indeed, the narrator's struggle to represent the landscape of Chimbote, which is charted in the *diario* sections, could be summed up as a futile struggle to produce a coherent social panorama from chaos and opacity. In effect, the novel traces a dialectical process of, on the one hand, attempting to order this chaos and penetrate this opacity and, on the other hand, admitting defeat in a gesture that expresses futility as well as reverence for the resistance

³²⁴ See Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*.

Chimbote mounts to being surveyed as a panoramic landscape. The narrator's attempts to gain a totalizing overview perennially fail, yielding an immersive, unmoored, and fragmentary "dwelling perspective" instead. Though lamented by the narrator as an aesthetic, personal, and political failure, this defeat may nevertheless constitute headway towards achieving a more ethical, and participatory mode of conjuring local ways of life.

The tension between these two different modes of configuring landscape are reflected in tension between two different modes of narration in *Los zorros*: one stationary and composed of conversation coherent and prolonged enough to allow the reader to accumulate information about Chimbote, the other disorientatingly mobile and disjointed, demanding that the reader immerse herself in the sights, sounds, and rhythms of Chimbote from dislocated and perambulatory points of view. This tension becomes apparent upon examining the macrostructure of the novel. *Los zorros* contains two prolonged scenes of discussion between relatively stationary interlocutors: the conversation between don Ángel Rincón Jaramillo, executive of the fishmeal plant, and his visitor, don Diego, in Chapter Three, and the meetings at the residence of the gringo priests in Part II. These sections stand out as exceptions from the rest of the novel, where the point of view changes frequently as we follow the motion of characters such as prostitutes, fishermen, gangsters, and the street preacher Moncada as they traverse the city on foot, by bicycle, and by taxi. As we will see, however, even these seemingly stationary scenes begin to "move," spin, or become spatially and temporally disoriented under the influence of the music, dance, and magic of the foxes.

The majority of the novel is structured around the interstices of the paths traced by moving, migratory bodies.³²⁵ Rather than following one central plot, the fictional world created by Arguedas weaves together the stories of a dozen or more residents of Chimbote, most of whom seem to be perennially en route from one location to another. The ambulatory routes of these stories continually intersect in space and time, returning us to previously narrated scenes from new perspectives. The focalization of the narrative frequently "jumps" from one character to another when their stories cross paths. For example, in the first chapter, we follow the seasoned *criollo* fisherman Chaucato from his boat to the brothels, where we subsequently lose sight of Chaucato in the crowd and start following Asto, a recent transplant who speaks no Spanish, as he makes his way from brothel to brothel. The chapter eventually follows three prostitutes from the brothels on their uphill journey back to their homes at the end of the night before turning back to Chaucato's narrative.

In contrast to the dizzying, motion-filled narration that makes up most of the novel, the two stationary scenes signaled above appear more interested in gaining a discursive overview of the landscape of Chimbote than in traversing it. In Chapter Three, which is largely structured as a dialog, we learn about the rapid industrialization of the port, the resulting influx of Indians from the *sierras*, and the waves of labor organization that have been successfully squelched by Braschi, a capitalist-turned-mafioso who controls most of the city. In the final diegetic scene of the novel (Part II), also consisting primarily of dialog, we gain an overview of the interactions between the religious and non-profit groups seeking to help and reform the impoverished *barriadas marginales*; we learn, for example, of the rifts emerging in the religious leadership as leftist priests espousing liberation theology come into conflict with traditional Catholicism. In

³²⁵ Izquierdo reads Arguedas's Chimbote as a landscape of paths traced by movement, citing "la huella de los burros" that the prostitutes walk home and "la vía de peregrinos" where the crosses are carried (137). See also Galindo's reading of how walking becomes a way of constructing identity (both individual and collective) in the novel and how a new social identity constructed is inherently migratory (195).

each of these scenes, the conversation touches upon the lives of many of the characters we have encountered elsewhere in the narrative, providing context, explaining relationships, and narrating backstories omitted by Arguedas's narrator, who tends to present events from the intimate proximity of a participant rather than locating them within a larger panorama. As such, the dialogs in the "stationary" chapters serve to orient the reader to a world in which she has already been chaotically immersed.

In the meta-textual reflections presented in the *diario* sections, Arguedas's narrator states explicitly that these two chapters are intended to counter the centrifugal motion generated in chapters I, II, and IV and tie the novel's many threads together into a coherent whole. In the Second Diario, Arguedas asks himself how he will possibly unite the many plots introduced in the sprawling first chapter: "¿Y cómo hago, ahora yo, por eso, para anudar y avivar las ramas que tanteando y anhelante, como un sujeto que despierta de un coma profundo, he extendido tanto en el primer capítulo de esta novela?" (117).³²⁶ Chapter III, which immediately follows this *Diario* appears to be Arguedas's answer to this dilemma. The introduction of an outsider to Chimbote, in the form of Diego, who has often been read as one of the foxes and as a figure for the author, allows Arguedas to elicit from one of his characters, don Ángel, the overview that the narrator has declined to provide.³²⁷ When he arrives as a visitor to the fishmeal factory, Diego is curious, and his incessant questions about Chimbote and the changes it has recently undergone require don Ángel to explain the relationships between characters we have already met, including Chaucato, Braschi, and Antolín Crispín. As he narrates the recent explosion of the fishmeal industry and the ascension of Braschi's mafia as the ruling powers in Chimbote, don Ángel embraces the unifying, coherence-imposing work that Arguedas's narrator seems to have outsourced to him. Whenever Diego's errant curiosity or his own digressions threaten to derail the central narrative, Don Ángel steers the conversation back on track, as when he catches himself waxing poetic about the plight of the city's pelicans: "Pero dejemos a los pobres "cochos"; tomemos el hilo de la historia principal" (135).

The totalizing potential of this dialog becomes most explicit at the moment when it begins to appear absurd, as the realism of the scene starts to disintegrate. After don Ángel admits to having only a partial understanding of the motivations of Chimbote's poor, Diego asks him for an overview: "¿y el panorama? ¿Cómo ve usted el panorama, el conjunto?" (153)³²⁸. Don Ángel responds with confidence that he can create an objective map or diagram of the social panorama: "Sí, amigo Diego; ese panorama sí lo veo más claro. Espere un instante. El conjunto es así. ¡Ya! Mire bien el mapa o diagrama con nombres que voy a trazar y escribir; voy a ir dibujando. Empiezo. Siga mi mano y oiga mis palabras. Creo que nos va a salir algo; ya algo objetivo. Vea." (153). Don Ángel's insistence that his interlocutor not only listen but also look underscores the visual nature of the overview he aims to provide. In fact, Arguedas inserts here a figure of the drawing produced by don Ángel, the only illustration to appear in the text. The strange diagram produced is that of a face – "la cara del Perú" (154) – crisscrossed with lines that map various cultural, political, and economic influences – the Pope, the US government, the Peruvian government, Communism, etc. – onto this anthropomorphic representation of the

³²⁶ "how do I go about tying together and livening the branches I have eagerly and gropingly, like an individual awakening from a deep coma, spread so widely in the first chapter of this novel?" (86).

³²⁷ Martin Lienhard has read Diego as a muse figure who draws the story of Chimbote out of don Ángel in an act that is part seduction and part sorcery (117-118).

³²⁸ "You have quite a clear and adequate understanding, Don Angel, of so many spheres, but what about the panorama? How does the overall picture look to you, the whole panorama?"
"Yes, Diego my friend – I really do see that panorama more clearly" (113)

nation. Don Ángel is particularly preoccupied with identifying “las fuerzas rojas” – Juan XXIII, Communism, and “la rabia lúcida o tuerta de una partecita del pueblo peruano contra U.S.A., la industria y el gobierno” – and assuring his interlocutor that these forces are outnumbered by the powers marked in white – the U.S.A., Peruvian national industry, government, and “la ignorancia del pueblo peruano” (153-154).

Ironically, this image, offered as an objective map, does not display any discernable rational organization and visually resembles a totem figure from indigenous artwork more than a Cartesian diagram. Nevertheless, as don Ángel’s explanation indicates, it does succeed in providing an overview of sorts of the world represented in *Los zorros*. For example, the revolutionary forces that don Ángel draws as red eggs can be mapped onto the Liberation Theology of Padre Cardozo and in the anti-government, anti-industry, anti-imperialist ravings of the “madman” Moncada. Moreover, don Ángel articulates why these forces remain impotent to disrupt the status quo: in addition to being overpowered by the conservative forces of industry, government, foreign influence, and widespread ignorance among the population, they are marginalized and handicapped. As don Ángel spells out here, and as Arguedas illustrates in Section II of *Los zorros*, “Los cardozos,” as don Ángel refers to the foreign priests, remain by in large ignorant of the Peruvian people and their particular experience, blinded as they are by an overly schematic and imported revolutionary ideology. Moncada, for his part, is both lucid and mad. Along with the eloquent songs of the blind beggar Antolín Crispín, Moncada’s largely-ignored street sermons remind us that the truth is seen and expressed by “los tuertos,” the half-blind and half-mad. Of course, by devoting copious pages of a literary text to reproducing these songs and sermons in their entirety, Arguedas grants them prominence and authority that don Ángel is eager to deny them. Similarly, by ending the novel with the prolonged scene that takes place in the residence of the foreign priests, Arguedas leaves open the possibility that they may, in conjunction with organizers embedded in the local community, such as Balazar and Maxwell, be able to affect social change after all. In other words, the novel as a whole reflects the diagram drawn out by don Ángel but also destabilizes the plant manager’s confident reading of his own “map.”

Within this particular scene, too, the ability to represent Chimbote in the visual forms of a diagram or a map is subverted: Diego affects a metamorphosis of sorts in which don Ángel’s visual representation of the panorama of Chimbote is made to yield a dizzying and embodied performance. Encouraged to laugh and breath by Diego, don Ángel becomes inexplicably hysterical while explaining his diagram. Meanwhile, Diego begins to spin in a dance that don Ángel recognizes as native to his own Andean hometown of Cajabamba. As don Ángel becomes mesmerized by and caught up in his visitor’s dance, his sociological explanation of the power dynamics in Chimbote morphs into a rhythmic song (157-158). As don Ángel’s rational discourse and schematic drawing give way to song and dance, the ostensible realism of this scene unravels to reveal that even this modern scene set in the factory remains enchanted. As María José Barros has noted, Diego succeeds in contaminating the rational, capitalist-industrialist world of the fishmeal plant with the music and magic of the highlands (152). Meanwhile, the dance re-animates the static overview this chapter initially seemed designed to provide.

As such, Diego’s role in this chapter appears to be to destabilize the construction of a visual panorama and to reintroduce movement, magic, music, and embodiment into the novel’s attempts to know the world it narrates. Rather than completely undermining the purported objective of this chapter – to draw together the disparate threads and stories introduced in the preceding two chapters and construct an overview – Diego’s dance suggests that such unity and

understanding must be arrived at differently, not through the abstraction involved in plotting coordinates on a map or aggregating perspectives into a panorama, but through the synchronization of movements the harmonization of sounds.³²⁹

Diego plays a similarly disruptive, animating, and transformative role in Section II, which I have identified as the other “stationary” scene in the novel. Upon arriving to the residence of the North American priests in the form of a messenger carrying Maxwell’s *charango*, Diego appears to morph into a mythical, dancing being when Maxwell plays the instrument:

El mensajero empezó a emplumarse de la cabeza, como pavorreal o picaflor de gran sombra. Retrocedieron todos hacia las paredes. Diego comenzó a hacer vibrar sus piernas abiertas y dobladas en desigual ángulo; las hizo vibrar a más velocidad que toda cuerda que el hombre ha ensangrentado y ardido, luego dio una voltereta en el aire e hizo balancearse a la lámpara, le dio sonido de agua, voz de patos de altura, de los penchados de totora que resisten gimiendo la fuerza del viento. (336)³³⁰

In both cases, Diego’s dance interrupts and derails the attempts of the other characters to rationally explain the social, economic, and political dynamics of Chimbote. As Lienhard has noted, Diego’s subversion of the totalizing impulses in the novel operates on the level of narrative structure and language as well:

Desde un punto de vista estrictamente textual, los vertiginosos bailes de Diego subvierten las estructuras narrativas, al impedir cualquier desarrollo lineal, cualquier fluir tranquilo del lenguaje. Los bailes constituyen un procedimiento narrativo “centrífugo”, que hace girar, alrededor del zorro, la loquecida, que lleva a un verdadero deliro narrativo y lingüístico. (142)

Diego’s inexplicable appearance in each of these “overview” chapters has the effect of thwarting their synthesizing work and, in fact, manifesting the centrifugal energies of the text on the level of the narrative: his spinning dance renders literal the vertiginous nature of the text’s most mobile and disorienting chapters.

When the fox-narrator “jumps” from the metadiscursive level of the diarios to the level of the *relato*, he foils, or at least reveals as failed and likely futile, the narrator’s explicit desire to use these chapters to gain mastery over his unruly narrative. Hibbett notes what a slippery figure Diego is – neither man nor animal, realist nor mythic, of the story nor of the diaries. The challenge and discomfort that his intervention in the world of the narrative pose to the reader may be instructive: Hibbett argues that the reader’s struggle to maintain familiar distinctions (between different discursive levels, between realist and mythic genres and the temporalities generally ascribed to each) requires that we participate in the narrator’s struggle to grapple with the convoluted reality he encounters in Chimbote (396-397).

In the last diary, the narrator again laments his failure to pull the threads of his story together and construct an overview, indicating that the Part II was intended to fulfill this function: “Yo iba o pretendía . . . El primer capítulo es tibiión y enredado . . . Pretendía un muestrario cabalgata, atizado de realidades y símbolos, el que miro por los ojos de los Zorros

³²⁹ See William Rowe’s work on musicality in *Los zorros* and on Diego’s role in particular in “bending” time and space to produce a non-Cartesian time space linked to the magic of the Andean cosmovision.

³³⁰ “The messenger’s head began to be adorned with plumes, like some peacock or long-shadowed hummingbird. They all stepped back to the walls. Diego began to make his legs quiver – they were apart and bent at different angles; he made them vibrate more rapidly than all the [charango] strings man has bloodied and set ablaze, then he did a somersault in the air and made the lamp swing, making a sound like water, like the voices of the highland ducks, of the totora reed plumes, which make a wailing resistance to the strength of the wind” (253).

desde la cumbre de Cruz de Hueso adonde ningún humano ha llegado ni yo tampoco . . . Debía ser anudado y exprimido en la Segunda Parte” (344)³³¹ He thus gives up his final attempt to achieve the overview, which he concludes no human consciousness has attained. As a literary device intended to elevate the perspective of the novel to superhuman heights, the foxes have failed, or, perhaps more properly, Arguedas’s narrator has failed to keep up with them. As he laments in the second diary: “Estos “Zorros” se han puesto fuera de mi alcance; corren mucho o están muy lejos” (252). The elusiveness of the titular foxes becomes a symbol for the failure of the novel: as they escape, so does the possibility of synthesizing disparate worlds promised by the dialogical structure for which they stand.

If these mythic figures can find coherence and meaning in Chimbote’s chaotic reality, they do not appear interested in transmitting it to the reader. As we have seen, when they enter the world of the *relato*, their role is to destabilize this world, making it more rather than less vertiginous. In fact, the novel’s desire to “catch” the foxes and arrest the destabilizing, spinning motion they introduce into its outlook appears to be ambivalent at best. Admitting the possibility that Arguedas lets the foxes escape, in effect choosing the chaotic, immersive perspective from the ground over achieving a coherent overview, begs the much-debated question of whether the novel is truly the failure it claims to be, a question that will be taken up in the last section of this chapter.

Natural landscape, psychic landscape

As I have already suggested in my observations about how much of the novel is given over to the chaotic, immersive experience of traversing the landscape as opposed to observing it from the detached perspective of an outside viewer, Arguedas appears to be, however ambivalently and fatalistically, wed to the former approach to representing Chimbote. Instead of simply renouncing the visual panorama as a mode of perceiving Chimbote, however, Arguedas subverts the objectivity and rationality of such a perspective by infusing his visual landscapes with subjective attributes.³³² In the select moments when the novel does attempt to paint a visual panorama of Chimbote, the landscape is not described naturalistically nor even as fully separate from those who inhabit it; rather, these vistas contain the psychological, social, and political attributes of the dynamic, living landscape traced by the novel. The lack of boundaries between the landscape, its inhabitants, and the subjectivity of the narrator describing it reflects the animistic worldview of the Indian culture.³³³ Even more radically than giving life and voice to the non-human world, which Arguedas does throughout his work, *Los zorros* traces an urban ecosystem where the landscape *embodies*, rather than just metaphorically representing, the instability and violence of the social world to which it is inextricably linked.³³⁴

³³¹ “I was going to, or was trying to . . . The first chapter is lukewarm and confused . . . What I was trying to present was a cavalcade, quickened with a sampling of reality and symbol, what I see through the Foxes’ eyes from the summit of Bone Cross dune, which no human being has ever got to the top of and neither have I . . . It should all be tied together and condensed in the Second Part” (258).

³³² As Rowe has noted, Arguedas’s visual descriptions are more elaborate, more literary, and more subjective (as opposed to naturalistic) in this novel than in his earlier works (“El nuevo lenguaje” 204).

³³³ Pantagioso Pecero points out that in the Andean cosmivision, language has its own life, and rivers, hills and plants all talk (320). Writing about a different indigenous group, the Pueblo Indians, Leslie Marmon Silko suggests that “landscape,” which implies an outside perspective, might not even be a suitable term for the way the natural surroundings are represented in indigenous cultures where human consciousness is understood to inhabit the “hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky [. . .]” (265).

³³⁴ I am using embodiment in Tim Ingold’s sense of the way the landscape incorporates the life-cycles, dwelling activities, and natural processes that constitute it over time. Ingold asks, “Is it possible to identify a corresponding

One of the most cited examples is the way the Bay of Chimbote is anthropomorphized as a prostitute or fallen woman and the capitalists who reap its riches compared to rapists and seducers. Rather than simply being a recurrent metaphor to moralize the exploitation of natural resources, the figures of the prostitute and the seduced and abandoned woman appear in the text in the form of characters who are individualized if not fully and psychologically fleshed out. Among the other prostitutes we meet in the first chapter is Orfa, a highland hacienda owner's daughter who has been "cast out in dishonor." In the last diary we learn of her never-to-be-narrated suicide: she throws herself off of a cliff into the bay, we are told, "desengañada por todo y más, porque allí, en la cima, no encuentra a Tutaykire trenzando oro ni ningún otro fantasma y sólo un blanqueado silencio, el del guano de isla" (342).³³⁵ Abandoned by gods she had hoped to find on the peak of "El Dorado," Orfa, much like the narrator, finds that she cannot attain heights high enough to recuperate the enchanted world from up above nor to produce a coherent vista of the world she has been living in; instead, she finds only the synesthetically conjured abyss of "un blanqueado silencio."

Interestingly, however, Orfa sees the Bay of Chimbote in its entirety in the face of her companion and fellow prostitute, Paula Melchora, who has been impregnated by Tinoco, a particularly violent mafioso. In the first chapter, Orfa discerns the topography and activity of the port in the creases in Paula's skin: "Su compañera, la que estaba a su lado, vio que los ojos de la mujer se achicaban, toda la cavidad de los ojos y parte de la frente se arrugaban, y así, en esa cara apretada, vio que la gran bahía, el más intenso puerto pesquero se concentraba en las arrugas del ojo de su compañera" (68).³³⁶ In this instance, it is not by looking out from afar that the landscape is revealed; rather, it is in the act of looking closely at the face of an individual that the totality shows itself. The choice of the individual is significant: exploited and impregnated by Braschi's hit man, Paula serves as a living metaphor for the bay whose fertility is being reaped and exploited by Braschi's capitalistic enterprise.

Rowe observes that this gesture, of showing "el mundo [. . .] reflejado en el hombre" is common in Arguedas's earlier works; the key difference in *Los zorros*, he argues, is that instead of reflecting the natural world, which lends a certain order to human existence, the human faces and lives in Chimbote reflect a landscape altered and defiled by human activity ("El nuevo lenguaje" 201-202). In this de-naturalized environment, fragments of the natural world and its order persist in subjectivities of the peasants recently immigrated to the city rather than in the external landscape. Rowe cites the Andean carnival song that Paula begins to sing in this scene. This song begins by cursing Chimbote, its industry, and its mafiosos, but as she dances, it begins to yield a natural landscape (70). Here as elsewhere in the novel, the natural world persists as that which can be conjured in song more readily than it can be perceived with the eyes.

The rare instances when Arguedas does offer a visual description of Chimbote beheld from on high do not portray a serene natural landscape but, rather, an undulating and infernal apparition of the port defiled by industrialization. The first visual overview of the city we are given comes when we follow three of the prostitutes up the hillside to their neighborhood and look down on the town below:

cycle, or rather, a series of interlocking cycles, which build themselves into the forms of the landscape, and of which the landscape may accordingly be regarded as an embodiment?" (157).

³³⁵ "more than disillusioned by everything because up there on the mountaintop she does not find Tutaykire nor any other phantom weaving golden strands, but only the whitened silence of sea-fowl dung" (257).

³³⁶ "Her companion, the one beside her, saw the woman's eyes narrowing' art of her forehead was furrowed and all the skin around her eyes was crinkled, so in that frowning face she saw the great bay, the busiest fishing port, focused in the wrinkles around her companion's eyes" (50).

Llegó a la carretera “marginal” de gruesa arena y basura en que empiezan las calles, todas derechas y en cuadro, de la *barriada*. Abajo, al pie del médano, el puerto pesquero más grande del mundo ardía como una parrilla. Humo denso, algo llameante, flameaba desde las chimeneas de las fábricas y otro, más alto y con luz rosada, desde la fundición de acero. No alcanzaba al cerro la pestilencia del mar. [. . .] Interrumpiendo y, a largos trechos, rodeando las llamas, las luces y el humo del puerto, brillaban como metal medio escondido grandes pantanos en que la totora crecía aún, salvaje. (65)³³⁷

From this perspective on high, the factories below produce hellish smoke and flames at all hours, giving the town an infernal glow. The ocean, which has been defiled by commercial fishing and industrial waste, and which is elsewhere compared to a giant, reeking “zorra,” emits nauseating smells. This “pestilencia,” however, does not reach the heights of the impoverished *barriada* where the prostitute in question lives.

We are here faced with a familiar irony, at least in the Andes, that the poorest urban residents often enjoy the best views and the freshest air, in exchange for living the furthest from the city center, “encima,” where there is the least infrastructure and where the climate is harshest. As such, many elements of the *campo* persist, in their least romanticizable form, within the bounds of the city (exposure to the elements, infrastructural underdevelopment, the absence of electric light in the marshes with their still wild reeds, etc.). In fact, María José Barros sees the hilly slums of Chimbote as a direct extension of the highlands the *serranos* have left behind when migrating to the coast (147). It is here that the culture from the world up above remains, where the song and dance, myths, agricultural mode of living, rural ideology and its and closeness to nature persist (ibid 148).

In a later scene when Bazalar, another *serrano* immigrant, leads the procession of the crosses, we see that there remains some natural beauty to be enjoyed from the heights of the *barriadas* on the hillside. Interestingly, however, vision is not the sense that Arguedas privileges when describing it: “La luz de las islas guaneras de la bahía ya se estaba dorando a esa hora y llegaba, fuerte, a las hondonadas y cumbres de San Pedro. Respiraban esa luz en el hueso del hueso, la gente que se había hecho sus casas en el menospreciado cerro de arena que dominaba todos los horizontes de Chimbote” (96).³³⁸ No longer limited to the visual perspective of Bazalar, we are presented with the collective relationship to this landscape shared by “la gente” who make up the slum dwellers. The synesthetic image of breathing in light suggests a relationship to landscape that is more corporeal than visual and echoes the way that landscapes will be sung and heard, more than seen, throughout the novel.

Singing the opaque city

“Tudo, nesta vida, é muito cantável” – Riobaldo, *Grande sertão: veredas*

³³⁷ “She reached the ‘bypass’ of trash and coarse sand where the shantytown streets began, all straight and laid out in blocks. Down below, at the foot of the dune, the biggest fishing port in the world was glowing like a barbecue pit. Dense smoke with some flames billowed out of the factory chimneys, while other pink-lit smoke rose higher from the Steel Mill. The sea’s pestilential odor did not reach the mountain. [. . .] At long intervals large hidden marshes where reeds still grew wild gleamed like metal, interrupting and surrounding the lights and smoke of the port” (47-48).

³³⁸ “The light of the guano islands in the bay was already turning golden at that hour and was shining into the hollows and crests of San Pedro strongly. That light was breathed down into their bone of bones by the people who had made their homes on the scorned sand mountain that dominated the horizons of Chimbote” (70-71).

“El canto, de los humanos o de otros seres, tiene lugar de privilegio para la comunicación en el mundo andino; tanto así que, para una comunicación plena, no basta la voz hablada, pues esta puede transmitir un discurso intelectual con algo de emoción e intención de acuerdo a la intensidad, el timbre [. . .]; sin embargo, es con la canción que se funden intelecto y emoción, lo objetivo y lo subjetivo; es la canción, la forma que permite la comunicación más allá o más acá de lo pensado, el canto permite la comunicación con otros seres de la naturaleza” (Chalena Vásquez 311)³³⁹

Arguedas invites intertextual readings with the work of João Guimarães Rosa by addressing himself to the recently deceased Brazilian author in the *First Diario*. Guimarães Rosa, along with Juan Rulfo, is one of the privileged few Latin American authors with whom Arguedas allies himself in the polemic with “los cortázares,” and the basis of this alliance appears to be a commitment to representing rural reality “de adentro,” as opposed to penetrating it and mastering it from without³⁴⁰. I would like to suggest that one of the principal techniques Arguedas shares with Guimarães Rosa, and one of the ways both authors achieve this intimate *conocimiento* “de adentro” is a tendency to occlude vision in favor of conjuring scenes through other senses, particularly through sound and song.

As William Rowe has noted, smells and sounds become a mode of vision in *Los zorros*: “Observamos que el olor y los ruidos del “hervidero” de Chimbote adquieren la transparencia de una visión que penetra y sintetiza” (“El nuevo lenguaje” 207).³⁴¹ In fact, Rowe reads *Los zorros* as challenging the hierarchy of the senses that has, since Descartes, if not since Plato, privileged vision, by depicting Chimbote as an oral and aural world (“Deseo” 333). Whereas vision captures only surfaces of objects and yields an impoverished version of reality, music becomes for Rowe the “modelo del conocimiento en que no se separan sujeto y objeto” (ibid 333-334).³⁴² This musical model of knowledge rejects western, scientific rationalism, which demands that the object of knowledge be contemplated from a distance, in favor of “un acercamiento apasionado al objeto de estudio” (*Ensayos* 60-61).³⁴³

Rowe finds in music the ability to bestow personal, social, and political meaning upon material reality without furnishing a totalizing representation: he cites the example of how a song can simultaneously mimic the sound of a river and evoke the larger meaning with which the river is inscribed in a particular community; in contrast, a visual description of a river would isolate individual features of the river such as its color or shape and only end up reproducing its surface (*Ensayos* 66). Because music penetrates and saturates, disrupting the limits between the

³³⁹ “Song, of humans and other beings, has a privileged place in Andean communication; so much so that, for full communication, the spoken voice isn’t enough, for this can transmit an intellectual discourse with something of emotion and intention in accordance with the intensity, timbre [. . .]; nevertheless, it is with song that intellect and emotion, the objective and the subjective, merge; song is the form that permits communication beyond or closer than thought, song permits communication with other natural beings.”

³⁴⁰ In the first diary, addressing himself to Juan Rulfo and writing about Alejo Carpentier, the narrator writes: “¡Es bien distinto a nosotros! Su inteligencia penetra las cosas de afuera adentro, como un rayo; es un cerebro que recibe, lúcido y regocijado, la materia de las cosas, y él las domina. Tú también, Juan, pero tú de adentro, muy de adentro, desde el germen mismo” (20). “He’s really different from us! His intelligence penetrates things from the outside inward, like a ray of light; his is a brain that takes in, lucidly and gladly, the stuff of which things are made, and he dominates them. You do, too, Juan, but you do it from the inside, from well inside, from the germ itself” (14).

³⁴¹ “We observe that the smell and the sounds of the “hervidero” of Chimbote acquire the transparency of a vision that penetrates and synthesizes.”

³⁴² “model of knowledge in which subject and object are not separate from one another.”

³⁴³ “a passionate approximation to the object of study.”

individual and the world perceived, it is freighted with the political potential to counteract the objectification of the material world in capitalistic modernity: “Contra la enajenación y la reificación capitalistas, el ser y el mundo se unifican” (76).³⁴⁴ The reader, too, when asked to experience the world narrated through sound and bodily sensations, must renounce her position of a voyeur witnessing this world from a safe remove and immerse herself intimately in it.

By depriving the viewer of a Birdseye perspective on the world narrated, both Arguedas and Guimarães Rosa, I argue, ask us to stumble through their narrative worlds half-blind. No longer able to master this world through vision, the reader becomes vulnerable to the impact of the sensorial experiences of the worlds conjured. In my reading of the climactic final battle scene of *Grande sertão: veredas*, (see Chapter 3), I pay particular attention to the role of the blind man Borromeu as one of the only non-participating witnesses to the deaths of Hermógenes and Diadorim and to the way that Riobaldo’s vision disintegrates at a crucial moment, preventing him, and the narrative focalized through his perspective, from seeing the traumatic event (Diadorim’s death) that seems to motivate his entire narrative. In *Los zorros*, too, a blind man, Antolín Crispín, is privileged as one who sees the social overview and “paints” landscapes with this songs. In *Los zorros*, too, a crucial, formative moment for the narrator is occluded from vision. I will return shortly to the role of Antolín Crispín as the blind bard of Arguedas’s Chimbote. First however, I would like to examine the visually veiled scene of rape narrated in the *First Diario*.

At a moment when he is just emerging from the fog of the poison with which he has tried to kill himself, the narrator recalls his sexual initiation as a boy, by the pregnant prostitute Fidela. Significantly, this traumatic episode is addressed in the second-person to João Guimarães Rosa by a narrator who complains of ocular pain: “Pero ya no deseo de suicidio! Al contrario, hay cierta dureza en el cuerpo de mis ojos, un dolor difuso [. . .] Sí, queridísimo João Guimarães Rosa, te voy a contar de algún modo en qué consiste ese veneno mío” (32).³⁴⁵ The narrator recalls having read “A terceira margem do rio” and feels certain that the author of this short story must understand his illness.

The confession that follows in the next diary entry, still addressed to Guimarães Rosa, depicts the arrival of Fidela, who is offered a bed in the kitchen where the narrator-as-boy sleeps. At the moment when he is about to narrate the rape itself, in terms of what he silently *saw*, the narrator interrupts himself: “Y fue avanzando la mano hacia mi vientre. Sus dedos duros estaban como caldeados. Yo guardé silencio; vi, hermano João. ¿Por qué me dirijo a ti?” (34).³⁴⁶ The narrator here digresses to examine the reasons for identifying with the Brazilian writer, which include feeling like they both belong to a class of rural writers at the margins of cosmopolitan modernism (34-35).

I am interested in the possibility that the affinity the narrator expresses for Guimarães Rosa may reside, not so much the marginal status the narrator attempts (unsuccessfully it would seem) to claim for them both, as in the Brazilian writer’s tolerance for ambiguity, obscurity, and enigma. Invoking “A terceira margem do rio,” Arguedas’s narrator calls upon Guimarães Rosa as an example of a successful writer who refuses to resolve the contradictions and mysteries he

³⁴⁴ “Against the capitalist alienation and reification, subject and world unite.”

³⁴⁵ “But no more suicidal desires now! On the contrary, there is a certain hardness in my eyeballs, a diffuse rather than concentrated pain [. . .] Yes, my dear João Guimarães Rosa, I’m somehow going to tell you what that poison of mine consists of” (23).

³⁴⁶ “And she was moving her hand closer to my belly. Her fingers were rather feverish; I kept quiet; I saw, brother João. Why am I addressing you?” (24).

introduces into his texts and who allows many aspects of his fictional worlds to remain opaque. By turning to the Brazilian master in this moment, Arguedas's narrator empowers himself to narrate differently, without spelling out and rendering visible the traumatic event to which he attributes, at least in part, his current state of psychological distress.

When he returns to the episode at hand, the narrator begins by contradicting his previous statement that he has seen: "No, João; no vi nada cuando Fidela me tocó el vientre y sus dedos, como arañas caldeadas, medio desesperadas, me acariciaban. Sentí como que el aire se ponía sofocado, creí que me mandaban la muerte en forma de aire caliente" (35).³⁴⁷ Visually darkening the scene, the narrator shifts the focus instead to his sensorial experience, in particular, that of suffocating heat. Based on her reading of this scene, Sara Castro-Klarén argues that *Los zorros* operates on the principal of "occlusion rather than disclosure": "There is a constant aversion, a shutting down of vision before the horrific" (310-311). This shutting down of vision is not, however, a form of omission or even full censorship; the rape *is* narrated, just not in visual terms. Similarly, the *relato* offers limited access, in purely visual terms, to Chimbote, a city the narrator experiences as opaque.³⁴⁸ As Rowe argues, however, crafting this world through other senses than vision does not diminish the impact of this portrait; to the contrary, encountering Chimbote through sound, smell, and physical sensation demands a greater level of intimacy and vulnerability of the narrator and reader alike. What is renounced is simply the sense of mastery and order that has come to be associated with seeing.

Ironically, many of the landscapes, both natural and urban, conjured in *Los zorros* are provided through the experience of Antolín Crispín, the blind beggar and musician. For example, in a remarkable passage at the end of Chapter II, all of Chimbote is contained in the melody of Antolín Crispín's guitar:

El humo de las fábricas, el griterío de los vendedores de fruta, comidas, sándwiches, maní, que tenían sus puestos en las aceras de las calles o al pie de los muros que cercaban las fábricas; el flujo de los colectivos y triciclos que pasaban y volvían bajo los remolinos de humo; el desfile, en grupos o a solas, de los pescadores que se iban del muelle y montaban en los colectivos o se detenían a devorar anticuchos, sándwiches, fruta; el ladrido de los perros en las barriadas, todo eso se constreñía, también como relampagueando, en la guitarra de Crispín Antolín que se seguía cantando en su casa de la Esperanza Baja, sentado en la misma silla. [. . .] Oía la luz de la isla, el zumbido de la tráquea humana de donde sale el hablar de cada quien, tal como es la vida. Así, su guitarra templaba la corriente que va de los médanos y pantanos encrespados de barriadas al mar pestilente, de la esconda a la caldera, de la cruz de Moncada al obispo gringo, del cementerio al polvo de la carretera. (110-111)³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ "No, João, I didn't see anything when Fidela touched my stomach with her feverish fingers (like spiders that had been heated and were half desperate) caressed me. I felt the air becoming stifling. I felt death was being sent me in the form of hot air" (25).

³⁴⁸ Giménez Micó describes as opaque the text's relationship to the "unnarratable" fishing port of Chimbote: "In fact, an opaque relationship regarding the referent dominates the entire text, more or less explicitly in the story itself and much more openly in the diaries" (91).

³⁴⁹ "The factory smoke, the shrill cries of the vendors of fruit, sandwiches, peanuts, and other food who had their sales places on the sidewalks or along the street or at the base of the walls around the factories; the stream of group taxis and tricycle-carts that came and went beneath the swirling smoke; the parade of fisherman, singly or in groups, who were leaving the wharf and getting into the group taxis or stopping to devour anticuchos, sandwiches, or fruit; the barking of dogs in the shantytowns – all of that was constrained, also like lightening flashing, in the guitar of Crispín Antolín, who went on singing in his house in Esperanza Baja, seated in the same chair [. . .] He heard the light of the island, the humming of the human trachea where each person's speech comes out, hearing life exactly

The vibrations of guitar strings and of the human vocal chords are what generate the panorama, as much social as physical, that Arguedas seeks to capture in this novel.

In addition to giving voice to his immediate surroundings through song, Antolín Crispín frequently summons the Andean landscape he left behind when he immigrated to the coast. For example, the song he plays for Florinda and her pimp, Tinoco, conjures Andean mountains and waterfalls in great detail: “Después tocó la introducción al huayno, acordes y melodías improvisadas que describían para Florinda y el cholo cabrón, las montañas y las cascadas chicas de agua, las arañas que se cuelgan desde las matas de espino a los remansos de los ríos grandes” (105)³⁵⁰. Crispín’s song effectively brings these rural landscapes into the heart of Chimbote’s violent and defiled landscape.³⁵¹ His guitar, the only possession he brought when he emigrated from the Andes, magically contains a natural world that has been almost but not entirely lost to the residents of Chimbote.

Antolín Crispín’s descent from the mountains is narrated twice in Chapter II, once in his own words and once in those of the narrator: “He bajado cumbres nevadas, pampas, barrancos, sin nadies que me ateje, sin nadies que me haga andar [. . .]” (104); “Ciego, flaco, jovencito, había bajado, cierto, nieves, cumbres, precipicios, desde su pueblo, tras de la Cordillera Blanca, hasta la línea del tren que corre por el endemoniado cañón del río Santa” (111).³⁵² In addition to substituting a mood of danger for the mood of freedom expressed by Crispín, the narrator’s account confirms that of the blind man, augmenting it with proper names and specifying that Crispín was already blind when he made this journey. His authority to describe the landscapes of Peru’s peaks and plains, then, does not come from his having seen them but, rather, from his having traversed them. I would argue that this is the model of landscape “painting” to which the novel aspires as well: to describe Chimbote by tracing ambulatory paths through it rather than by passively looking at it. As preformed by Antolín Crispín, this form of description provides remarkable detail without relying on vision as the primary means of perceiving the landscape.

It is important to note that Antolín Crispín’s evocations of the landscape are not simply inert descriptions; they also act upon the world narrated. In the scene where he sings for Florinda and Tinoco, for example, his song serves as an intervention in a scene of domestic violence. The notoriously violent gangster Tinoco has been threatening Florinda in her home when the blind man appears in the doorway and, undaunted, begins to insult Tinoco. Inexplicably intimidated, Tinoco begins to stammer – admitting, “Oye . . . en lo oscuro conoce el ciego qué es” (105) – and, apologizing, asks Crispín to play the guitar³⁵³. The *huayno* he plays not only dissipates the tension of the scene but also appears to cast a spell on Tinoco, who, in the following scene, displays uncharacteristic tenderness, offering to cry for a grieving father who cannot cry for his daughter (106). In sum, the magic of the blind man’s song appears capable of doing all that

the way it was. Thus, his guitar was attuned to the current flowing from the huge dunes and troubled waters of the shantytown marches to the foul-smelling sea, from the radar to the fish-meal boiler, from Moncada’s cross the gringo bishop, from the graveyard to the dust of the highway” (82).

³⁵⁰ “Then he played the introduction of the *huayno*, improvising melodies and chords that described for Florinda and the *cholo* pimp the warm Andean foothills and the little waterfalls, the spiders that hang down from thorny bushes towards the pools on the big rivers” (78)

³⁵¹ Rama writes that for Arguedas the landscape is contained in Quechua words themselves, which, like music, evoke the settings in which they have been previously heard (*Writing Across Cultures* 169-170).

³⁵² “I’ve come down over snowy peaks and high plains and gorges with nobodies makin; me stop, with nobodies makin’ me go” (77); “As a young man, the slender blind musician had come down over snowfields, mountain peaks, and cliffs from his hometown out beyond the Cordillera Blanca of the Andes, had come down to the train tracks that ran through the diabolical canyon of the Santa River” (82).

³⁵³ “in the darkness the blind man knows all about what’s what” (77).

narrator laments that his prose cannot do: preserve the Andean landscapes that have been lost to the inhabitants of Chimbote, capture the fragmented reality of Chimbote, and weave the two together in enchanting melodies with the power to disarm the violence of this rent world and infuse it instead with compassion.

We see repeatedly in *Los zorros* that song trumps rational discourse as a way to understand the tumultuous social panorama of Chimbote. Near the end of the last *diario*, the narrator writes, in reference to the infighting between religious leaders in Chimbote, “Los Zorros no discuten esto. Antolín Crispín lo hace oír en su guitarra, como ustedes saben, a oscuras” (342). The irony that it is the blind who best know the landscape belies Arguedas’s understanding of landscape, not as a scene to be visually apprehended, but, rather, as a scene to be heard, breathed, strummed, sounded from the perspective of one immersed in it. As Gabriela Nuñez writes: “para comprender *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, es necesario cerrar los ojos y escuchar el múltiple sonido de voces que se cruzan simultáneamente” (324).

Importantly, it is not just human language, be it Spanish or Quechua or English, that is responsible for conjuring these landscapes; inarticulate sounds prove just as evocative. Nuñez observes that the sounds we are asked to listen to in *Los zorros* include, in addition to oral dialogs, “la voz de la naturaleza” (323). Similarly, Chalena Vásquez insists: “El mundo sonoro andino está formado por los múltiples e infinitos mensajes que, a través del sonido/ movimiento, están emitiendo todos los seres que conviven en el universo: piedras, ríos, montañas, aire, astros, insectos, aves, humanos” (301).³⁵⁴ As we will see at the end of this chapter, for example, that the entire landscape of the Andes is contained in the squeals of a pig having his head scratched (15-16).

Chimbote as precarious landscape

In Arguedas’s descriptions of the physical landscape of Chimbote, sand predominates as the fundamental material making up the topography, hinting at the precarious and shifting nature of this landscape. As we have seen, when the prostitutes look down on Chimbote the first thing they see is “la carretera “marginal” de gruesa arena y basura” (65). Likewise, the vista conjured when Bazalar looks down on Chimbote from above consists primarily of “el menospreciado cerro de arena que dominaba todos los horizontes de Chimbote” (96).³⁵⁵ Indeed, sand is omnipresent: buildings are constructed around dunes; the shoes of every pedestrian sink in the sand; even the dead are buried in a sandy lot from which the crosses marking their graves can be plucked with ease and relocated.

The instability of this city-built-on-sand becomes even more pronounced in the discursive overview of the city we are given in don Ángel’s conversation with don Diego. From don Ángel’s metaphorical view from the top – as a wealthy industrialist – the social panorama of Chimbote looks like a natural disaster in action: Chimbote is, for don Ángel, the collapse of Andes onto the coast in a colossal landslide or flood. The Quechua word for such a natural disaster – *lloqlla* or *huayco* – becomes a recurring metaphor for the mass immigration of Indians.³⁵⁶ When asked if he knows the term, don Diego, defines “lloqlla” as “la avalancha de agua, de

³⁵⁴ “The sonic world of the Andes is formed by the multiple and infinite messages that, through sound/ movement are emitted by all of the beings who coexist in the universe: rocks, rivers, mountains, air, astrological bodies, insects, birds, humans.”

³⁵⁵ “the scorned sand mountain that dominated the horizons of Chimbote” (71).

³⁵⁶ Both terms are translated as “corremiento de tierras” or “aluvión;” the phenomenon is often described as the liquefaction of earth when sandy soil is saturated with water after heavy rains.

tierra, raíces de árboles, perros muertos, de piedras que bajan bataneando debajo de la corriente cuando los ríos se cargan con las primeras lluvias en estas bestias montañas” (124).³⁵⁷ To this definition, don Ángel replies: “Así es Chimbote, oiga usted; y nadie nos conocemos. Le dije que redujimos los obreros de doscientos cincuentiocho a noventiseís, ¿no? Esta lloqlla come hambre. Más obreros largamos de las fábricas más llegan de la sierra. Y las barriadas crecen y crecen, y aparecen plazas de mercado en las barriadas con más moscas que comida” (125).³⁵⁸ Clearly confounded as to why the Indians keep coming when there are no more jobs, don Ángel figures the mass immigration as an unstoppable natural force: “La gente ‘homilde’, como se llaman a sí mismos, bajó de la sierra a cascadas” (130).³⁵⁹ He complains that all of the undeveloped spaces in the city have been “invadidos por esa avalancha” (133).

Don Ángel’s recourse to the imagery of the *lloqlla* reveals his prejudice against the Indian immigrants, whom he views as invaders descending upon Chimbote without rhyme or reason, leading to the cancerous growth of poverty-ridden slums. In tension with the chaos and irrationality conjured by the image of the *lloqlla*, Don Ángel ascribes military precision to the “invasión” of the highlanders: “Oiga, los invadieren en orden, mejor que en Lima, militarmente, diría yo; con disciplina castrense trazaron sus calles y plazas, se repartieron sus lotes, aparecieron barrios que ni la conciencia de Dios habría imaginado” (133).³⁶⁰ The thinly veiled reference to squatters uprisings colors this language with a pervasive fear of political upheaval as the demographics of urban Peru undergo a precipitous shift.

The internal contradictions in Don Ángel’s characterization of the mass immigration of Indians to Chimbote reflect the mix of perplexity and paranoia with which many *criollo* residents of Chimbote react to the influx of *serranos*. For example, when the procession of cross-carrying poor residents of the *barriadas marginales* stops traffic on the highway, some of the motorists perceive the scene as an organized political action or a “sublevación pacífico” (94). The novel fails to clarify exactly why the slum-dwellers persist in the bizarre and laborious task or relocating the crosses of their dead, but it appears to be the result of a misunderstanding: the city authorities had decreed that the slum-dwellers must start burying their dead in a new, more peripheral location, but the orders had become convoluted in transmission to the Settlers’ Association in the shantytowns, and the residents had understood the instructions to “move their commentary” to mean relocating the crosses marking the graves of those already buried. The absurd and poetic action of rendering transitory even the promised permanency of the final resting place of the dead underscores the instability and openness of Arguedas’s Chimbote: even time seems to run in reverse as the once-buried-and-lain-to-rest dead spur a highly visible and mobile funeral procession, leaving a *colectivo* driver to ask how the dead can stop traffic: “¿De muertos que interrumpen la carretera?” (94).³⁶¹ One observer of this scene attributes the odd behavior to the Indians’ beliefs about death: “Para los más serranos, es decir, los indios, vale la

³⁵⁷ “an avalanche of water, earth, tree roots, dead dogs, and stones that comes rumbling down on the bottom of the current when the rivers are loaded with the first rains in these beastly Andean foothills . . .” (91).

³⁵⁸ “That’s how Chimbote is now, you hear? And none of us know each other. I told you we cut the workforce down from 258 to 96, didn’t I? This lloqlla feeds on hunger. The more workers we chase away from the factories, the more come down out of the Andes. And the shantytowns grow and grow and marketplaces appear in shantytowns with more flies than food” (91-92).

³⁵⁹ “The ‘humble’ people, as they call themselves, poured down out of the Andes in torrents” (96).

³⁶⁰ “Listen, they invaded them in an orderly way, better than the land takeovers they had in Lima, militarily I’d say. With army discipline they laid out the streets and squares and distributed the lots; neighborhoods appeared not even the mind of God would have imagined” (98).

³⁶¹ “Of dead people who are holdin’ up traffic?” (69).

cruz que marca el sitio donde están los muertos, pues” (94).³⁶² Nevertheless, it remains unclear to what extent or to what ends Bazalar, the pig-raiser and neighborhood organizer leading the procession may be leveraging the misunderstanding for political purposes. The inscrutable motives of what appear to be highly organized actions increases the paranoia of the onlookers, who suspect a political uprising: “Esto, como las invasiones, está organizado. Ahora no es contra las autoridades ni dueños ni comunidad de indígenas de Chimbote. Nadie sabe contra de quién” (93).³⁶³ As the *colectivo* passengers continue to debate the meaning of the procession of Chimbote’s poor, *serrano* voices, too, begin to chime in, standing up for the dignity of the slum-dwellers but in no way clarifying the situation nor diminishing the unease of the *criollos* who fear a squatters’ uprising.

While the mistrust expressed by these onlookers and by Don Ángel in chapter three should not be conflated with the implicit point of view of the novel, which tends to align more closely with the experience of the impoverished Indian residents of Chimbote than with the middle and upper class *criollos* resentful of their presence and fearful of their rapidly increasing numbers, the visual landscapes of Chimbote painted by Arguedas tend to reinforce the imagery of catastrophe, instability, and destruction evoked by the word “lloqlla.” As we have begun to see, Arguedas’s Chimbote is a landscape of verticality; it is vertiginous and unstable. The ground is sandy everywhere: the hills are made of sand and rocks and fishmeal, the roads of sand and garbage; everything is a composite, opposites meeting in a chaotic state of wreckage.

This rendering of Chimbote – as socially and geologically unstable, as shaped by and prone to catastrophic *lloqllas* – tragically anticipates one of Peru’s worst natural disasters: just six months after Arguedas’s suicide drew the composition of *Los zorros* to its abrupt conclusion, a magnitude 7.9 earthquake struck just 22 miles off of the coast of Chimbote, leveling much of the city and triggering *huaycos*, or avalanches, that roared down the surrounding valleys swallowing whole towns. It is estimated that over 20,000 people perished. I do not mean to suggest that Arguedas in any way prophesized this catastrophe. Obviously, the fact that Quechua has a word for these massive landslides belies that they are endemic to the region³⁶⁴. What I am suggesting is that Arguedas understood that these tragedies must be seen as part of the Andean landscape, in Tim Ingold’s sense of the word: Ingold proposes viewing landscape through the lens of archeology and understanding the environment as being continuously shaped by the “rhythmic pattern of human activities” within a larger, slower pattern of biological, geological, and astrological rhythms (164). The *lloqllas* endemic to the Andes form part of the region’s geological landscape and, for Arguedas, become a multivalent metaphor that collapses the distinctions between geology and history, between the individual and the collectivity, between the inner landscape and the outer landscape.

For example, the precarity of this landslide-prone landscape serves as a metaphor for the precarious mental state of the author. In his final letter to Gonzalo Losada, his Argentinian editor, Arguedas laments that the novel will remain unfinished because his will to write and to live has been crushed by a *huayco*:

Si hubiera podido seguir trabajando al ritmo con que lo hacía entonces quizá lo habría conseguido. Pero me cayó un repentino *huayco* que enterró el camino y no pude levantar,

³⁶² “For the ones who are the most like highlanders, that is to say, the Indians – the cross that marks the place where the dead are is what counts” (69).

³⁶³ “This is organized, like the squatters’ land takeovers are. Now it’s not against the authorities nor the landowners nor the Indian community of Chimbote. Nobody knows who it’s against” (69).

³⁶⁴ A catastrophic *huayco* had destroyed the town of Huarás thirty years earlier.

por mucho que hice, el lodo y las piedras que forman esas avalanchas que son más pesadas cuando caen dentro del pecho. Quiero dejar constancia que el *huayco* fue repentino pero no completamente inesperado. Hace muchos años que mi ánimo funciona como los caminos que van de la costa a la sierra peruana, subiendo por abismos y laderas geológicamente aún inestables. ¿Quién puede saber qué día o qué noche ha de caer un *huayco* o un derrumbe seco sobre esos caminos? La novela ha quedado, pues, lo repito, no creo que absolutamente trunca sino contenida, un cuerpo medio ciego y deforme pero que acaso sea capaz de andar. (20011, 349-350)³⁶⁵

In this extended metaphor, Arguedas's instable inner landscape becomes one with the Peruvian landscape, whose vertical extremes render the work of connecting the coast to the *sierras* a strenuous feat. Arguedas's life work has consisted of attempting to build roads and bridges between Peru's cultural extremes, allowing for communication and understanding where there have historically been walls and precipices.³⁶⁶ By focusing on the inherent instability of the landscape upon which he has attempted to erect his work, Arguedas makes his failure out to be a tragic eventuality. According to Arguedas's letter to Losada, *Los zorros*, which the author calls "maimed and uneven" (263) has been the casualty of a sudden, but by no means unexpected disaster: the collapse of a psychic landscape which, strained by the extremes it tenuously spanned, was bound to come crashing down at one moment or another.

This personal and national crisis is, in the end, indistinguishable from the writerly crisis that has been the principal subject matter of the diario sections of *Los zorros*: the tremendous difficulty of finding the language and the form to represent the unsettling realities of Chimbote. Recognizing that this new subject matter, Peru's coastal modernity, requires a radically different literary form but fearing he lacks the erudition and the strength to contain the forces of rupture he has released, Arguedas experiences the self-annihilating propulsions of the avant-garde project he has begun as a catastrophic phenomenon. As William Rowe suggests, the *lloqlla* or *huayco* is also a suitable metaphor for the mold-breaking form Arguedas adopts in his last novel:

. . . el huayco es fenómeno de los ríos que bajan desde las alturas hasta la mar del Pacífico, signo de la nueva orientación literaria de Arguedas. El huayco que trae la población andina a Chimbote rompe cualquier forma que se le trate de imponer [. . .] Lo cual es una formulación bastante precisa de cómo el texto hace coincidir la problemática de la forma novelesca con la del cambio histórico. ("Deseo" 336)³⁶⁷

The inseparability of historical crisis, personal crisis, and writerly crisis would seem to be what leads Arguedas to experience this *huayco* as a crushing weight.

³⁶⁵ "If I could have kept on working at the same rate as before I might have brought it off. But a sudden *huayco* fell down upon me that completely buried the road, and no matter what I did I couldn't lift the mud and stones that make up those avalanches, which are even heavier when they fall inside one's breast. I want to leave written evidence that the *huayco* was sudden but not completely unexpected. For many years my spirits have functioned like the roads that go from the coast to the Peruvian sierra, rising up through deep gorges and along mountainsides still geologically unstable. Who can know what day or what night a *huayco* or dry landslide must fall down onto those roads? The novel has been left, well, I repeat, I don't think it is completely lopped off, but instead it has been contained, like a body that's half-blind and deformed but perhaps still capable of speaking" (261-262).

³⁶⁶ Arguedas articulates this mission in his 1968 acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega Prize, "No soy un aculturado . . .", which is included in *Los zorros*.

³⁶⁷ The *huayco* is a phenomenon of the rivers that descend from the highlands to the Pacific ocean, [and the] sign of Arguedas's new literary orientation. The *huayco* that brings the Andean population to Chimbote breaks any form that one might try to impose on it [. . .] Which is a pretty precise formulation of how the texts makes the problematic of the form of the novel coincide with that of historical change."

Yet, considered in isolation from these other factors, Arguedas's struggles with the form of the novel might be celebrated as an avant-garde gesture. As Edmundo Gómez Mango writes: "Nunca el lenguaje novelístico de Arguedas es más embriagante y poderoso, cuando se asoma al 'huayco' de su propia destrucción" (376).³⁶⁸ As Mango goes on to note, however, drawing near to these destructive forces is a deathly serious matter for Arguedas and not an avant-garde flirtation with failure. As the author himself seems to lament in the Third Diary, Arguedas is unable to muster the playfulness of "los cortázares"; for him, pursuing the outer limits of language's expressive powers remains a life or death proposition, and hovering on edges of a creative *huayco* does not prove a sustainable position.

In the image of the *lloqlla* or *huayco*, natural disaster, personal crisis, artistic crisis, and national tragedy become one. The precarious landscape Arguedas paints in *Los zorros* is, for all of its moments of hope and beauty, remains a landscape of *lloqllas*, primed to unleash at any moment annihilating forces of destruction, despair, and violence. This violence takes many forms, some "natural" like the destruction of a landslide, but most with socio-political underpinnings: the "rape" of Chimbote by foreign and domestic capitalists, the political uprising that seems to stir below the surface throughout the novel, the readiness of the capitalist-mafiosos squelch any such uprising, and the intercultural tensions that lead to interpersonal conflicts (such as the never-written murder of the gringo Maxwell by El Mudo).

By literally writing these personal, political, and social crises into the landscape, Arguedas reverses the "whitewashing" of historical conflicts that has gone into many pastoral and regionalist renderings of the landscape. When the landscape can no longer be conceived as separate from the self and from the human society that inhabits it, it cannot be so easily be romanticized, appropriated, or commoditized; both landscape and culture cease to be bounded objects that can be studied by a subject capable of separating himself from them. Likewise, when the author's personal crisis extends beyond the bounds of the narrator's voice and subjectivity and is reflected in the physical and social world of the novel, it cannot so easily be dismissed as individual and apolitical.

III. Reframing failure

While *Los zorros* met with no shortage of negative reception, especially early on, from critics who compared it to *Los ríos profundos* and *Todas las sangres* and judged the posthumous novel to be incomplete, incoherent, and failed, more recent readings have been eager to find poetic, ethical, and political power in Arguedas's failure to synthesize his fragmentary portraits of Chimbote into a coherent panorama.³⁶⁹ For example, William Rowe suggests that rather than being an artistic or personal failure, this renunciation of totality is an honest reflection of the

³⁶⁸ "Never is Arguedas's novelistic language more intoxicating and powerful than when he approaches the 'huayco' of his own destruction."

³⁶⁹ Vargas Llosa reads the novel as severely flawed ("Entre ideología"), and Eduardo J. Pantigoso describes it as underdeveloped, unfinished, and of limited artistic quality (293). More recently, Dara Sales concedes that the novel is "inacabada e inacabable, rota por todos los lados" ("unfinished and unfinishable, broken everywhere") but nevertheless agrees with William Rowe that it is not "una novela fracasada", "sino una complejísimo apuesta narrativa cuya textura surge de un cruce de culturas, tradiciones, tiempos y voces" (27, 39). "a failed novel" "but rather a very complex narrative wager whose texture emerges from a crossing of cultures, traditions, times, and voices." For Rowe, the novel's incompleteness becomes a form of openness that "demands completion within sociopolitical reality" ("El lugar" 287-288).

world Arguedas sets out to depict: “La tendencia a la dispersión es un claro reflejo de la fragmentación de la cultura quechua en la sociedad costeña” (“El nuevo lenguaje” 201).³⁷⁰ Arguedas’s choice of a fragmented worldview may be considered the most appropriate, if not wholly realistic, form of representation possible for a heterogeneous world where few, if any, of its residents are truly fluent in all of the cultures and languages that collide, contaminate one another, and generate new cultural identities. Rowe notes that Moncada, a *criollo* of African descent who has befriended the dying *serrano* don Esteban de la Cruz, is the only character whose *language* can synthesize the worlds of the coast and the *sierras*. As a porta-voz of sorts for bi-cultural the author, Moncada represents the futility of arriving at a lucid overview of this fragmented reality: he sees all parts of society and the relationships between them, but his visions “tienden a ser parciales o apocalípticas” and are received within the world of the novel as mad rants (ibid 210).³⁷¹

As several critics have argued, the fragmentation of Chimbote and its languages in *Los zorros* may have a protective function as well. For example, Sara Castro-Klarén suggests that the inconclusiveness of the writing might be a product of fear of full disclosure and desire to leave the mystery of the foxes and the Andean world they represent intact (313). Given the violent exploitation of Indian labor and natural resources thematized throughout the novel, Catalina Ocampo argues, there is good reason to safeguard the sacred and mythic elements of this world from being appropriated and defiled: “de cuidar el secreto y el misterio de lo sagrado, defendiéndolo de un habla violenta para que el saber del mito no sea violado como la bahía de Chimbote” (134).³⁷² By this logic, revealing too much, succeeding in transcribing this world into language to be consumed in the capitalistic marketplace would amount to a form of prostitution and betrayal: “entrega lo sagrado al mundo que lo va a prostituir. Confesar todo es traicionar al mundo indígena, es aculturarse. Por eso, dentro del mundo confuso y sin sentido de la palabra rota, la diferencia y la salvación se buscan por otros medios: bailando, cantando, musitando, expresándose a través del cuerpo [. . .]” (135).³⁷³ Whereas language, with its capacity for abstraction and cutting signifiers loose from their referents, threatens to commodify and sell-out the experience of Chimbote’s residents, embodied forms of expression appear to offer resistance.

Indeed, the novel places considerable emphasis on the bodily movements and functions of its characters, leading some critics to dismiss it as grotesque and scatological.³⁷⁴ To cite just a few examples in addition to the dancing of the foxes, the scenes set in the brothels revolve around song, dance, copulation and physical conflict; the narrative chronicles in great detail the exculpations and dying body of Esteban de la Cruz; and the descriptions of Bazalar’s domestic life focus largely on the reproductive habits of his two wives, including the suckling of children and piglets alike. Glossing Walter Benjamin on Plato’s banquet, Ocampo finds in Arguedas’s return to the body a way to reveal secrets without exposing and destroying them (137). Whereas words threaten such a betrayal, the body’s existence in space and time offers an alternate, less

³⁷⁰ “The tendency towards dispersion is a clear reflection of the fragmentation of the Quechua culture in the coastal society.”

³⁷¹ “tend to be partial or apocalyptic.”

³⁷² “to keep the secret and the mystery of the sacred, defending it from violent language so that mythic knowledge is not violated like the bay of Chimbote.”

³⁷³ “it hands the sacred over to a world that will prostitute it. To confess everything is to betray the indigenous world, it is to acculturate. That is why, within the confusing and senseless world of the broken word, difference and salvation are sought by other means: dancing, singing, mumbling, expressing oneself through the body [. . .]”

³⁷⁴ For example, Vargas Llosa finds the novel oddly fascinated with the base, grotesque, and disgusting sides of bodily existence (“Literatura y suicidio” 27).

violent way of expressing unity and coherence: “En su agonía con la palabra, escribir silenciosamente con el cuerpo – bailar, hacer el amor, morir – surge como la única manera de volver a atar los tiempos (conservando su aspecto sagrado), de atar los espacios (sin prostituir la materia), de atar los seres de su sujeto dividido” (138).³⁷⁵ Not only is bodily existence the universal substrate that unites the heterogeneous lives depicted in *Los zorros*, but the synchronization of bodily movements and the provision of bodily care are repeatedly represented as the means through which cultural differences can be (momentarily) bridged without requiring either party to cede his difference.³⁷⁶

As his famous description of himself as a “vínculo vivo” expresses, Arguedas offers his own bodily existence as proof that the world from up above and the world from down below can coexist. As a result, it is difficult to talk of the agony of the divided subject, as Ocampo does, without talking about the bilingual, bicultural author, who, by the time of writing *Los zorros*, had begun to feel his calling to span the disparate times and spaces represented by the *sierra* and the coast as an impossible and torturous act. This line of thinking brings us to the problematic yet inevitable question of whether Arguedas’s suicide might be read not only as a way out of this impossible predicament but also as an act of sacrifice or martyrdom. Citing the prominence of the figures of “Che” Guevara and Jesus Christ in the Second Part, William Rowe has suggested that perhaps *Los zorros* was always intended as a posthumous novel, and as such, as the ultimate act of sacrifice by its author (“El lugar”). Might we read the death of the author and the consequent abortion of his project as an attempt to spare his subjects from the violence of representation in a form that cannot, for all of Arguedas’s best efforts, fully escape a legacy of colonization, appropriation, and acculturation inherent in the form of the novel?

Such readings are dangerous for the obvious reasons that they romanticize Arguedas’s suicide and threaten to reduce the motives for it, which undoubtedly included severe clinical depression, to a political-cum-literary agenda. Yet, as numerous critics have remarked, the interspersion of the *diario* sections encourages if not necessitates the conflation of the author’s biography and psychological travails with the world of the literary text. Even when the *diario* sections are read as written in the voice of a fictional author-figure, rather than that of Arguedas himself, there is no getting around the fact that this author-figure announces his intent to kill himself and encourages us to read this decision as precipitated by the “failure” of the novel. The act of suicide is thus so thoroughly written into the novel, that it becomes impossible to read the one independently of the other.

At the same time, however, we would do well to remember that the explanatory narrative for this suicide offered in the *diario* section of *Los zorros* is itself a literary creation: occupying a slippery territory between testimonial and fiction, this narrative must be read as the discursive creation and not simply as a naïve personal confession.³⁷⁷ The explanations offered for the

³⁷⁵ “In his agony with the word, writing silently with the body – dancing, making love, dying – emerges as the only way to once again bind times (conserving their sacred aspect), to bind spaces (without prostituting material), to bind the beings of his divided subject.”

³⁷⁶ Examples we might cite include the musical duets of Maxwell and Antolín Crispín, the Andean dance shared by Diego and don Ángel, and the friendship between Esteban de la Cruz and Moncada, who sometimes, when no one is looking, carries his dying friend in his arms.

³⁷⁷ There continues to be some debate on this point. Mario Vargas Llosa, for example, reads the diaries as signed by the author, but as Christian Fernández points out, the publishers did not follow Arguedas’s instructions, which specified that his acceptance speech for the Premio Inca Garcilaso de la Vega be inserted as a foreword (it appears as an afterward) and which do not ask that his suicide notes (bearing his signature) be published in the novel. Fernández argues that the presentation elected by the publishers, wherein the last diary is immediately followed by a

author's suicide in *Los zorros* might then be read as a strategy of framing the real-life suicide that Arguedas has come to see as inevitable: fictionalizing his death (writing it into the world of his novel) provides a noble narrative through which his biographical death may be read: the impossibility to "escribir bien" and "luchar bien" has left him no choice but death: "Ni soporto vivir sin pelear, sin hacer algo para los otros [. . .]," proclaims the author of the *diarios* (17).³⁷⁸ While it may seem callous and cynical to read the *diarios* as containing such a rhetorical strategy, one of the paradoxes of *Los zorros* is that redeeming it as an aesthetic creation involves granting the text a sophisticated and avant-garde capacity for self-reflexivity that contradicts the *diario* narrator's description of himself as technically naive. Doing so does not necessitate reading the authorial voice expressed in the *diarios* as insincere or; to the contrary, it merely involves remembering that all literary texts take on a life of their own, and that the author of the *diarios* admits, like many authors before him, to feeling outpaced by his own creation.

With these considerations in mind, we might return to Ocampo's reading of *Los zorros* as resisting the violence of verbal articulation by returning us to the body. The act of suicide that ends the novel might then be seen as the ultimate act of writing silently with the body. Just as Diego's dancing serves to interrupt and derail conversations that seek to disclose Chimbote in its totality, the death of the author-figure serves to interrupt the composition of a novel that purportedly aspires to the same end. By this logic, the violence of death preempts the violence of representation, specifically, representation of the cultural other, which has been historically continuous with domination (Rivera 194). As Eduardo Chirinos writes, Arguedas's death becomes a way of avoiding a violent representation of the other, in what Cornejo Polar has called "una incómoda parodia del Rey Midas" : "todo lo que toca se convierte en literatura" (101). For Arguedas, the risk of trivializing and exploiting urgent real-world problems by converting them into fodder for literature is a threat worse than death. The irony, of course, is that by writing his suicide into *Los zorros*, it too is converted into literature.

The abrupt termination of the incomplete novel is only the most dramatic example of the numerous ways the text refuses to fully disclose the subject matter it purports to represent. Lienhard observes that, whereas indigenist literature traditionally assumed an audience unfamiliar with the culture represented and went to great lengths to make this culture legible to such an outside audience (lengthy explanations, thorough translations, glossaries, etc.), Arguedas's last novel appears indifferent to the reader's ability to understand. Lienhard claims that Arguedas's radically reinvented regionalism is no longer centered on a referent to be transparently represented (i.e. the life of *campesinos*) but, rather, on the language that struggles to breach the cultural divide between reader and subject matter: by subverting the form of the novel with a Quechua worldview, Lienhard argues, Arguedas asks the reader to *experience* cultural difference through the text's formal fissures and linguistic disconnects and stutters (185-186). In Ocampo's words, the text thus succeeds in giving the reader "una experiencia límite ante la palabra" (122). Far from being simply a flawed text, she argues it is a text that takes us to the edge of an abyss in efforts to resist disclosing its most sacred secrets to a profane and market-driven world (124).

In addition to resisting the facile consumption of its subject matter by an appropriative, cosmopolitan audience, the incomplete, fragmented, and temporally discontinuous form of *Los*

series of materials signed by the author, encourages us to read the "yo" of the *diarios* as Arguedas himself, whereas he seems to have intended for the identity of this narrator to occupy a more fluid position between fiction and autobiography (295).

³⁷⁸ "Nor can I stand living without fighting, without doing something to pass on to others [. . .]" (11).

zorros challenges the linear view of history that would relegate the Andean world to the archaic past. As Lienhard argues, the “inconclusión” of the book reflects a non historiographic view of history, thus breaking with a novelistic tradition closely associated with the teleological pursuit of closure: “El zorro rechaza por completo la posibilidad que le brinda la forma novelesca, la de ‘cerrar el círculo’, de crear una coherencia ficticia mediante la producción de una ilusión narrativa” (194).³⁷⁹ Lienhard is quick to point out that because Arguedas’s last work is literally unfinished, the rejection of closure in *Los zorros* is more complete and more radical than that of “muchas novelas consideradas como ‘abiertas’ o experimentales”, such as Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en la catedral*, which is fragmented, but, like a puzzle, seamlessly put back together by the end (194).

While several of Arguedas’s earlier works express a utopian politics wherein Peru’s Andean cultures inherit the future, *Los zorros* may be the most politically radical work in that its form thoroughly upends the linear, progressive model of history responsible for demanding that these “archaic” cultures be abandoned to the past. In fact, Lienhard reads *Los zorros* as a corrective of sorts to “la visión histórica ideologizante” expressed in the narrative progression of *Todas las sangres* (195). As modernity becomes increasingly synonymous with western cosmopolitan culture the only way to assure the survival of traditional Andean culture is to look for an outside of what Alexandra Hibbett describes as “esta visión de la historia como progreso lineal de pasado-andino a futuro-occidental” (401). Hibbett sees *Los zorros* as enacting a dialectical model of relations that upsets the hierarchy that would code the modern as inherently superior to the premodern:

Si la historia del Perú ha sido siempre narrada como un paso progresivo de un pasado andino a un futuro occidental – entendida la occidentalidad como la única modernidad posible --, se puede decir que en esta parte de *Los zorros* se vislumbra un a nueva manera de ver la historia del Perú, donde lo andino no tiene que ser superado para lograr un futuro occidental, sino que ambos pueden relacionarse fuera del mito, de forma dialéctica, no progresiva e igualitaria, fuera de un sistema de dominación social. (400)³⁸⁰

One of the principal means through which this more egalitarian mode of relations between Andean and western cultures is achieved in *Los zorros* is through dialog. The organizing metaphor of the novel – the dialog of the fox from up above with the fox from down below – presumes that these two ways of life exist contemporaneously and have the capacity to exchange their knowledge and points of view.

Multiple readers have linked the prevalence of dialog in *Los zorros* to the text’s ethical project. Significant portions of chapters I and IV and nearly all of chapter III and part II of the novel are structured as dialogs. Galindo points to the propensity of Arguedas’s characters, such as Diego, don Ángel, and the fishmeal workers in Chapter III or Moncada and don Esteban in Chapter IV, to speak to each other as equals (195). Precluding a single perspective, including that of an omniscient narrator, from assuming the authority to narrate Chimbote, dialog emerges as a non hierarchical form. Like the sea, which ignores the vertical stratifications of life lived on land, and as Tarta points out, allows even humble *serranos* to make a living as fishermen – “Pa-pa-

³⁷⁹ “The Fox completely rejects the possibility offered by novelistic form, that of ‘closing the circle’ of creating a fictitious coherence through the production of a narrative illusion.”

³⁸⁰ “If the history of Peru has always been narrated as a progressive step from an Andean past to a western future – westernness being understood as the only possible modernity – , one could say that in this part of *Los zorros* a new way of seeing the history of Peru appears, where the Andean does not have to be overcome in order to achieve an western future, but rather, both can relate to one another outside of myth, in a dialectical, egalitarian, and non-progressive form, outside of the system of social domination.”

para los se-se-serranos de tierra. La-la mar i-i-guala [. . .]” (57) – dialog proves to be one of the great equalizing forces in Arguedas’s Chimbote; even the stuttering Tarta is patiently allotted his share of lines to speak.³⁸¹ The dialog form also allows for the great linguistic diversity of the novel, and as the narrator’s “proper” Spanish increasingly gives way to the idiosyncratic versions of the language spoken by highlanders and foreigners, it loses its primacy, becoming just one more dialect.

Julio Ortega observes that even the *diario* sections, which initially appear to be written in the monologic voice of the author, are also contaminated by dialog: in addition to the dialogs between the foxes, the *diarios* contain multiple sustained instances of direct address, where the author figure appears to dialog with his literary colleagues (“El zorro” 86). Juan Rulfo and João Guimarães Rosa both appear as Arguedas’s interlocutors, addressed as “tú”.³⁸² Ortega locates the utopian project of the text in an ethics of vulnerability sustained by the form of dialog:

En efecto, la eticidad que sostiene la identidad vulnerable del individuo en el diálogo con el otro, en el mutuo reconocimiento, circula en el libro como su paradigma sustantivo. En verdad, sin esta permanente identificación ética, que mantiene la humanidad del tú en el yo, no se podría entender cabalmente el proyecto utópico del autor. La capacidad de comunicación se representa como una capacidad de identificación, que provee la identidad del sujeto en la voz del otro y en las voces de lo otro. (ibid 86-87)

It should also be noted that, as in the works of Rulfo and Rosa with which Arguedas is in dialog, the dialogical quality of *Los zorros* evokes the oral tradition of the largely illiterate subjects represented. Reading Arguedas’s last novel in light of Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” Stephan Gruber argues that both texts both value oral community and the space of intersubjectivity as that which transmits experience (381).

The predominance of dialog proves to be yet another way then that the text’s failure to conform to the conventions of the novel might be seen as a rejection of the totalizing ideology associated with the genre. Refusing the discursive overview provided by the singular authority of an omniscient narrator and the teleology of a closure-driven plot, *Los zorros* embraces an ethics of openness and instability. In sum, the text’s formal “failures” – the constant collapsing of categories, discourses, and narrative levels into a slippery continuity, the unattainability of the overview that would map out and fix the landscape in our gaze, and the dissolution of linear narrative into a whirling apparition – have liberating potential: they thwart the ability of the narrator and the reader to dominate this world and to relegate it to the past.³⁸³

The question of the reader’s access

Following these readings, far from being an unintended consequence of Arguedas’s struggle to represent Chimbote, the reader’s inability to understand is crucial to his poetic-political project. We might even go as far as to read the text as intentionally rebuffing the

³⁸¹ “Fo-fo-for the highlanders on land. Th-th-the ocean ma-ma-makes e-e-everyone equal [. . .]” (42).

³⁸² In one instance, Guimarães Rosa is addressed as “usted” (32).

³⁸³ Fernando Rivera sees the mixing of *diarios* and *relato* in *Los zorros* as a way of bearing witness to the difficulty of relating to the other. By including the subjectivity of the author, the novel renounces any claim to objectively document the other and, instead, bears witness to the author’s experience of otherness: “Y lo que produce esta representación no es un saber sobre el otro, sino la experiencia del saber del otro, que viene en el canto de los patos andinos, el ruido de las cascadas y las voces de los hombres. Escribir es testimoniar esa experiencia que uno tiene del otro, como en *Los zorros*. (194-195). “And what this representation produces is not the knowledge of another but, rather, the experience of knowing another, which comes in the song of the Andean ducks, the noise of the waterfalls and the voices of men. To write is to witness this experience that one has of another, as in *Los zorros*.”

(presumably elite, criollo, or international) reader in order to thwart our ability to appropriate and colonize the cultures depicted, thus marking a forceful rupture with the objectifying tendency in traditional regionalist and indigenist literature.³⁸⁴ In fact, Lienhard has suggested that Arguedas's barbed remarks towards "los cortázares" may also be directed at the reader, thus undiplomatically marking "una posible ruptura entre el narrador y su público" and "la imposibilidad de una comunicación total con algunos de sus hipotéticos lectores" (47).³⁸⁵ As I argue in my reading of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, overt hostility and mistrust towards the reader may be felt as a necessary, protective gesture by an author who embraces an ethics of incomplete disclosure out of fear of violating his subaltern subjects in the act of exposing them.

In Arguedas's case, however, I want to emphasize the possibility that the text may selectively bar only "algunos de sus hipotéticos lectores." In a world where the stark divisions between the *sierras* and the *costa* have begun to erode, it is increasingly difficult to locate the reader in one or the other of these camps, and *Los zorros* complicates our ability to confidently assert who compose its intended audience. Lienhard has noted the prevalence of the third-person plural in the *diario* sections, which suggests a collective voice and a possible a solidarity between narrator and an *indigenous* audience (42). Rowe celebrates the text for the way it "projects or anticipates a new bicultural reader," a future Peruvian subject who embraces her indigenous heritage from within the dominant, lettered culture ("Reading" 283). Without fully excluding such hopeful projections for the future, Arguedas must nevertheless reconcile himself to the fact that the majority of his readers in his lifetime have been coastal elites who it seems cannot and must not have full access to the indigenous world he seeks to honor.

I am interested in the possibility, gestured towards by Chalena Vásquez, that the much-discussed musicality of the text (see Rama and Rowe in particular) may provide an opportunity for certain readers to participate bodily in the text, thus gaining intimate access denied to other readers.³⁸⁶ Vásquez notes that in spite of the overwhelming aurality of the text – the many songs, conversations, and mute sounds reproduced – the reader cannot actually hear the language on the page; the reader's ability to be moved by the text thus depends on her individual response to the auditory landscapes conjured. Each reader's response will be different, Vásquez argues, based on what the individual's auditory memory allows her to "hear" of the text: "Cada lector tiene, a su vez, en su memoria auditiva, su propio mundo sonoro, que le sirve como referencia para la interpretación" (Vásquez 300).³⁸⁷

We might extrapolate that those readers familiar with Quechua music and speech patterns and with the mute sounds of nature in the Andes will be able to meaningfully hear far more than those who are not. As Arguedas writes of the Andean waterfalls in the *First Diary*, "Ellas

³⁸⁴ As Doris Sommer has argued in her reading of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* [. . .], even *testimonio* literature co-authored by subaltern subjects can display such resistance to fully disclosing its secrets to the audience. Sommer argues that rebuffing the reader in pursuit of intimate knowledge of the other is itself politically significant work.

³⁸⁵ "a possible rupture between the narrator and his public" "the impossibility of total communication with some of his hypothetical readers."

³⁸⁶ Such a somatic experience of reading, especially when used to evoke the natural world, argues Francine Masiello, offers a form of ethical encounter with otherness that is outside of and thereby potentially critical of dominant political and market forces. Whereas Masiello sees poetry as offering bodily experience of its rhythms, echoes, and silences to potentially any reader, however, Vásquez emphasizes the silences and moments of linguistic opacity in Arguedas's text that can be filled and deciphered only by readers whose bodies already contain aural memories that will resonate with the language on the page.

³⁸⁷ "Each reader has her own auditory memory, her own sonic world, which serves as her reference for interpretation."

retratan el mundo para *los que sabemos cantar en quechua*; podríamos quedarnos eternamente oyéndolas” (emphasis mine, 16).³⁸⁸ The use of the first-person plural here posits a community for whom the sounds of Andean life are always accessible and legible, offering the reader the opportunity to identify with this community but also subtly reminding those of us who do not know how to sing in Quechua or hear a landscape in a waterfall that we are barred from this community and the embodied knowledge it shares.

Arguedas has frequently been compared to a modern-day Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, owing to his role as a bicultural subject whose writings on Indian culture have served as guide and translator for a non-indigenous readership. Based on the points made by Lienhard and Vásquez, however, I would argue that the two Peruvian authors, separated by almost four centuries, are united as much by the subtle resistance their texts mount to the foreign or *criollo* reader as by the access to the indigenous world that they provide. In both cases, it is the impenetrability of the Indian oral tradition by non-indigenous ears that erects the greatest barrier to the reader’s access. As Estelle Tarica has argued, this is a barrier that both men are invested in diminishing through acts of translation in order that Indian culture might be better understood, valued, and preserved within the culture of the colonizer, but, I would add, neither author ignores the protective function of this barrier in a colonial context.

Like Arguedas, Garcilaso learned Quechua as a child, absorbing the language orally through his interactions with family and community and learned Spanish, along with written language, only later in life. In his *Comentarios reales*, Garcilaso’s refrain of, “la lengua que mamé en la leche” expresses the embodied nature of his relationship to his maternal language. Though generally diplomatic in his critiques of the Spanish colonizers, Garcilaso is hardly delicate in his repeated assertions that the inability or unwillingness of the Spanish conquistadors and historians alike to master the Quechua language has resulted in incomplete and in many ways distorted understanding of the Inca people. Garcilaso stresses the privileged position he is in as a bilingual, bicultural subject to correct these misunderstandings, which is the explicit objective of the *Comentarios*.

Tarica points to similarities in the reception of the boundary-crossing work of Garcilaso and Arguedas as well as a shared “desire that literature preserve something threatened with extinction” (81). Breaking with the positivism of traditional ethnography Garcilaso and Arguedas both posit a utopian hope that Indian culture can be documented and preserved within modernity without being objectified, colonized, or ossified as archaic relic: “The possibility of penetration without violence and of intimate knowledge without power, in short, of ethnography without its colonizing function; the possibility of political-economic integration – modernization—without its soul-destroying component . . .” (82). Both authors embody this possibility in their bilingualism and the fluidity of their cultural identities; the bicultural writer becomes a “vínculo vivo” between the two worlds. Tarica argues that in both cases, however, successfully bridging the two cultures amounts to a difficult, if not impossible, feat of translation, and, specifically, translation from an oral language where sound and meaning are thoroughly integrated, to a written language where meaning resides in abstractions as much as in embodied enunciations (99). The struggle to communicate the aural and musicality of the Quechua-speaking world onto the page is a central preoccupation for Garcilaso as well as for Arguedas.

Garcilaso sees the ignorance and subsequent fallibility of the Spanish historians as residing specifically in their inability to grasp aural characteristics of the Quechua language; the

³⁸⁸ “They portray the world for *those of us who know how to sing in Quechua*; we could go on listening to them forever” (11).

variable meanings that one word can have depending on its pronunciation easily evade a listener from a graphocentric culture where the sound of the spoken word may be treated as incidental to its meaning: “En lo que se ha dicho se ve largamente cuánto ignoran los españoles los secretos de aquella lengua [. . .]” (80).³⁸⁹ To what degree Garcilaso is willing and able to grant his readers access to these secrets remains ambiguous. On the one hand, unlocking such secrets is what his text claims to offer its European readership; on the other hand, many secrets, especially those related to the subtleties of Quechua pronunciation, escape the page. The impossibility of providing complete access to an oral culture through writing becomes apparent in Garcilaso’s explications of Quechua words. Garcilaso alludes to his methodology in his “*Advertencias acerca de la lengua general de los indios*.” Part warning, part pronunciation guide, part disingenuous apology for his use of Quechua words, this note serves to prepare the reader for an encounter with the language of the other. Even as he linguistically equips his reader to follow him, however, Garcilaso warns of the overwhelming challenge he sets:

La primera [advertencia] sea que tiene tres maneras diversas para pronunciar algunas sílabas, muy diferentes de como las pronuncia la lengua española, en las cuales pronunciaciones consisten las diferentes significaciones de un mismo vocablo: que unas sílabas se pronuncian en los labios, otras en el paladar, otras en lo interior de la garganta [. . .](5)³⁹⁰

Anyone who has ever grappled a foreign language knows what a bodily experience it is to try to reproduce alien sounds with one’s mouth. The impossibility of teaching such a skill in writing ought to make us read Garcilaso’s *advertencia* as forewarning the reader of the futility of the mission ahead of her. In other words, his copious explanations of Quechua pronunciation do not so much provide access so much as mark the point beyond which the reader cannot follow him.

The important difference between Arguedas and Garcilaso is that the former writes in and for a world where there could conceivably be bilingual readers among his audience.³⁹¹ As such, the Quechua words, songs, and even the mute sounds of the natural world may resonate differently in the ears of readers with first-hand knowledge of Andean culture and landscape. *Los zorros* thus posits the possibility that some of what is lost in translation might yet be recuperated by the right reader, by members of the indigenous *and* mestizo communities who identify as “los que sabemos cantar en Quechua.” Importantly, as we see in the case of Maxwell, “los que sabemos cantar en Quechua” are not limited to those who are racially Indian or even to those who, like Arguedas, happen to have been raised in a Quechua-speaking environment. Arguedas radically upends essentialist notions of identity and authenticity by positing willingness to immerse oneself, linguistically, bodily, spiritually, in a culture as that which allows one to understand a given culture and become an authority on it. We are no longer in a textual world, like Garcilaso’s where it is necessary to assert, “Porque soy indio . . .” in order to position oneself as an expert guide and translator.³⁹²

Moreover, unlike the relatively diplomatic Garcilaso, Arguedas no longer assumes full responsibility for the difficulty the reader who does not identify as such may face in understanding Quechua-based culture. Arguedas points to his own failures, to the inherent

³⁸⁹ “In what has been said, it can be amply seen how ignorant the Spanish are of the secrets of that language.”

³⁹⁰ “The first [advisory] is that there are three diverse ways to pronounce some syllables, very different from how they are pronounced in the Spanish language, in whose pronunciation lie the different meanings of a single word: that some syllables are pronounced on the lips, others on the palate, others in the interior of the throat [. . .]”

³⁹¹ In fact, William Rowe reads *Los zorros* as anticipating such a bi-lingual, bi-cultural audience (“Reading” 283).

³⁹² See José Rabasa’s “Porque soy indio . . .”

challenges of translation, and to inherent limitations of the written word, but he also confronts his reader, more directly and forcefully than in Garcilaso does, with her own ignorance. If you do not know the tunes that accompany the verses reproduced on the page, if you cannot conjure the sound of an Andean waterfall in your “mind’s ear,” if you cannot follow the Spanish language when inflected with Quechua syntax, pronunciation, and cadence – Arguedas’s text seems to say – then you ought to feel the loss of the world that escapes you. Moreover, because the culture, landscape, and language in which we would have to immerse ourselves to gain this embodied knowledge are increasingly endangered, increasingly contaminated by western culture and industry, we have reason to fear this loss is irreversible.

Conclusion: A failed realist novel or an avant-garde success?

Because the *diario* sections encourage us to collapse the biography of the author and the story of the novel’s composition into the narrative of Chimbote, the problem of authorial intentions becomes particularly thorny and seemingly inevitable in *Los zorros*. The narrator of the *diarios* vociferously disavows any affiliation with cosmopolitan avant-garde movements and criticizes “los cortázares” for their masterful yet distant treatment of Latin American reality, suggesting that such practices are socially irresponsible and possibly continuous with colonial ideologies that objectify and exoticize non-Western cultures. He also professes his loyalty to the Quechua-speaking world and, by asking that his acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega be included in *Los zorros*, makes explicit his mission: the writing of works that serve as a “vínculo vivo” between Andean indigenous culture and the rest of the world. Are we to conclude, then, that because the novel remains incomplete and never succeeds in synthesizing the disparate cultural elements of Chimbote into a coherent and fully legible portrait that Arguedas has failed? How are we to make sense of the text’s avant-garde formal features – its self-referentiality, its spatial and temporal fragmentation, its musicality, its emphasis on the materiality of language, and its admission that its referent cannot be transparently represented? Are these signs of failure, or, as Lienhard has argued, unavoidable consequences of the author’s infiltration of the form of the novel with an Andean cosmivision? Might they constitute a strategy of resistance in the face of a potentially appropriative audience or, in spite of the author’s protestations, a genuinely avant-garde stand against mimetic realism?

The narrator of the *diarios* makes clear that he experiences his failure to transmit material reality in words as a dire crisis: this failure amounts to an inability to “trabajar bien” and “luchar bien” and leaves him with nothing to live for (13). Yet he also grants that his maimed may yet be viable, comparing it to “un cuerpo medio ciego y deforme pero que acaso sea capaz de andar” (350). I do not believe it is necessary to question the conviction of this suicidal narrator when he asserts that he has failed in order to grant the success of the resulting text. In other words, though it matters a great deal to Arguedas that he did not succeed in what he set out to accomplish in *Los zorros*, it does not make sense to evaluate the work solely in light of the intentions articulated in the *diarios* sections. Nor is a reading of *Los zorros* as embodying an avant-garde ethos of success-in-failure tantamount to ignoring or abandoning the ethical and political projects Arguedas held dear; to the contrary, the avant-garde form of *Los zorros* is indispensable to its political stance, which includes refusing to betray the secrets of its enigmatic subject matter by laying them bare for easy consumption on the global literary market.

Many critics have struggled to grapple with the avant-garde impulses of the final novel of a writer who disavows avant-garde poetics not just on aesthetic but on political grounds. Some, like Julio Ortega, will insist that the novel is not avant-garde but simply unfinished (2000, xxiii).

Others, like Vargas Llosa, suggest that the discrepancy between *Los zorros* and Arguedas's preceding corpus belies how thoroughly Arguedas has gone off the deep end: "Es una de las peculiaridades de esta novela, que ella colocara, al final de su vida, a un aturo más bien tradicional, desinteresado de la literatura contemporánea [. . .] en el centro mismo de la modernidad literaria e hiciera de él un autor en cierto modo "maldito" ("Entre ideología" 7).³⁹³ As I have elsewhere emphasized, though Vargas Llosa's characterization of Arguedas as traditional and uninterested in contemporary literature is likely inaccurate and biased, it is, nevertheless, an image that Arguedas embraced.

Ángel Rama will agree that Arguedas not influenced by foreign models or even other Peruvian *vanguardistas*, but he grants his work a "vanguardista spirit: futurity" (*Writing Across Cultures* 141). According to Rama, the new transculturated regionalism exemplified by Arguedas responds to universal-modernist trends like stream of consciousness and fragmentation with formal innovations with roots in local traditions and cultural forms. Rama cites the oral monologue in *Grande sertão: veredas* and the "scattered discourses" of *Pedro Páramo*, of which Rama claims: "Both of these solutions arose from reclaiming oral and popular narrative structures" (ibid 27). Yet, it is important to point out that, much like Guimarães Rosa, Arguedas does not *just* draw on language and forms culled from the autochthonous cultures represented. In addition to weaving myth, oral tradition, and folk songs into the form of the novel, Arguedas engages with Western cultural forms. Rama himself argues that *Los ríos profundos* is operatic, and opera, no less than the novel, is the invention of imperial cultures.³⁹⁴ Moreover, Arguedas includes in *Los zorros* distinctly modern, if not to say modernist tropes and techniques, such as industrial technology and cinematic montage. Alexandra Hibbett notes the prominence of machines in *Los zorros*, arguing that Arguedas removes machinery from its familiar context so that it ceases to signify modernity and progress; no longer an instrument of capitalism, the machine in the fishmeal factory is presented as a strange and seemingly-living being. Arguedas's treatment of the rhythmic, dance-like motions of industrial machinery have also been linked to Vertov's industrial montages (Lienhard 140).

In fact, as William Rowe and Martin Lienhard both point out, we can trace in *Los zorros* a formal aversion to synthesis that might be called cinematographic, particularly evocative of Eisenstein's "paisajes musicales" (Lienhard 162). Because Arguedas depicts Chimbote as a world that cannot be summed up or synthesized into a single image, montage-like sequences are best suited to weave together disparate scenes, languages, and narrative levels (Rowe *Essays* 136). Rowe argues that in order to construct Chimbote in this fragmented form, Arguedas had to have learned from the most avant-garde techniques of visual representation like collage, montage, and cubism (ibid). For his part, Lienhard ultimately sees dialog between many different discourses as a form of montage, which he argues belies the modernity of the novel:

La pretendida 'incapacidad narrativa' de Arguedas, vista desde otro ángulo, bien se parece a una estrategia narrativa no tradicional que se podría llama 'cinematográfica' [. .

³⁹³ "One of the peculiarities of this novel is that it situates a rather traditional author, uninterested in contemporary literature, at the end of his life, [. . .] in the very center of literary modernity and makes of him in a certain way an "poète maudit."

³⁹⁴ Rama Describes *Los ríos* as having a "swelling orchestral movement" which sometimes bursts into song and as an "operatic score" (*Writing Across Cultures* 177-178). He argues that such a return to musical and poetic, rather than narrative, organization combats a "trend in bourgeois society" "to abandon poetry in favor of prose, abandon the lyrical world in favor of realist and psychological worlds, and replace orality with writing" (178). Nevertheless, Rama also reminds us operas are still narratives (189). The claim that opera is a less bourgeois form than the novel may be hard to sustain.

.] exige una lectura prácticamente sincrónica de las secuencias forzosamente yuxtapuestas. En la producción cinematográfica, la rapidez del montaje puede crear la ilusión de la contemporaneidad. (171)

While engagement with the visual media is often interpreted as a form of modernist aspiration – in effect, as citing the European avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century – doing so from within a written text can also serve to lay bare the epistemological and ethical challenges faced by an author struggling to translate the alterity of material and oral culture into written language. As I argue in my chapter on James Agee as well, there is a fine line between berating oneself for “failing” to adequately represent one’s subject matter and decrying the limitations of one’s medium. Moreover, as we have seen in the case of Agee, performing the failure of the written medium is in itself a project of political significance.

Agee longs in vain that he could “do no writing at all here” and represent his rural subjects instead with “fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” (10). As Stephen Gruber observes, Arguedas praises Juan Rulfo for loading language with material reality – “de ceniza, de piedra, de agua, de pudrición violenta por parir y cantar” – and laments that he himself has failed to “transmitir a la palabra la materia de las cosas” (Gruber 384, Arguedas 18,13). The dialog of the foxes at the end of Chapter I provides some clues as to why Arguedas finds language to be an inadequate medium for the kind of knowledge and communication towards which he aspires:

EL ZORRO DE ABAJO: ¿Entiendes bien lo que digo y cuento?

EL ZORRO DE ARRIBA: Confundes un poco las cosas.

EL ZORRO DE ABAJO: Así es. La palabra, pues, tiene que desmenuzar el mundo. El canto de los patos negros que nadan en los lagos de altura, helados, donde se empoza la nieve derretida, ese canto repercute en los abismos de roca, se hunde en ellos se arrastra en las punas, hace bailar a las flores de las yerbas duras que se esconden bajo el *ichu*, ¿no es cierto?

EL ZORRO DE ARRIBA: Sí, el canto de esos patos es grueso, como de ave grande; el silencio y la sombra de las montañas lo convierte en música que se hunde en cuanto hay.

EL ZORRO DE ABAJO: La palabra es más precisa y por eso puede confundir. El canto del pato de altura nos hace entender todo el ánimo del mundo. (71)³⁹⁵

As Rowe argues, this passage draws a contrast between the holistic “conocer mediante la naturaleza” represented by the song of the black ducks and “el lenguaje verbal,” which has to “desmenuzar o dismantlar la realidad para examinarla y entenderla” (“El nuevo lenguaje” 199).³⁹⁶ Whereas the former is “grueso” and all-encompassing, the latter lacks the magical capacity of song to capture all of a landscape in sound precisely because it is “más preciso.”

³⁹⁵ “THE FOX FROM DOWN BELOW: Do you fully understand what I say and tell you?/ THE FOX FROM UP ABOVE: You mix things up a bit. / THE FOX FROM DOWN BELOW: That’s the way it is. Well, then, the word must shatter the world. The song of the black ducks that swim in icy highland lakes where melted snow is collected – that song re-echoes from the rocky abysses, and sinks down into them; it’s swept over the bleak high country, making the flowers of the tough herbs hidden under the *ichu* dance, right?/ THE FOX FROM UP ABOVE: Yes, the song of those ducks is deep-toned, like a large fowl’s; the mountain’s silence and shadow transforms it into music that sinks down into everything there is./ THE FOX FROM DOWN BELOW: The word is more precise, and that’s why it can be confusing. The highland duck’s song makes the whole spirit of the world understandable to us” (52-53).

³⁹⁶ “a knowledge mediated by nature”; “verbal language”; “scrutinize and dismantle reality to examine it and understand it.”

Importantly, the song of the ducks is able to inarticulately express the “ánimo del mundo” because it sonorically interacts with the physical landscape and with its negative spaces in particular: “ese canto repercute en los abismos de roca, se hunde en ellos se arrastra en las punas, hace bailar a las flores de las yerbas duras que se esconden bajo el *icho*.” It is by virtue of resounding in the hollows of rocks and grazing the flatlands like wind that this song penetrates and achieves its resonance with the living landscape. Though Arguedas laments that language cannot achieve this ideal of non-verbal communication, he nevertheless attempts to formally emulate the song of the ducks by writing negative spaces and fissures into his text. As Cornejo Polar argues, it is precisely because words are inadequate that silences become integral to the text (20). Cornejo Polar points specifically to the yet-unwritten episodes alluded to in the last diary as negative spaces for the reader to fill in: “Profundos pozos cuyo sentido es una pura posibilidad, una disponibilidad atrozante que sólo niega una opción: la de dejar, sin cubrir con significado ese vacío” (20-21).³⁹⁷ We might also identify the numerous disjunctures between story lines, perspectives, discursive levels, and languages as potential negative spaces in which the voices conjured in *Los zorros* might resonate and thus approximate the inarticulate song of the land that Arguedas laments cannot be captured in language.

I want to end by examining a frequently cited passage from the first *diario* that contains one of Arguedas’s most beautiful gestures to an outside of language. After announcing his decision to kill himself, the narrator details his plans to spend his last days among animals on the streets of San Miguel and recalls a particularly intimate moment he once shared with a pig:

...logré rascar la cabeza de un *nionena* (chanchó) algo grande, en San Miguel de Obrajillo. Medio que quiso huir, pero la dicha de la rascada lo hizo detenerse: empezó a gruñir con delicia, luego (¡cuánto me cuesta encontrar los términos necesarios!) se derrumbó a pocos y, ya echado y con los ojos cerrados, gemía dulcemente. La alta, la altísima cascada que baja desde la inalcanzable cumbre de rocas, cantaba en el gemido de ese *nionena*, en sus cerdas duras que se convirtieron en suaves; y el sol tibio que había caldeado las piedras, mi mecho, cada hoja de los árboles y arbustos, caldeando de plenitud, de hermosura incluso el rostro anguloso y energético de mi mujer, ese sol estaba mejor que en ninguna parte en el lenguaje del *nionena*, en su sueño delicioso. (15-16)³⁹⁸

The delighted squeals of the pig conjure an entire Andean landscape, complete with waterfalls and sunshine that seems to redeem all that it touches. As the narrator goes on, he elaborates on this landscape, generalizing it as the landscape of all of Peru and emphasizing its precipitous verticality, its life-giving potential, and the way that all of this can be painted through inarticulate natural sounds:

Las cascadas de agua del Perú, como las de San Miguel, que resbalan sobre abismos, centenas de metros en salto casi perpendicular, y regando andenes donde florecen plantas alimenticias, alentarán en mis ojos instantes antes de morir. Ellas retratan el

³⁹⁷ “Deep wells whose meaning is pure possibility, a gripping availability that only denies one option: that of leaving this empty space uncovered with meaning.”

³⁹⁸ “[...] I got to scratch the head of a rather large *nionena* (pig) in San Miguel de Obrajillo. He sort of wanted to run away but the joy of being scratched made him tarry; he began to grunt with delight, then (how hard it is for me to find the necessary terms!) he collapsed little by little shortly afterward and, once he was stretched out with his eyes shut, moaned sweetly. The high, extremely high waterfall that flows down off the unreachable rocky peak was singing in the deep tone of that *nionena*, in his stiff bristles, which softened; and the sunshine that had heated the stones, my chest, and each leaf on the trees and bushes, warming with plenitude and beauty even my wife’s angular and forceful features – that sun was more present in the *nionena*’s language, in his delicious slumber, than anywhere else” (10-11).

mundo para los que sabemos cantar en quechua; podríamos quedarnos eternamente oyéndolas; ellas existen por causa de esas montañas escarpadísimas que se ordenan caprichosamente en quebradas tan hondas como la muerte y nunca más fieras de vida; falderíos bravos en que el hombre ha sembrado, ha fabricado chacras con sus dedos y sus sesos y ha plantado árboles que se estiran al cielo desde los precipicios, se estiran con transparencia. (16)³⁹⁹

Las cascadas that epitomize the verticality of this landscape appeal to the ears as much as to the eyes, and Arguedas grants their sound the capacity to “retratar el mundo” through song, “para los que sabemos cantar en quechua.” While the waterfalls are a beautiful reminder of the dangerous verticality of this landscape – they could not exist without *precipicios* and *abismos* – the *lloqlla* or landslide serves as a more ominous reminder of how the vertical extremes that physically, socially, and economically stratify Chimbote always contain the latent threat of ruin.

Whereas the avalanche-like collapse of *serrano* culture onto the coast is perceived by *criollos* like don Ángel as an invasion or as a stain marring the social landscape, Arguedas also figures it as a tragic fall of a noble culture, as Indians raised in the *campo* succumb to the vices of the city. Don Ángel, alludes to this tragedy in the simile he uses to describe the degradation of Chimbote’s iconic pelicans: the beautiful *alcatraces* have been reduced to sick, trash-eating scavengers, “como a incas convertidos en mendigos sin esperanzas” (135). What cannot be seen from the sociological overview provided by don Ángel, however, is that the *cholos*, fishermen, prostitutes, and even the sick and “crazy” beggars who populate Arguedas’s Chimbote are not without hope. Though they may live in a fallen and continuously falling world where nature has been defiled, promises broken, and the streets paved with trash, even the most destitute, like Antolín Crispín, the blind street musician whose songs have the power to enchant Chimbote with the magic of the Andes, cannot be called “mendigos sin esperanza.” Their world, which we can come to know only by immersing ourselves in it, by listening to the buzz of conversations and the melodies of songs, by following the circumambulations of street preachers and men visiting brothels, by traversing its streets and losing our footing in the sand, is a vibrant community where people look out for one another and find new ways of keeping old traditions alive. These glimmers of hope constitute the “movimiento ascensional” that José Luis Rouillón’s reading attempts to trace in *Los zorros*.⁴⁰⁰

I too am interested in the possibility, tenuously offered by these lines, that, for those who know how to listen to this music, this landscape may yet be redeemed. Significantly, those who know how to sing in Quechua in *Los zorros* are not just the Indians but also foreigners like Maxwell, who accompanies Antolín Crispín with the *charango*. The learnability not only of the musical culture of the Andes, but of the mode of intimate, enchanted *conocimiento* for which it

³⁹⁹ “The waterfalls of Peru, like those of San Miguel, where waters slide down into abysses hundreds of feet deep, dropping almost perpendicularly and irrigating terraces where food plants flower, will comfort my eyes moments before dying. They portray the world for those of us who know how to sing in Quechua; we could go on listening to them forever; they exist because of those sheer mountains, capriciously arranged into gorges deep as death and more fiercely alive than ever’ wild mountain slopes where with his fingers and his brains man has contrived fields to till, has sown crops, and has planted trees that stretch skyward from the cliffs, stretching transparently” (11).

⁴⁰⁰ Rouillón writes: “He intentado a través de estas páginas regir el movimiento ascensional que impulsa el relato de los Zorros, como una corriente subterránea más poderosa que todas las frustraciones, todas las ‘llocllas’ que caen sobre Chimbote y Arguedas” (353). “I have tried through these pages to channel the ascensional movement that propels the story of los Zorros, like an underground current more powerful than all of the frustrations, all of the ‘llocllas’ that fall on Chimbote and Arguedas.” He points to human friendship, unconditional love, and the excerpt from St. Paul’s letter that Cardozo reads before falling asleep at the end of the novel as infusing the novel with a redemptive tone that draws on the tenants of both Christianity and Andean mythology (353-356).

stands, emerges as one of the most hopeful possibilities offered in the novel. We might extrapolate that we, too, as readers, may learn to perceive the smoke and the trees rising to the sky as counteracting the downward tumbling of waterfalls and *lloqllas* that are endemic to this landscape. The hope offered in *Los zorros*, like the landscapes it conjures and the cohesion of its discourse, feels precarious and far from assured of its own tenability, but I do think it is there if we can learn how to – perhaps not look for it – “but listen to it.

Coda Let the Bedbugs Bite

As we have seen, the anguish expressed in the *diarios* of *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* closely resembles that expressed by James Agee in the metatextual reflections included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Both men lament the impossibility of representing the world about which they have chosen to write without inflicting further harm on it, and both men long for a form of representation less violent than that offered by language. Agee famously expresses his wish that he could use no writing at all and furnish the reader instead with images, smells, and material objects.⁴⁰¹ Arguedas, for his part, experiences apprehension at the prospect of representing Chimbote because his knowledge of it is not deeply embodied enough: he has only encountered the city as an adult, as opposed to having grown up immersed in its sensorial reality. He describes feeling paralyzed by:

el miedo de tener que escribir sobre lo que se conoce sólo a través del temor y la alegría adultos, y no en el zumbar de la mosca que uno percibe apenas el oído se forma, a través del morder conviviente del piojo en el cuero cabelludo y en la barriga, en las millones de mordeduras a la raíz y a las ramas todavía tiernas de la suerte, que te dan hombres y ríos, grillos y autoridades hambrientas. (116-117)⁴⁰²

Through the humble images of cohabitating with insects, Arguedas describes a child-like perception that is not only more attuned to sensorial experiences like the buzzing of a fly and the pinch of a bug-bite, but that also feels the surrounding world – its landscape, its suffering, its social structures – as if these too were perforations of tender skin. Now charged with representing a world where he perceives himself to be an outsider, Arguedas fears he cannot meet the challenge of recapturing this child-like sensitivity and vulnerability and transmitting it through the written word. In other words, he, much like James Agee, fears he cannot complete his representational project in accordance with his own ethics, which, in Arguedas's case, require him to depict local life, “de adentro.”

Interestingly, Agee offers bed-bug and lice-bitten skin as the ultimate measure of intimate inhabitation towards which an outsider might aspire. Agee's induction into the world of the tenant farmers is consummated the first night he stays under their roof, a sleepless night that he spends sensually taking in his surroundings and trying in vain to protect himself from the bites of the insects who share his bed:

The pillow was hard, thin, and noisy, and smelled as of acid and new blood; the pillowcase seemed to crawl at my cheek. I touched it with my lips: it felt a little as if it would thaw like spun candy. There was an odor of something like that of old moist stacks of newspaper. I tried to imagine intercourse in this bed; I managed to imagine it fairly well. I began to feel sharp little piercings and crawlings all along the surface of my body. I was not surprised; I had heard that pine is full of them anyhow. Then, too, for a while longer I thought it could be my own nerve-ends; I itch a good deal at best: but it was bugs

⁴⁰¹ In his Preamble, Agee writes: “If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement [. . .] A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point” (10).

⁴⁰² “the fear of having to write about what one is familiar with only through adult dread and joy, instead of through the buzzing of a fly perceived when the ear was barely formed, or through the cohabitant biting of the louse on one's hairy scalp and on one's belly, and through millions of bites on the still tender root and branch of one's fate that men and rivers, handcuffs and hungry officials give you” (85).

all right. I felt places growing on me and scratched at them, and they became unmistakable bedbug bites. I lay a while rolling and tightening against each new point of irritation [. . .] I struck a match and a half-dozen broke along my pillow: I caught two, killed them, and smelled their queer rankness. They were full of my blood. I struck another match and spread back the cover; they rambled off by dozens. I got out of bed, lighted the lamp, and scraped the palms of my hands all over my body, then went for the bed. I killed maybe a dozen in all; I couldn't find the rest; but I did find fleas, and, along the seams of the pillow and mattress, small gray translucent brittle insects which I suppose were lice. (374-375).

Agee's sensorial exploration of his surroundings gives way to sexual fantasy, which in turn gives way to obsessive focus on the insects with which he finds himself intimately cohabitating. In fact, the presence of these bugs and Agee's bizarrely sensual if grotesque exploration of their interaction with his body eclipses the narration of his sexual fantasy, chastening the scene. This extremely intimate if not glamorous form of bodily participation in the environment is narrated with a mixture of disgust and awe. Vermin-infested sheets are a novelty for Agee, and the mix of longing and squeamishness that mark him as an outsider in the world of the tenant farmers is never more apparent than in his midnight battle with the bedbugs.

In contrast, Arguedas laments the irrecoverability the mode of experience represented by such bites: his incapacity to write of Chimbote with the deep familiarity and sensitivity with which the skin records an insect bite leads him to suicidal thoughts. He values having been bitten by lice as his truest credential; it is what marks him as an insider to the provincial worlds about which he writes. His history of bodily integration with the environment, rather than his parentage, race, or social class, is what bestows his account with authenticity. In fact, addressing himself to Guimarães Rosa in the first *diario*, Arguedas emphasizes lice-bitten skin, over intellectual formation, literary style, or ideological position as that which makes one a provincial writer:

Así somos los escritores de provincias, éstos que de haber sido comidos por los piojos, llegamos a entender a Shakespeare, a Rimbaud, a Poe, a Quevedo, pero no el *Ulises*. ¿Cómo? Dispénenme. En esto de escribir del modo como lo hago ahora ¿somos distintos los que fuimos pasto de los piojos en San Juan de Lucanas y el "Sexto", distintos de Lezama Lima o Vargas Llosa? No somos diferentes en lo que estaba pensando al hablar de 'provincianos.' Todos somos provincianos, don Julio (Cortázar). (34-35)⁴⁰³

In this passage, Arguedas channels Guimarães Rosa as interlocutor, fellow 'provinciano,' and muse: the one-sided dialogue – complete with questions and apologies that imply the interruptions and objections of an unheard interlocutor – recalls the unique narrative structure of *Grande sertão: veredas*. Moreover, this passage evidences what I have argued is the most abiding lesson Arguedas learns from Rosa: that not all contradictions need to be resolved. Rosa is famous for his paradoxical assertions – “tudo é e não é” – which confound rational explanation and reject dialectical synthesis in favor of preserving the difference, the fundamental non-identity yet persistent existence of multiple, seemingly irreconcilable positions: the devil does and does not exist; Riobaldo is and is not a war criminal; Diadorim is and is not a woman, etc..

⁴⁰³ That's how we provincial writers are – those of us who, after having been eaten by lice, finally come to understand Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Poe, and Quevedo, but not *Ulysses*. How's that? Pardon me. In this matter of writing the way I am doing it right now, how do those of us who were lice fodder in San Juan de Lucanas and in El Sexto Prison differ from Lezama Lima and Vargas Llosa? We're no different with respect to what I was thinking when I was talking about 'provincials.' We are all provincials, Don Julio (Cortázar)" (24-25).

Arguedas's Chimbote, in which the world from up above and the world from down below do not merge nor cancel each other out but, rather, coexist in the same place and time, embodies such paradoxes.⁴⁰⁴

The passage cited above is similarly rife with contradiction: provincial writers both are and are not fundamentally different from "los cortázares." Throughout the diaries Arguedas suggests a number of grounds on which such a distinction might be upheld: the former are not professional writers whereas the latter are; the former write from within the worlds they represent and the latter represent from without; the former prize authenticity of experience whereas the latter prize technical sophistication; the former have been bitten by provincial lice whereas the latter have not, etc. Yet Arguedas's assertion here that "todos somos provincianos" belies the untenability of most of these claims to difference. The claim to not understand Joyce is particularly perplexing since Guimarães Rosa has often been likened to a Brazilian Joyce, and the formal difficulty of *Ulysses* is a difficulty grounded in the vernacular and is often read as embodying a form of provincial resistance.⁴⁰⁵ If it is the worldliness and technical sophistication of "los cortázares" and the Joyces of the world from which Arguedas wishes to distance himself and his fellow provincial writers, then the choice to do so in a passage that draws attention to his indebtedness to the famously erudite and intricate work of Guimarães Rosa would seem to undermine this endeavor.

Ultimately, Arguedas's attempts to schematically divide the literary world into professional and non-professional writers proves as futile as maintaining the distinction between above and below; the narrator must confront a world that is, in the words of Riobaldo, "muito misturado." Nothing proves this more than the unclassifiable form *Los zorros* takes: not fully autobiographical nor fictional, not fully "primitive" nor "creative" (in Vargas Llosa's schema), not fully realist nor avant-garde, not fully regionalist nor of the 'boom.' In slipping deftly between such categories as the foxes do between worlds and discourses, the novel succeeds in inscribing the urgency of a cultural crises (the loss of traditional ways of life) and a political crisis (the impasse at which the committed intellectual finds himself at this historical juncture) in the formal crisis of the text.

Interestingly, though the comparison is rarely drawn between the two authors, Juan José Saer is lauded for much the same accomplishment. Both *Los zorros* and the Saer's roughly contemporaneous *El limonero real* grapple with the high stakes of failure if the particularity of local culture proves illegible to the novel, even as they appear to court this very failure. Both texts take us to the very edge of a crisis of representation, yet both texts finally prove readable (in the sense that they are read if not in the sense of being fully legible and decipherable). Both ultimately turn the problems of transmitting such ways of life into a literary aesthetic with the potential to educate the reader in how to attend to the temporality of rural life.

In the case of *El limonero real*, my reading finds in the concept of more-than-looking, hope that experience may yet be transmissible, if we have the patience and fortitude to experience it *in time*. Yet, Saer does not guarantee nor promise that transmissibility will be secured; as we see, the endeavor remains precarious, in part because few have the time and endurance for this arduous process, and in part because political and personal circumstances may make us unwilling or unable to engage in recollecting and retelling the past. Additionally, what

⁴⁰⁴ This is essentially a description of Cornejo Polar's notion of heterogeneity, as opposed to Rama's transculturation.

⁴⁰⁵ Martin Lienhard notes that Juan Rulfo, another of Arguedas's interlocutors and literary heroes has also been compared to Joyce (67).

might yet be transmitted in *El limonero real* is not a whole and intelligible story but a sense of day-in-day-out familiarity that remains largely mute. Saer knows too well that to force this experiential *conocimiento* to narrate and to signify would be a betrayal of the local knowledge he seeks to impart. Much as in the case of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, what we gain by reading and re-reading *El limonero real* is decidedly not psychological intimacy nor access to Wenceslao's interiority; instead it is familiarity with the rhythms of his world, the day-in-day out existence that is the real.

Experiencing this reality requires experiencing its temporality, which is a scintillating, twilight temporality of a world that is on the verge of no longer being. *El limonero real* does not simply impart a vision of a rural world in ruins; it imparts a sense that the world is changing invisibly before our eyes, a sense that the visible present is always already crumbling into the future, a sense that tragedies we cannot fully discern lurk in plain site. Similar to what we have seen in *Grande sertão: veredas*, narrating from within the immanent experience of a suspended present does not fully isolate nor protect the moment from the diachronic flow of time; to the contrary, every present moment opens out to the remembrance of things past and the latent presence of things to come. Even in the visible state of suspension that can be achieved through description in literature and art, the present moment always contains the movement towards its future dispersal.

Importantly, then, the rural places and traditional community formations we encounter in all four of these texts are not presented as relics of the past to be recuperated nostalgically but, rather, as parts of our world that are vanishing *in the now*. The cost of insisting on the within-time-ness of the rural is thus that one renounces the desire to capture and immortalize a dying way of life in literary representation. If, as Sontag remarks, the tourist's camera both "loots and preserves" (*On Photography* 64), these representations of the region renounce their ability to preserve when they disavow the instrumental, representational, verisimilar language that makes prose a tool of positivistic representation. In their insistence on inscribing rural life in time and rendering it elusive to visual apprehension, in language whose ability to signify, to narrate, to bind meaning together seems always on the brink of disintegration, these works express through their form a crisis of communicability of experience wherein transmission between individuals, between generations, between cultures, and between media (i.e. the oral to the written) is by no means secured.

But where does this crisis leave us? *Los zorros* marks the end of the road for Arguedas. Saer, in contrast, follows *El limonero real* with a prolific career; most of his subsequent novels are, in fact, far more readable than *El limonero real*, which marks the peak of his most experimental phase. Critics such as Florencia Garramuño have identified in Saer's work a "coming back from the brink," that coincides with the end of Argentina's military dictatorship in the early 1980's. Around this time, somewhere between *Nadie nada nunca* (1980) and *El entenado* (1983), Saer ceases to obsessively describe opaque surfaces and reintroduces narrative as a structuring principle in his fiction. This renewed willingness to write novels that *tell a story* – rather than leaving it to be gleaned from in between descriptive passages – certainly signals an important turn in Saer's career. Nevertheless, we might also learn something of Saer's navigation of this crisis of representation from an earlier moment of "coming back from the brink" that occurs within *El limonero real*. In the middle of the novel, we arrive at a precipice of sorts, a black box on the page that is not only illegible but renders the page hostile to language: the page becomes a surface on which it is futile to write. Yet Saer does not end with this impossibility. Like *Grande sertão: veredas*, which declares it has exhausted itself by the half-way point and

“could stop here,” *El limonero real* nevertheless moves beyond this moment of narrative stalling. Saer’s technique for moving on from this breakdown of the connection between words and meaning is to go all the way back to the beginning of time and of language in order to reinvent narrative in a different voice (the first-person, the unlettered voice of a peasant) and in a different mode (that of myth and oral storytelling) than we have previously seen in this novel.

This gesture of returning to the mythic and to the autochthonous as a way of restoring the connection between words and things is precisely what Arguedas reveals as impossible in *Los zorros*.⁴⁰⁶ This defeat will prove crushing to Arguedas, who understands such a re-enchantment of language as the only way to redeem his rent world and his own role in it as a writer. Importantly, *El limonero real* does not ultimately succeed in recuperating the autochthonous and the oneiric either. The accretion of different discourses (myth, religious fable, objectivist description, oral story-telling) calls into question the primacy and authority of any one of these discourses. Even the point of origins towards which the novel returns is a place of proliferation and doubt: the world comes into being iteratively – “Y aparece después otra islita, y después otra, y otra, y otra. Siempre la misma islita [. . .]” (149) – rather than through a decisive narrative event.

The way out of the crisis of representation, then, does not lie in returning to a moment of fully restored connection between words and things, but, rather, in the regressive gesture itself. The looping return to the past brings movement and life back into forms that seem to be dead – much the way Riobaldo brings Diadorim back to life through recursive movement of his narration which refuses to abandon the past to the past: “De volta, de volta. Como se tudo revendo, refazendo” (617). As the theorists of Critical Regionalism remind us, this regressive gesture, characteristic of a “rearguard” aesthetic, is by no means retrograde. To the contrary, the texts examined here all suggest that breaking with the past is not the only revolutionary gesture possible; exploring the continuity between past and present can be just as radical.

Returning to the Regional Today

In this spirit, I would like to end by gesturing towards contemporary cultural production that, explicitly or implicitly, continues to dialog with the questions at the forefront of the mid-century literary works we have examined. For instance, the blurring of the line between ethnography and art in Agee and Arguedas anticipates the New Journalism and *testimonio* movements of the 1960’s to the 1980’s as well as the innovative documentary film-making of Eduardo Coutinho, the Sensory Ethnography of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, and the experimental ethnography and hypermedia projects of Professor Sergio Bairon at the Universidade de São Paulo. These projects seek to avoid the pitfalls of traditional *testimonio*, and, for that matter, classical anthropology, through increased self-reflexivity. Rather than effacing their own work of

⁴⁰⁶ Rama emphasizes Arguedas’s faith in language’s ability to link words and things and his immunity to poststructural challenges, writing that Arguedas never doubted the self-evidence of his ability to depict reality (162): “For him – as, at root, for most poets – the word *was* the thing, not merely its meaning represented in a sound” (*Writing Across Cultures* 163). Yet, this faith is precisely what comes into crisis in *Los zorros*. William Rowe reads *Los zorros* as the novel in which Arguedas realizes the futility of this work and recognizes the irredeemable arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. This realization is both liberating and tragic: “Aquí, al final de su trayectoria como escritor, Arguedas llega a descubrir esa distancia entre mundo y lenguaje que los poetas han soñado acortar y esto, paradójicamente quizás, le permite hacer del lenguaje un medio más consciente y más flexible” (“El nuevo lenguaje” 205). “Here, at the end of his trajectory as a writer, Arguedas comes to discover that distance between world and language that poets have dreamed of closing and this, paradoxically perhaps, allows him to make of language a more conscious and flexible medium.”

mediation, these collaborations with indigenous communities foreground the intersubjective experience of *living together* shared by “native informant” and urban intellectual, as well as the temporally protracted process through which they are created.

It seems inevitable that the trajectory I have been following should lead outside of written representation. From the desire to strip language of abstraction and render it concrete, to the pursuit of the fluidity and mutability of oral speech, to the vain desire to trade words in for images and artifacts, to the adoption of cinematographic technique in literature, the works I am examining all yearn to use words on the page to do what they are constitutionally unable to do. It is only logical then that we might seek the afterlife of such projects in film as well as in literature. In 2011, the Pacific Film Archive (PFA) featured a program entitled “First Person Rural: The New Nonfiction.” The series included, among other portraits of rural life shot in the documentary-style, Lisandro Alonso’s *La Libertad* (2001), which follows the daily labor of a lumberjack in the backwoods of Argentina, and Lucien Castaing Taylor’s *Sweetgrass* (2011), which follows a group of Montana shepherds as they lead their flock to summer pasture. By showing primarily banal actions unfolding in real time, these films foreground the sensorial experience of place and the slow, iterative temporality of working life, demanding a new form of engagement from the viewer. As the PFA series attests to, in the decade that separates these two films, the hyperrealist version of new cinema for which Alonso has become famous – characterized by extreme naturalism, long takes, minimal extradiagetic sound, minimal dialogue, use of non-professional actors – has become a phenomena among independent filmmakers concerned with portraying rural life.

Significantly, we might note, Alonso claims that it was Saer’s ability to write five-hundred pages about a single day in *El limonero real* that most influenced his own treatment of time (West 33). Hernán Ronsino, contemporary Argentine writer and author of *La descomposición* (2007), *Glaxo* (2009), and *Lumbre* (2013), is also explicitly indebted to Saer in several respects, including his belief that, for Argentine authors who are not from Buenos Aires, the question of spatial setting is a political one (Bellini). There are particularly strong echoes of Saer in Ronsino’s first novel, *La descomposición*. Ronsino has acknowledged that the language of this novel is greatly indebted to Saer, and the character Bicho Souza makes an (almost) explicit reference to *El limonero real* when he is eating lemons after enjoying an *asado* with the narrator: “Dice que se acuerda siempre de un libro raro que leyó sobre una familia de pescadores y un limonero” (69). A less direct citation of *El limonero real* comes in the form of the novel’s narrative structure: out of the slow and fragmented narration of a single meal – the *asado* the narrator shares with Bicho Souza in celebration of his 60th birthday – unravel sixty years worth of personal memories and local history.

I also believe there is an as-of yet unexplored intertextual connection between Saer the very contemporary fiction of Selva Almada, who has written three novels set in and between the Argentine provinces of El Chaco and Entre Ríos. Her second novel, *Ladrilleros*, employs a recursive narrative structure, which, much like in the cases of Saer and Ronsino, unravels a temporally deep and complex backstory from within the narration of a single present moment: in this case, the scene of a rural fairgrounds abandoned for the night, where the two protagonists, Marciano Miranda and Pajarito Tamai are slowly expiring after a mutually fatal knife fight. In between the refrains, when we return again and again to this fateful scene, the narrative loops through short vignette after short vignette illuminating the relationship between the two young men. Much like in Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande sertão: veredas*, the entire novel revolves – thematically as well as structurally – it repeatedly circles around – the scene of the knife fight.

This circling motion is repeatedly evoked – in opening image of an immobile Ferris wheel, in the whirling bodies of the two youths fighting each other – a scene which we learn has been repeated “muchas veces en todos estos años con pequeñas variantes,” culminating in its last, fatal iteration (226). These are just a few brief examples of the recent explosion of experimental narratives of non-urban life on the Riplatense literary scene, which leads me to believe that we are only now seeing the coming to fruition of a phenomenon seeded by Saer’s innovations with narrative time.

We might also consider the echoes of *Grande sertão: veredas* Brazilian novelist Ronaldo Correia de Brito’s *Galiléia* (2009), which represents the sertão as a heterogeneous time-space where the archaic and mythic coexists with modern technology and modern crises, and in films such as Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra marcada para morrer* (1984) and *O fim e o principio* (2006). Embodying the cyclical temporality of return (the return of the past as it is revisited through storytelling, the return of themes and motifs in a non-linear, “rambling,” and decidedly oral mode of narration, the return of the filmmaker to the sertão to revisit his subjects at different points in time), these films depict a sertão that, rather than being defined by its backwardness, offers caveat to the linear march of history. Coutinho’s sertão documentaries thus achieve the politically radical work of inscribing his peasant-subjects *in the present*, as part of Brazil’s contemporary modernity, without asking them to renounce their ties to the past.

Thus, although Agee, Rosa, Arguedas, and Saer are often seen as singular occurrences, groundbreaking authors difficult to assimilate to any literary genealogy, echoes of their work do continue to reverberate in contemporary literature and film. The above-mentioned authors and filmmakers all turn to formal experimentation, but not to the exclusion of past tradition, to respond to quandaries with which writers from Agee to Saer have long wrestled: How to avoid depicting non-urban life as an atemporal pastoral fantasy and, instead, immerse the audience in the iterative and oftentimes tedious temporality of working life? How to avoid reifying one’s subjects as objects of ethnographic study or aesthetic contemplation and, instead, turn a critical eye on the fraught process of collaboration through which their images and stories are produced?

Works Cited

- Abel, Elizabeth. "Skin, Flesh, and the Affective Wrinkles of Civil Rights Photography." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*. 20.2 (2012): 35-69. *Project Muse*. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- . *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F. N. Jephcott. London and New York: Verso, 2005. Print.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 2007. Print.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Print.
- . *Potentialities*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Agee, James. *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013. Print.
- . *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*. New York: Bantam, 1962. Print.
- . *Selected Poems*. Ed. Andrew Hudgins. New York: The Library of America, 2008. Print.
- Agee, James and Evans, Walker. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Print.
- Almada, Selva. *Ladrilleros*. Buenos Aires: Mardulce, 2014. Print.
- Alonso, Carlos J. *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Print.
- Alpers, Paul. *What is the Pastoral?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.
- Alpers, Svetlana. *The Art of Describing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.
- Allred, Jeff. *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.
- Anitagrace, Joyce. "O Nome Da Filha: Sexualidade, Identidade E O Ato de Narrar Em *Grande Sertão: Veredas*." *Luso-Brazilian Review*. 42.2 (2005): 110-133. *Jstor*. Web. 2 May 2017.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Arce, Rafael. "La imagen novelesca." *Revista Hispánica Moderna*. 66.2 (2013): 109-120. *Project Muse*. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- . "Un enigma familiar: los últimos relatos de Juan José Saer." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*. 37.74 (2011): 111-129. *Jstor*. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- Arguedas, José María. *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 2011. Print.
- . *Los ríos profundos*. Ed. Ricardo González Vigil. Madrid: Cátedra, 2010. Print.
- . *Todas las sangres*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1964. Print.
- . *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*. Trans. Frances Horning Barraclough. Ed. Julio Ortega. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press and Colección Archivos, 2000. Print.
- . *Dioses y hombres de Huarochirí: Narración Quechua recogida por Francisco de Ávila*. Trans. José María Arguedas. Lima: Universidad Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, 2009. Print.
- . *Qepa Wiñaq . . . Siempre: Literatura y antropología*. Ed. Dora Sales. Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2009. Print.
- Arsillo, Vincenzo. "The veredas of time. Dialectics of Time Images in *Grande sertão: veredas*

- by João Guimarães Rosa.” Studies in the Literary Achievements of João Guimarães Rosa, the foremost Brazilian writer of the twentieth century. Ed. David Treece, Ligia Chiappini, and Marcel Vejmelka. New York: Edwin Mellen, 2012. 284-295. Print.
- Azoulay, Ariella. The Civil Contract of Photography. New York: Zone Books, 2008. Print.
- Balderston, Daniel. “El narrador dislocado y desplumado: los deseos de Riobaldo en *Grande Sertão: Veredas*” El deseo, enorme cicatriz luminosa. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2004. 85-101. Print.
- Barros, María José., “Chimbote en El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo de José María Arguedas: entre la sociedad urbana y la sociedad rural.” Aisthesis. 51 (2012):141-157. Web. 8 Oct. 2012.
- Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980. Print.
- . How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces. Trans. Kate Briggs. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- . Writing Degree Zero. Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967. Print.
- Beckman, Ericka. “Unfinished Transitions: The Dialectics of Rural Modernization in Latin American Fiction.” Modernism/ modernity. 23.4 (2016): 813-832. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.
- . “Jorge Isaac’s *María* and the Space-Time of Global Capitalism” Studies in English Literature 1500-1900. 56.3 (2016): 539-559. *Project Muse*. Web. 8 Dec. 2016.
- Bellini, Juan Manuel. “Hernán Ronsino: literatura con antecedentes” La Pulseada 97 (2012). Web. 9 May 2017.
- Benedetti, Mario. El escritor latinoamericano y la revolución posible. Buenos Aires: Editorial Alfa Argentina, 1974. Print.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective. Trans. James Maraniss. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. “The Storyteller” Illuminations. Trans Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 83-109. Print.
- . “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Illuminations. 217-251.
- . “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Illuminations. 253-264.
- . The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Trans. John Osborne. Norfolk: Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd., 1977. Print.
- . “Brief History of Photography.” One-way Street and Other Writings. Trans. J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin Books, 2008. 172-192. Print.
- . “One Way Street.” One-way Street and Other Writings. 46-115.
- Bersani, Leo. “I Can Dream, Can’t I?” Thoughts and Things. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 58-76. Print.
- Bertelsen, Lone and Murphie, Andrew. “An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain.” The Affect Theory Reader. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 138-157. Print.
- Best, Stephen and Marcus, Sharon. “Surface Reading: An Introduction” Representations (2009): 1-21. *Jstor*. Web. 20 Feb. 2013.
- Blinder, Caroline. “Animating the Gudgers” New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans. Ed. Caroline Blinder. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. 145-163. Print.
- Bold, Christine. The WPA Guides: Mapping America. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

1999. Print.
- Bolle, Willi. Grande Sertão: Veredas.br. : o romance de formação do Brasil. São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 2004. Print.
- . "Um romance de formação do Brasil" *João Guimarães Rosa*. Spec. issue of Cadernos de literatura Brasileira. 20-21 (2006): 270-282. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The attitude of the Algerian peasant toward time." Mediterranean Countrymen: Essays in the Social Anthropology of the Mediterranean. Paris: Mouton & Co., 1963. 55-72. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. Obras Completas I. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2008. Print.
- Brizuela, Natalia. Fotografia e império: paisagens para um Brasil moderno. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. "Freud's Master Plot." Reading for the Plot. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.
- Butler, Judith. Giving an Account of Oneself. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. Print.
- . The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Butler, Judith and Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Who Sings the Nation-State? London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010. Print.
- Cabra marcada para morrer. Dir. Eduardo Coutinho. 1984. Film.
- Caldwell, Erskine and Bourke-White, Margaret. You Have Seen Their Faces. New York: The Viking Press, 1937. Print.
- Campbell, Neil. The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. Print
- Cândido, Antônio. "O Homem dos Aessos." *Guimarães Rosa*. Ed. Eduardo F. Coutinho. Spec. issue of Coleção Fortuna Crítica 6 (1983): 294-309. Print.
- . "Literatura e Subdesenvolvimento," A Educação pela noite e outros ensaios. São Paulo: Editora Ática: 1987. 140-162. Print.
- Carmello, Patricia. Memória e esquecimento no Grande Sertão: Veredas: Travessia e melancolia. Rio de Janeiro: Viveiros de Castro, 2013. Print.
- Castro-Klarén, Sara. "'Like a pig, when he's thinkin'": Arguedas on Affect and on Becoming Animal." The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below. 307-323.
- Chirinos, Eduardo. "La escritura como 'desenterramiento'" *Algunas reflexiones en torno a El zorro de Arriba y el zorro de abajo* de José María Arguedas." Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana 26.51 (1999): 99-109. *Jstor*. Web. 16 Feb. 2012.
- Columbus, Claudette Kemper. "Interconexiones: ¿habrá zorros argedianos aún no reconocidos?" Arguedas: La dinámica de los encuentros culturales. Tomo I. Ed. Cecilia Esparza, Miguel Giutsi, et al. Lima: Fondo Editorial Pontificia Universidad Católica, 2013. 369-376. Print.
- Comer, Krista "Exceptionalism, Other Wests, Critical Regionalism." American Literary History. 23.1 (2011): 159-173. Print.
- Cornejo Polar, Antonio. "*El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* : palabra y realidad." Los hervores de Chimbote en El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo de José María Arguedas. Chimbote: Río Santa Editores, 2006. 17-76. Print.
- Correia de Brito, Ronaldo. Galiléia. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Objetiva, 2008. Print.
- Cortez, Enrique. "Sobre el Testimonio en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*". Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana. 72 (2012): 221-340. *Jstor*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Coutinho, Eduardo F. "Guimarães Rosa e o Processo de Revitalização da Linguagem."

- Coutinho. 202-234.
- . Grande sertão: veredas: travessias. São Paulo: E Realizações, 2013. Print.
- Cunha, Euclides da. Os sertões. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985. Print.
- Daniel, Mary. João Guimarães Rosa: travessia literária. Rio de Janeiro: José Olímpio, 1968. Print.
- Dantas Lima, Deise. Encenações do Brasil rural em Guimarães Rosa. Niterói: Editora da Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2001. Print.
- Davis, Hugh. The Making of James Agee. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008. Print.
- Döblin, Alfred. "Faces, Images, and Their Truth." August Sander's Face of Our Time. Trans. Michael Robertson. Munich: Schirmer Art Books, 1994. 7-15. Print.
- Dorst, John. "On the Porch and in the Room: Threshold Moments and Other Ethnographic Tropes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans. Ed. Caroline Blinder. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. 41-69. Print.
- Empson, William. Some Versions of Pastoral. Norfolk: New Directions, 1950. Print.
- Evans, Walker. Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973. Print.
- Fabian, Johannes. Time and the Other: how anthropology makes its object. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- Fantasma Dir. Lisandro Alonso. 2006. Film.
- Fantini, Marli. Guimarães Rosa: Fronteiras, Margens, Passagens. São Paulo: Ateliê, 2004. Print.
- Fernández, Christian. "The Death of the Author in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*." The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below. 290-306.
- Finazzi-Agrò, Ettore. Um lugar do tamanho do mundo: Tempos e espaços da ficção em João Guimarães Rosa. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2001. Print.
- Fonesca, Edson Nery da. "Gilberto Freyre e o movimento regionalista." Gilberto Freyre's Manifesto Regionalista. Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, 1996. 219-234. Print.
- Frampton, Kenneth. "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism." Perspecta. 20 (1983): 147-162 *Jstor*. Web. 10 May 2017.
- . "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," The Anti-Aesthetic. Ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. 17-35. Print.
- Franco, Jean. The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. Print.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Freitag, Florian, and Kristen Sandrock, eds. Transnational Approaches to North American Regionalism. Spec. issue of European Journal of American Studies. 9.3 (2014). Web. 10 May 2017.
- French, Jennifer L. Nature, Neo-Colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers. Hanover: Dartmouth University Press, 2005. Print.
- Freyre, Gilberto. Manifesto Regionalista. Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, 1996. Print.
- Galindo, Alberto Flores. "Dos Ensayos sobre José María Arguedas." Los hervores de Chimbote en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* de José María Arguedas. Chimbote: Río Santa Editores, 2006. 157-208. Print.
- Galvão, Walnice Nogueira. Guimarães Rosa. São Paulo: Publifolha, 2000. Print.
- . "O Certo no Incerto: o Pactário." Guimarães Rosa. Coutinho. 408-421.

- . "Rapsodo do sertão: da lexicogênese à mitopoese." João Guimarães Rosa. Spec. issue of Cadernos de literatura Brasileira. 20-21 (2006): 144-186. Print.
- Garbuglio, José Carlos. "A Estrutura Bipolar da Narrativa." Coutinho 422-445.
- Garcia: Álvaro Andrade. O sertão e a cidade: o sertão de Guimarães Rosa 50 anos depois. São Paulo: Peirópolis, 2007. Print.
- Garramuño, Florencia. La experiencia opaca: Literatura y desencanto. Buenos Aires: Tierra Firme, 2009. Print.
- Giménez Micó, José Antonio. "The Deterritorialization of Knowledge in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*." Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos. 26.1-2 (2001-2002): 83-105. *Jstor*. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
- Goble, Mark. Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985. Print.
- Gramuglio, María Teresa. "Juan José Saer: El arte de narrar" Punto de vista. 2.6 (1979). CD-ROM.
- . "El lugar de Juan Jose Saer" Juan José Saer por Juan José Saer. Buenos Aires: Celtia, 1986. 261-299. Print.
- . "La filosofía en el relato." Punto de vista 7.20 (1980): 35-36. CD-ROM.
- . "Estética y política" Punto de vista 9.26 (1986): 1-3. CD-ROM.
- . "Un posmodernismo crítico" Punto de vista 15.42 (1992): 27-28. CD-ROM.
- . "Una imagen obstinada del mundo." Glosa y El entenado. Poitiers: Archivos, 2010. 729-741. Print.
- Gruber, Stephan. "La dialéctica de lo irreconciliado: Los zorros de Arguedas a través de la filosofía de Walter Benjamin" Esparza, Giutsi, et al. 377-392.
- Hansen, João Adolfo. O "O": A ficção da literatura em Grande Sertão: Veredas. São Paulo: Hedra, 2000. Print.
- . "Grande sertão: veredas e o sertão." Lecture given at Stanford University, February, 2009. PDF.
- Hibbett, Alexandra. "Bailar la máquina: historia e imagen dialéctica en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*." Esparza, Giutsi, et al. 393-420.
- Ingold, Tim. "The Temporality of the Landscape." World Archeology 25 (1993): 152-174. *Jstor*. Web. 28 Feb 2015.
- Izquierdo, Lucas. "Espacio y Lenguaje: Una cartografía de Chimbote en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* de José María Arguedas." Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana. 75 (2012): 131-148. *Jstor*. 9 May 2017. Web.
- Jameson, Fredric. The Antinomies of Realism. London: Verso, 2013. Print.
- . The Seeds of Time. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Print.
- . A Singular Modernity. London and New York: Verso, 2012. Print.
- Jay, Martin. Songs of Experience. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Print.
- Kidd, Stuart. Farm Security Administration Photography, the Rural South, and the Dynamics of Image-Making 1935-1943. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004. Print.
- Kubitschek, Juscelino. Introduction. Revista Brasília, 1.1 (1957). Print.
- La libertad. Dir. Lisandro Alonso. 2001. Film.
- Lages, Susana Kampff. João Guimarães Rosa e a saudade. São Paulo: Ateliê, 2002. Print.
- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique" Critical Inquiry 37:3 (2011): 434-472. *Jstor*. Web.

- 9 May, 2017.
- Lienhard, Martín. Cultura andina y forma novelesca: zorros y danzantes en la última novela de Arguedas. Lima: Editorial Horizonte, 1990. Print.
- Librandi-Rocha, Marília. “Nuvens Invisíveis: Uma Poética da Latência e da Nuance no conto “Nenhum, Nenhuma,” de João Guimarães Rosa.” Ellipsis 9 (2011): 93-108. Print.
- . “Multiple Rumors: *Recado* and the *Conconversa* in João Guimarães Rosa’s Fiction.” Luso-Brazilian Review. 53:2 (2016): 62-83. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- . “Sertão, City, Saudade.” The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space. Ed. Joan Ramon Resina and William Viestenz. Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2012. 61-75. Print.
- Limón, José E. “Border Literary Histories, Globalization, and Critical Regionalism.” American Literary History. 20.1-2 (2008): 160-182. Print.
- Lofaro Michael A. Ed. Agee at 100: Centennial Essays on the Works of James Agee. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012. Print.
- Lorenz, Günter. “Diálogo com Guimarães Rosa” (Geneva 1965). Coutinho. 62-97.
- Los muertos. Dir. Lisandro Alonso. 2004. Film.
- Lukács, György. History and Class Consciousness. Trans. Rodney Livingston. Cambridge: MIT, 1968. Print.
- . “Reportage or Portrayal?” Essays on Realism, Ed. Rodney Livingston, Trans. David Fernbach. Cambridge: MIT, 1981. Print.
- Maccioni, Laura. “Enigma, Política, y Lenguaje en *Cicatrices* y *La Mayor*: Juan José Saer en los sesenta (un diálogo con Rodolfo Walsh).” Chasqui 44.1 (2015): 48-63. Print.
- Mango, Eduardo Gómez. “Todas las lenguas: Vida y muerte de la escritura en ‘los zorros’ de J.M. Arguedas” El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo. Ed. Eve-Marie Fell. Madrid: CISIC, 1990. 360-368. Print.
- Maranhão, Brenno Kenji Kaneyasu. “The Dialectics of Formation and Conformation: The Politics of Fiction in Brazil and Argentina.” Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 2013. Print.
- Mariátegui, José Carlos. Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana. La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1973. Print.
- Marx, Leo. The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. Print.
- Masiello, Francine. El cuerpo de la voz (poesía, ética y cultura). Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2013. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. Politics of Affect. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015. Print.
- Miller, James S. “Inventing the ‘Found’ Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America.” Journal of American Folklore 117.466 (2004): 373-393. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Miller, D.A. Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Print.
- Milton, Kay. Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Montaldo, Graciela. Juan José Saer: El limonero real. Buenos Aires: Hachete, 1986. Print.
- . De pronto, el campo: literatura argentina y tradición rural. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1993. Print.
- Moraña, Mabel. “Territorialidad y foresterismo: la polémica Arguedas/ Cortázar revisitada.” José

- María Arguedas: hacia una poética migrante. Ed. Sergio R. Franco. Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana and Pittsburgh University Press, 2006. 103-120. Print.
- Moreiras, Alberto. The Exhaustion of Difference. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001. Print.
- Newhall, Beaumont. The History of Photography. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964. Print.
- Núñez, Gabriela. "Paradigmas de interacción cultural y sus limitaciones." Esparza, Giusti, et al. 319-330.
- Ocampo, Catalina. "La agonía de José María Arguedas y la palabra trágica." Franco 121-142.
- O fim e o principio. Dir. Eduardo Coutinho. 2006. Film.
- Ortega, Julio. "Itinerario de José María Arguedas. (Migración, peregrinaje y lenguaje en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*)." Franco 81-102.
- . "Introduction." The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below. xi-xxxii.
- . "A Book on Death." Poetics of Change: The New Spanish-American Narrative. Trans. Galen D. Greaser. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. 183-189. Print.
- Ortiz, Juan L. Antología. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 2002. Print.
- . Obra Completa. Santa Fe: Centro de Publicaciones, Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1996. Print.
- Orvell, Miles. The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture 1880-1940. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Print.
- Oubiña, David. "Cronofotografías literarias." El silencio y sus bordes. Buenos Aires: Tierra Firme, 2011. 63-122. Print.
- Pantigoso, Eduardo J. La Rebelión contra el indigenismo y la afirmación del pueblo en el mundo de José María Arguedas. Lima: Editorial Juan Mejía Baca, 1981. Print.
- Pecero, Manuel Pantigoso. "El zorro que calla y el zorro que habla: tradición y ruptura en la obra de Arguedas." Arguedas Centenario: Actas del Congreso Internacional José María Arguedas: Vida y Obra 1911-2011. Ed. Gladys Flores Heredia, Javier Morales Mena, Marco Martas Carrera. Lima: San Marcos Editorial, 2011. 311-322. Print.
- Peláez, Sol. "Ungrounding the Nation: A Reading of Juan José Saer's *Nobody Nothing Ever (Nadie nada nunca)*." The New Centennial Review 14.1 (2014): 1-24. *Project Muse*. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- Penhos, Marta. Ver, conocer, dominar: Imágenes de Sudamérica a fines del siglo XVIII. Buenos Aires: Siglo veintiuno editores, 2005. Print.
- Piglia, Ricardo. "La prolijidad de lo real." Punto de vista. 1.3 (1978): 26. CD-ROM.
- Pinheiro Passos, Cleusa Rios. "No giro da memória: literatura e psicanálise em Grande sertão: veredas." João Guimarães Rosa. Spec. issue of Cadernos de literatura Brasileira. 20-21 (2006): 262-269. Print.
- Policsek, Cecilia. "The Poetics of Negativity as a Form of Seeing Literature: *The Witness* by Juan José Saer." Neophilologus 97.1 (2003): 1-8. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- Portocarrero, Gonzalo. "Las últimas reflexiones de José María Arguedas." Los hervores de Chimbote en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* de José María Arguedas. Chimbote: Río Santa Editores, 2006. 77-122. Print.
- Powell, Douglas Reichert. Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. New York: Routledge,

2008. Print.
- Premat, Julio. La dicha de Saturno: Escritura y melancolía en la obra de Juan José Saer. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2002. Print.
- Prieto, Adolfo. Literatura y subdesarrollo. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblioteca, 1968. Print.
- . Los viajeros ingleses y la emergencia de la literatura argentina (1820-1850). Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1996. Print.
- Rabasa, José. Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010. Print.
- . “‘Porque soy indio’: Subjectivity in *La Florida del Inca*,” Poetics Today. 16.1 (1995): 79-108. *Jstor*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary. New York: Verso, 1994. Print.
- Rama, Ángel. Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America. Trans. David Frye. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012. Print.
- . “El ‘Boom’ en perspectiva.” Más Allá del Boom: Literatura y Mercado. Ed. David Viñas. México, D.F.: Marcha Editores, 1981. 51-129. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art. Trans. Zakir Paul. London: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Resina, Joan Ramón. “Introduction: The Modern Rural.” The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space. Ed. Joan Ramon Resina and William Viestenz. Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2012. 7-25. Print.
- Ricoeur, Paul. “Narrative Time” Critical Inquiry 7.1 (1980): 169-190. *Jstor*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Rivera, Fernando. “El zorro en el espejo: poética narrativa y discurso autobiográfico.” Franco 177-196.
- Rojas, Rodrigo Montoya. 100 años del Perú y d José María Arguedas. Lima: Editorial Universitaria, 2011. Print.
- Roncari, Liz. “The Backlands of the Liberal Republic (1889-1930): State of Violence and State Violence.” Treece, Chiappini, and Vejmelka. 357-367.
- Ronsino, Hernán. La descomposición. Buenos Aires: Interzona 2007. Print.
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. “Second Inaugural Address.” Jan. 20, 1937. *Bartlebypress.com*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Rosa, João Guimarães. Grande sertão: veredas. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2014. Print.
- . The Devil to Pay in the Backlands. Trans. James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963. PDF.
- . Primeiras Estórias. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 1967. Print.
- . The Jaguar and other stories. Trans. David Treece. Oxford: Boulevard Books, 2001. Print.
- Rouillón, José Luis. “La luz que nadie apagará: aproximaciones al mito y al cristianismo en el último Arguedas.” Fell 341-359.
- Rowe, William. “El lugar de la muerte en la creación del sujeto de la escritura.” Franco 167-176.
- . “Reading Arguedas’s Foxes.” The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below. 283-289. Print.
- . Ensayos arguedianos. Lima: Universidad de San Marcos y SUR, 1996. Print.
- . “Deseo, escritura y fuerzas productivas.” Fell 333-340.
- . “El nuevo lenguaje de Arguedas en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*.” Texto Crítico. 11 (1978): 198-212. Print.
- Rowland, Clara. A forma do meio. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 2011.

- Print.
- . “*I Could Stop Here*”: Figures of Rereading in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*.” Treece, Chiappini, and Vejmelka. 318-333.
- Saer, Juan José. *El Limonero real*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2010. Print.
- . *La mayor*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2005. Print.
- . *Nadie nada nunca*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1994. Print.
- . *Glosa*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2006. Print.
- . *El arte de narrar*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2011. Print.
- . *El entenado*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2012. Print.
- . *La ocasión*. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1988. Print.
- . *El río sin orillas*. Madrid: Alianza, 1991. Print.
- . “La cuestión de la prosa.” *La narración objeto*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1999. 55-61. Print.
- . *Papeles de trabajo: Borradores inéditos*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2012. Print.
- . “Una literatura sin atributos.” *El concepto de ficción*. México, Universidad Iberoamericana, 1997. 264-267. Print.
- . *Trabajos*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2006. Print.
- . “Sartre: contra entusiastas y detractores.” *Punto de vista*. 3.9 (1980): 11. PDF.
- . “Juan.” *Juan L. Ortiz: Obra Completa*. Santa Fe: Centro de Publicaciones, Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1996. 11-14. Print.
- . *Notebook*. n. d. MS Princeton University Library, Princeton. Print.
- Saer, Juan José and Piglia, Ricardo. *Diálogo*. Santa Fe: Centro de Publicaciones, Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1990. Print.
- Sales, Dara. “Introducción: José María Arguedas, Wiñaq.” *José María Arguedas: Quepa Wiñaq . . . Siempre Literatura y antropología*. Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2009. 11-55. Print.
- Sampsell-Willmann. *Lewis Hine as Social Critic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. Print.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. “Narrar la percepción.” *Escritos sobre literatura argentina*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2007. Print.
- . “La condición mortal.” *Escritos* 289-295.
- . “Aventuras de un médico filósofo.” *Escritos* 304-305.
- . “Una poética de la incertidumbre.” *Escritos* 306-309.
- . “Una mirada política” *Punto de vista*. 9.27 (1985): 1-4. CD-ROM.
- . “El saber del texto.” *Punto de vista*, 9.26 (1986): 6-7. CD-ROM.
- . “Punto de Vista señala: La mayor” *Punto de vista* 1.3 (1978): 18-19. CD-ROM.
- . “Los dos ojos de Contorno.” *Punto de vista* 4:13 (1981): 3-5. CD-ROM.
- . “Literatura y política” *Punto de vista*. 6:19 (1983): 8-11. CD-ROM.
- . “Experiencia y lenguaje II.” *Punto de vista*. 18:51 (1995): 5. CD-ROM.
- . “La política, la devastación.” *Glosa y El entenado: Edición crítica*. Poitiers: Archivos, 2010. 762-778. Print.
- Schüler, Donald. “Grande sertão: veredas – Estudos” *Guimarães Rosa*. Coutinho 360-377.
- Segal, Susan. “Foreword” to *Reproducing Nations: Types and Costumes in Asia and Latin America ca. 1800-1860*. Americas Society, April 2006. Curated by Dr. Natalia Majluf. PDF.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.

- Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Skeats, Walter W. A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language. Oxford, 1882.
- Sommer, Doris. "Slaps and Embraces: A Rhetoric of Particularism." The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader. Ed. Ileana Rodríguez. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York: Picador, 1973. Print.
- . Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.
- . "Against Interpretation" Essays of the 1960's & 70's. Ed. David Rieff. New York: Library of the Americas, 2013. 10-20. Print.
- Spiegel, Alan. James Agee and the Legend of Himself. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. Print.
- Stern, Mirta. "Prólogo" El limonero real. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1981. Print.
- Steward, Kathleen. Ordinary Affects. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Stott, William. Documentary Expression and Thirties America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print.
- Süssekind, Flora. O Brasil não é longe daqui. São Paulo: Cia. das letras, 1990. Print.
- Tanglen, Randi Lynn. "Critical Regionalism, the US-Mexican War, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary History." Western American Literature 48.1-2 (2013): 180-199. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 May 2017.
- Tarica, Estelle. The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Print.
- Temple Herr, Cheryl. Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. Print.
- Torres Perdigón, Andrea. "Reflexión y experiencia: el género novelesco en Juan José Saer." Letral 7 (2001): 102-113. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. Reading American Photographs. Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1989. Print.
- Vargas Llosa, Mario. "Literatura y suicidio: El caso de Arguedas (*El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*)." Revista Iberoamericana 110-11 (1980): 3-28. Web. 9 May 2017.
- . "José María Arguedas: Entre Ideología y La Arcadia." Revista Iberoamericana. 47 (1981): 33-46. Web. 9 May 2017.
- . José María Arguedas, Entre Sapos y Halcones. Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1978. Print.
- . "Primitives and Creators." The Times Literary Supplement. 3481 (1968): 1287-1288. PDF.
- Vásquez, Chalena. "La luz y el sonido en la obra de José María Arguedas: una propuesta de musicología andina." Esparza, Giutsi, et al. 299-314
- Vega, Garcilaso de la. Comentarios reales de los incas. Ed. Carlos Aranibar. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991. Print.
- Vigil, Ricardo Gonzáles. "Arguedas: una modernidad transculturada." Esparza, Giutsi, et al 95-108.
- Viñas, David. "Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana." Más Allá del Boom: Literatura y Mercado. Ed. David Viñas. México, D.F.: Marcha Editores, 1981. 13-50. Print.
- Vizcaino-Alemán, Melina. "What's So Critical about Critical Regionalism? The Case of Fray Angélico Chávez's New Mexico Triptych." Western American Literature. 49.2 (2014): 199-222. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 May 2017.

West, Denis and Joan M. "Cinema Beyond Words: An Interview with Lisandro Alonso." Cineaste 36.2 (2011): 30-38. *Jstor*. Web. 20 Nov 2015.

Williams, Raymond. The Country and the City. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. Print.

Winston, Brian. Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations. London: British Film Institute, 1995. Print.