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The Limits of the Letter: The Politics of Representation and Margins
in Latin American Vanguard Writings of the 1950s and 60s

by

Adam Joseph Shellhorse

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Hispanic Languages and Literatures

in the

Graduate Division

of the University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Ana Maria Mão-de-Ferro Martinho, Chair

Professor Richard Rosa

Professor Ivonne del Valle

Professor Laura E. Pérez

Fall 2010

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Adam Joseph Shellhorse

Abstract

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by Adam Joseph Shellhorse

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Berkeley
Professor Ana Maria Mão-de-Ferro Martinho, Chair

Throughout this study, I theorize and explore the consequences of the self-reflexive text in the literary writings of João Cabral de Melo Neto, Osman Lins, and David Viñas. I argue that what unites these writers is not solely the context of neocolonialism and underdevelopment in the 1950s and 60s in Brazil and Argentina but the properly vanguard problem and gesture of mediating the present and politics, as I trace in their theoretical writings, letters and literary texts their shared concern with making literature relevant, functional and dynamic in a public sphere in crisis. If I contextualize these writers in their historical moments and provide close readings of their works, I also localize and extract from their projects concrete problems and formulations that I deem productive for the study of literature today, and in order to place these historically engaged and dynamic literary projects in dialogue with some of the more pressing debates in the field of contemporary Latin American Studies such as the crisis of literature, the politics of aesthetics, the rise of the neoliberal city, the legacy of the Boom and literary vanguardism, the Neo-Baroque, and the ongoing problems of subalternity, Eurocentrism, and representation.

In dialogue with the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group and thinkers such as José Rabasa, Alberto Moreiras, Severo Sarduy, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou, my study links the Subaltern Studies Group to a different line of theoretical questioning and examines how the writings of Cabral, Lins, and Viñas ultimately articulate self-reflexive and challenging proposals concerning the vanguard functions of literature and literature's difficult relationship to subalternity and the political field in a neocolonial context.

For Tomomi

For Mother

For the memory of Father, (1945-2008)

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INTRODUCTION

The Limits of the Letter: The Politics of Representation and Margins in Latin American Vanguard Writings of the 1950s and 60s

In an ambitious assessment of the politics of literary production in Latin America in the 1960s and its bearing on Latin American Studies today, Idelber Avelar has written:

The struggle over the literary within Latin American studies today—as well as the discussion concerning modernity and postmodernity in the continent—hinges, to a great extent, on the stance one takes towards the legacy left by the boom. Revisiting these texts thus imposes itself as an urgent task, for their impact can be felt everywhere from the perception of Latin America abroad to the profile of arts and humanities curricula at schools and universities in and out of the continent. (24)

No doubt, writing in 1999 and concerned with the collapse of the Latin American nation-state due to rampant neoliberalism across the continent, Avelar's argument is organized around the widespread critique leveled at magical realism and literary transculturation in the 1990s by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Collective, and thinkers such as Jean Franco, Alberto Moreiras, Brett Levinson and John Beverley.

For Avelar, the cultural context marked by the Boom in the 1960s marks the advent of full-blown, Latin American literary autonomization from the state. This is so due to the Boom's international market successes and the Latin American writer's complete professionalization. Paradoxically, Avelar argues, literature in Latin America reaches an apex of sorts in an increasingly technocratic society that no longer needed it. It therefore, following Walter Benjamin, loses what Avelar calls its "aura":

Writing, especially the one defined as literary, had always been in Latin America a sort of supplementary religion; the letrado, "owner of writing in an illiterate society, had proceeded to sacralize it." The decline of the aura, brought about by the development of market forces and professionalization, marks the historical specificity of the boom. Such autonomization of literature would bring with it a puzzling paradox: the very moment when literature became independent as an institution, the very moment when it completely realized itself and therefore radically became itself coincided with the total collapse of its historical *raison d'être* in the continent. (30)

While I concur with Avelar that addressing the hegemony of the Boom and transculturation theory in Latin American Studies proves salutary from an epistemological standpoint,—in this study I engage in depth Avelar's theory and injunction to reassess the "struggle over the literary" in chapters two and three,—this dissertation endeavors to forge, more specifically, a dynamic, multiple, and self-reflexive perspective on the literary politics of Brazilian and Argentine vanguard writings during the 1950s and 60s. Accordingly, I seek to engage and move beyond the paradoxes of the Boom by addressing the power and limits that were assigned to the literary in its relation to the context of vanguardism that circulated across the continent in many inventive and challenging forms and procedures. Highly self-reflexive and in multiple ways, literature articulated complex mediations that negotiated the problem of intellectual engagement and the vanguard functions of art and literature against the backdrop of neocolonialism and the structure of feeling of militancy set in motion by the Cuban Revolution and the general, countercultural rebuttal of the system.

The Avant-Garde Problematic

“More or less, the whole of twentieth century art,” writes Alain Badiou, “has laid claim to an avant-garde function” (*The Century* 132). This militant function and truth procedure in the sphere of the arts proper to the twentieth century, including individual literary practices, for Badiou, concerns art’s claim on the present—the avant-garde’s “passion for the real” (131).¹ As a form of cultural practice contextualized by politics and society and informed by the taking of positions in the present, the avant-garde *act* not only challenges the aesthetic consensus by declaring its autonomy and rupture with obsolete past forms, but manifests a concrete will to form and subjectivity that challenges the normative modalities and apparatuses of representation which structure and maintain the status-quo: “It’s always a matter of going further in the eradication of resemblance, representation, narration or the natural” (132).

Art, as an avant-garde procedure, configures “an arrangement of the sensible” that produces “an art effect” which triggers in the reader or spectator a forceful recognition of the present (133). For Badiou, this is so because the avant-garde gesture willfully declares the singularity and actuality of its present instantiation in an effort to mediate, through radical sensible ensembles, the “real” dynamism and intensity of lived reality.

In invoking the force and legacy of the European avant-garde gesture, Badiou is concerned with the fact that the concept today, in the twenty-first century, has come to be imagined as antiquated and “obsolete”(132). At the conclusion of his essay, Badiou states the underlying problematic:

Only the recognition of the fabrication of the present can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art. [...]

What characterizes our present day, which scarcely merits being called, to borrow an expression from Mallarmé, ‘a beautiful today’, is the absence of any present, in the sense of the real present. The years that followed 1980 remind one of what Mallarmé rightly said about those that came after 1880: ‘A present is lacking.’ (Emphasis added 140)

With respect to its passion for the present and engagement with the “real,” Badiou locates the avant-garde’s relevance and dynamic political function, understood not only in terms of a group but as a singular will to form, in its energetic claim on the present, in its (counter) fabrication and recognition of the present as transformable.

Badiou’s theses on the “avant-garde function” of twentieth century art authorizes a reassessment of the concept of *vanguardia* in Latin America, especially so during the 1950s and 60s when the concept was regularly evoked by individual writers and avant-garde groups in both aesthetic and political contexts. Customarily examined in terms of the historical avant-garde movements and literary practices of the 1920s, such as Brazilian Modernismo or the Argentine *Martinfierristas*, we lack a theorization of the function of *vanguardia* in Latin American writings of the 1950s and 60s.² Far from exhaustive, my project lays the theoretical foundation for an ongoing, comparative analysis of this challenging time period by reassessing the power and vanguard functions that were assigned to the literary in the 1950s and 60s from close readings of three crucial writers from Brazil and Argentina, oft ignored by critics of the Boom, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Osman Lins and David Viñas.

Vanguarda: the Struggle for Reality

“Does a concept of aesthetic *vanguarda*” have the same validity in Latin America,” writes Ferreira Gullar in 1969, “as in Europe?” (*Vanguarda* 3). For Gullar, everything hinges on the “peculiar angle from which one perceives history” (21), and this viewpoint includes a constellation of historical elements that encircle and inform Latin American cultural life during the post-War generation of the 1950s and 60s: a new internationalist conception of humanity marked not only by the nightmares of the War but by the optimism of industrial development and the planning state; an increasingly complex society with access to diverse media such as film, television and the radio; and an in general critical vision of the uneven character of Latin American modernity and the condition of neocolonialism and dependency. “Todos os setores da *intelligentsia* brasileira têm consciência disso,” writes Gullar, “e essa *consciência do país sob domínio*” (67). Staking out a position in the present and constructing a consciousness of vanguardism and intellectual responsibility, the problem of engaging what Mário Chamie called the “complex of coloniality” [*complexo colonialista*], and the “invasion” [*decadência em face de veículos de massa*] of the North American cultural industry, underwrites with force the production, mediation and divulgation of vanguard theories and practices in Brazil and Argentina (Manifesto Praxis 7).

In Latin America, and especially in the Brazil of the 1960s, the concept of *vanguarda*, understood both politically and aesthetically, was regularly invoked by a host of protagonists including the Brazilian Concrete Poets and their magazines *Noigandres* and *Invenção-Revista de Arte de Vanguarda*, the Praxis Poetry Group led by Mário Chamie and his magazine *Praxis-Instauração crítica e criativa*, by the CPC and their popular poetry readings in Brazilian favelas, and by the massive popular front that arises in 1961 with the government of João Goulart demanding agrarian reform, and which was stifled by the military dictatorship in 1964. In Argentina, while there were certainly fewer groups that claimed to be a literary “avant-garde,” Beatriz Sarlo has argued in a similar vein concerning the vanguard function that was assigned to Argentine intellectual and aesthetic activity following the first ouster of President Juan Domingo Perón in 1956. In fact, the Argentine journal, *Contorno* (1953-1958), poignantly addressed the problems of intellectual responsibility, imperialism, neocolonialism, the legacy of the avant-garde of the 1920s,³ and the political and ethical dimensions of literature; a host of magazines and avant-garde practices would follow suit, probing the force and power of the arts, literature and popular culture in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s.

Like Badiou, Gullar points out that the “avant-garde character” of modern art hinges on its commitment to the “real” and to its mediation of the present. The singularity and open form of the avant-garde work, accordingly, results from the artist’s need to address an increasingly complex society. A Latin American avant-garde aesthetic thus begins for Gullar from a critical examination of the conditions and consequences of underdevelopment. And yet, insofar as the consequences induced by the international division of labor and cultural colonialism are far from uniform, each country’s intellectuals have the task of negotiating the specificities of their nation’s communities and cultural registers and formations. For this reason, Gullar argues: “a melhor arte de um país subdesenvolvido é aquela que parte de sua realidade específica, de sua particularidade” (69). Against the social realist premise, against a literature of thesis, for Gullar, the avant-garde mediation of the “complexities” of underdeveloped societies requires a mobile, dynamic, and incessantly inventive and inconclusive work (81-82).

Graphing Poetry, Politics and Hunger

In the realm of literature and distinct from Badiou's theses on the European avant-gardes, it could be said that the vanguard problem, contextualized by neocolonialism, hinged on the writer's concern with the mediation of the present and the dilemma of literary engagement in the 1950s and 60s. The constellation of commitment, of constructing a viable and revolutionary "poetic action" in the present, and the mediation of the writers "alienation" from the political process, including the mobilized Brazilian masses, effectively inform the pages of the Brazilian *Invenção-Revista de Arte de Vanguarda* (1961-1968), spearheaded by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and José Lino Grünewald. While an extensive assessment of the Concrete poets far exceeds the scope of this dissertation, I would like to briefly invoke two of their more emblematic "political" poems, written for the second issue of the *Invenção* review in 1962, in order to introduce and trace the problem, politics and centrality of literary mediation in the 1950s and 60s as a vanguard gesture in Latin America.

Haroldo de Campos's poem, "poesia em tempo de fome" [poetry in time of hunger], is built around a fundamental inversion that is at once thematic, syntactic and political. The third of "four fragments," entitled "Servidão de passagem" [Servitude to landscape/passage], it could be said that the poem plays with constructing fragmentary sense, ensembles of perception, through synecdoches that tie together the act of writing poetry, the act of assigning names, and addressing the time of hunger.

poesia em tempo de fome
fome em tempo de poesia

poesia em lugar do homem
pronome em lugar do nome

homem em lugar de poesia
nome em lugar do pronome

poesia de dar o nome

nomear é dar o nome

nomeio o nome
nomeio o homem
no meio a fome

nomeio a fome

The beginning and concluding stanzas highlight the word "fome" [hunger], which suggests a crack/absence, but also a central desire in the ordering poetic apparatus of giving names, "poesia de dar o nome"(6, 7) "Fome" also connotes the condition and problem of poverty and subalternity, a fundamental crisis concerning official national representation in Brazil that the fragments of "Servidão de passagem" thematize.

De Campos's poem maps and breaks up this "landscape," this poetic and political "passagem" representing "hunger," with the verb-noun, "nomeio," which means "I name" but which also constitutes a neologism in Portuguese, combining the prepositions "no" [in] and "meio" [middle]: "in the middle" or "in the means." Thus to give the name through poetry— naming the name, naming man and naming hunger as the penultimate stanza reads—is an operation that concerns mediation, the problematical passage of poetic representation concerning the poor, the hungry, the voiceless, and also the revolutionary poet's desire to bridge this gulf, this "fome."

I hasten to add that crucially, in calling attention to poetry, to the act of naming and the passage of sense "no-meio," de Campos's poem places the reader in a compositional standpoint, in what Décio Pignatari called the concrete poem's "making concrete of composition" or "phenomenology of composition" (Pignatari 58; 67). Calling attention to the phenomenon of the poetic word as it composes a field of representation constitutes a radical, vanguard act with respect to framing politics and subaltern margins. Through the double-entendre of nomeio, "I name" and "in the means," de Campos's poem intercepts and suspends the object of representation, "fome," suspends the poet's "speaking for" the poor, and interpellates the reader in the present moment to consider "fome" politically and from the perspective of poetic construction. Far from imposing a vision whereby the poet-intellectual becomes the vanguard spokesman for the poor, "poesia em tempo de fome" is a poem that problematizes aesthetic commitment, highlighting self-reflexivity, the mapping of fissures in representation such as subalternity and hunger, and the construction and naming of the present as political tasks.

Published also in the second issue of *Invenção-Revista de Arte de Vanguarda*, Augusto de Campos's poem, "cubagramma" articulates an inventive, transgressive and polysemic mapping of the neocolonial context and the protagonism and polemical status of Cuba in Latin American political debates during the 1960s. Like "poesia em tempo de fome," de Campos's constellation poem on the Cuban Revolution problematizes official political representations, pointing to margins and multiple modalities of writing, reading and mediating the impasse of intellectuals and aesthetic engagement.

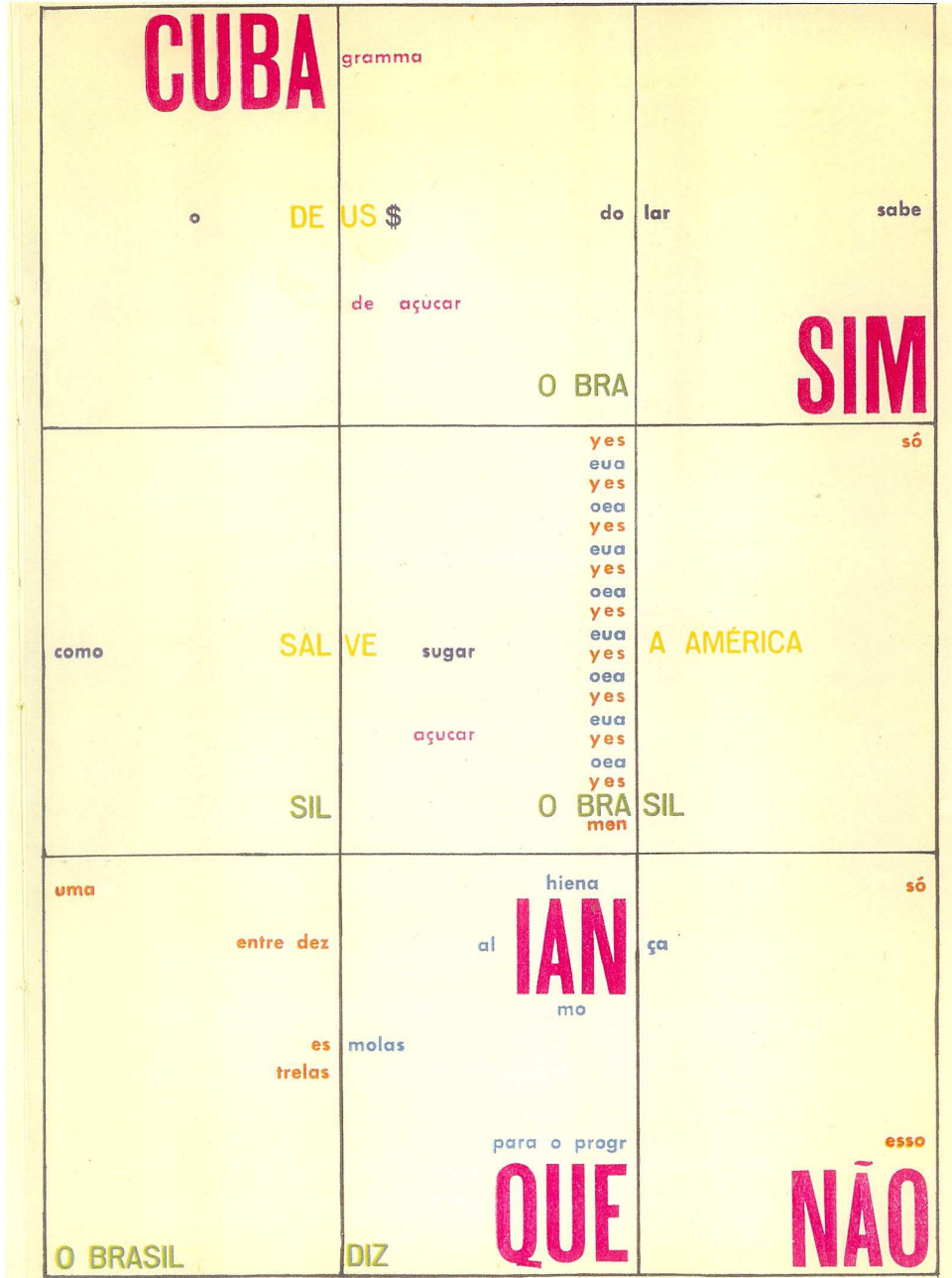


Figure 1: “cubagramma,” Augusto de Campos, reprint in *Invenção-Revista de Arte de Vanguarda* (Tomo II, 1962)

This poetic field is organized in nine quadrants through six colors—a prominent red that points to Cuba and the Revolution, a green that metonymically points to Brazil, and the colors marine, blue, orange and yellow. Syntactically words become fragmented, cross-sectioned and intercepted by the quadrants and contrasting colors. There are no stanzas but semantic blocks that, like Deleuzian rhizomes, produce offshoots of sense and half-sense—abrupt lines of semantic flight that turn the poem into a laboratory of readings that encircle the prominently displayed, yet fragmented syntagma in bold red: CUBA/gramma SIM IAN QUE NÃO. The accentuated visible limits and divisions to the poem-design not only divide and allow the reader to construct multiple readings vertically,

horizontally, through color combinations and across the quadrants, but call attention to the poem's "concrete grammar" and compositional coordinates.

It could be said that the poem's compositional character takes on protagonism over the poem's field of representation. Indeed, the word "*gramma*," like Haroldo's play with "nomeio," constitutes a double-entendre. *Grámma*, from the Greek, refers to letters, to that which is designed, and to the written register. In the second quadrant, it also clearly refers to grams as units of measure, constituting a poetic play with Cuban sugar and U.S. neocolonial interests in the 1960s. In addition to graphing the poem's "grammar," the poem displays, in phonetic fragments and metonymies of color, the neocolonial political context that includes the nation states of Cuba, Brazil, and the United States.

No doubt, like Haroldo de Campos's "poesia em tempo de fome," "cubagramma" articulates a self-reflexive and multiple mediation of a prominent political problem in the 1960s. Far from presenting a poetic resolution to the poem's inquiry on the Cuban Revolution and its possible "alliance" with an increasingly revolutionary Brazil in 1962, where the masses were fast gaining agency, the poem first maps its structural and syntactic grammar—the building blocks, colors and limits of composition—as an interpellation of the reader to critically mediate this political impasse from the standpoint of construction as opposed to abstract schemata and official politics. Far from speaking for the nation-state and the people, de Campos's poem suspends ready-made solutions and the imposition of the ideological, inscribing across the poem's colored words and political field, a modifiable, fabricated and concrete present for the reader.

Throughout this study, I theorize and explore the consequences of the self-reflexive text in the literary writings of Cabral, Lins, and Viñas, what I call the metaliterary gesture and its relation to mapping, as in Haroldo and Augusto de Campos's poems, the time and landscape of hunger, the poetic, and the political in Latin American literature of the 1950s and 60s. What unites these writers is not solely the context of neocolonialism and underdevelopment but the properly vanguard problem and gesture of mediating the present and politics, as I trace in their theoretical writings, letters and literary texts, their shared concern with making literature relevant, functional and dynamic in a public sphere in crisis. If I contextualize these writers in their historical moments and provide close readings of their works highlighting their vanguard gestures, I also localize and extract from their projects concrete problems and formulations that I deem highly productive for the study of literature today, and in order to place these historically engaged and dynamic literary projects in dialogue with some of the more pressing debates in the field of contemporary Latin American Studies such as the crisis of literature, the politics of aesthetics, the rise of the neoliberal city, the legacy of the Boom and literary vanguardism, the Neo-Baroque, and the ongoing problems of subalternity, Eurocentrism, coloniality of power, postcoloniality and representation.

With respect to recent scholarship on the concept of the Latin American avant-garde, thinkers such as Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, Vicky Unruh, and Gonzalo Aguilar point to the avant-garde's highly "self-critical attitude" due to its "contentious encounters" with European avant-garde proposals, its "pivotal relationship to the past," and the dilemma of engaging the reader and spectator with the problem of the present, national identity, cultural syncretism, and experimental art in an international context (Ramírez, "A Highly Topical" 2; Unruh 6). These thinkers have issued a challenge to rethink the legacy of the Latin American avant-gardes and how the avant-gardes proposed, questioned, and disseminated engaged functions for art. Accordingly, Ramírez and Olea's essays and exhibition have called for "a non-linear" and "generative, dialectical understanding of [vanguard] art," including reopening the discussion on vanguard practices and procedures carried out by groups and individuals of

the 1950s and 60s (Ramírez, “Prologue” xvi), while Unruh and Aguilar have pinpointed the need to focus on the avant-gardes modes of “non-conciliatory” intervention with the social, the tradition, the mimetic, and the international (Aguilar, “Formas” 36).

When I invoke the vanguard as gesture, inspired by Ramírez, Olea, Unruh and Aguilar’s emphasis on activity and transgressive aesthetic forms, I am referring to a critical, self-reflexive attitude and act, fundamentally mediational, which engages and redistributes traditional forms, the present, the political field, the problem of subalternity and the neocolonial context of the 1950s and 60s in Latin America. Where I differ from these critics, following Badiou, is in the emphasis I place on the “art-function” and “effect” that contextualizes the writings of Cabral, Lins and Viñas and their modes of mapping through the literary the impasse of subalternity and politics. In dialogue with the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group and thinkers such as José Rabasa, Alberto Moreiras, Severo Sarduy, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou, my study links the Subaltern Studies Group to a different line of theoretical questioning and examines how the writings of Cabral, Lins and Viñas ultimately articulate self-reflexive and challenging proposals concerning the vanguard functions of literature in a public sphere in crisis and literature’s difficult relationship to subalternity and the political field in a neocolonial context.

Accordingly, unfolding over four principal movements, chapter one traces the problem of metapoetry and its relation to politics and subalternity in João Cabral de Melo Neto’s celebrated dramatic poem, *Morte e Vida Severina: auto de Natal pernambucano* (1954-55). I begin by contextualizing *Morte e Vida* against the backdrop of the politics of cultural production in mid-twentieth century Latin America. Second, I gather my bearings by reading from within Cabral’s extended *Ars Poetica*, *Psicologia da Composição* (1947) a principal *metapoetic* strategy that formidably shapes *Morte e Vida*. I then juxtapose the strategy of the metapoetic in *Psicologia da Composição* to the theoretical vision that Cabral forges in three of his critical essays, “Da função moderna da poesia” (1954) [On The Modern Function of Poetry], “Poesia e composição” (1952) [Poetry and Composition] and “Joan Miró” (1950). My aim is to underwrite the points of convergence between poetry and aesthetic theory that Cabral’s project articulates. I show that what unites this critical project is the properly political dilemma and compositional concern with constructing a critical, self-reflexive and functional textuality that *Morte e Vida Severina* addresses at both levels of form and content. Third, I read *Morte e Vida* as a work that articulates the impasse of the poetic in regards to the politics and crisis of margins. Invoking Fredric Jameson’s re-elaboration of modernism as a narrative category and Alberto Moreiras’s critique of Latin American cultural studies, I conclude with a theoretical and historical reassessment of Cabral’s place in the debate over political and literary vanguardism in Latin America.

Chapter two is representative of an attempt to problematize and reengage what Idelber Avelar has called the historical, political, and discursive “struggle over the literary” that came to a head in Latin America in the 1960s, and which constitutes an impasse in Latin American Studies today regarding the legacy of the Boom and how we envision and continue to engage in the study of literature (24). The purpose of this chapter is therefore to produce two sorts of overlapping maps that connect back to the epistemological problematic underwriting Cabral’s explosion of the poetic letter and mapping of the subaltern. By continuing to focus on cultural production in Brazil, I aim to interlink the historical legacy of the Spanish American Boom with Brazilian writer Osman Lins. On the one hand, engaging Jacques Rancière’s theory of the politics of aesthetics, I trace and discuss through Lins’s letters and essays produced during the 1960s his vision of an ornamental literature and its relationship to politics and violence. On the other, I provide a close reading of his famous text, “O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina” (1966), written at the onset of the Brazilian military dictatorship, as a dynamic text that

resets the terms of the debate in the 1960s about subaltern margins, experimental letters and the legacy of the Boom, evincing a forceful vision, indeed, of the struggle over the literary.

Chapter three continues the discussion on Lins's project in relationship to the legacy and critical force of the Latin American Neo-Baroque. Insofar as we consider the mechanisms of representation that *underwrite* and *limit* Lins's negotiation of the subaltern, it is my contention that we may begin to reconstruct a politically dynamic interface that de-ontologizes the nationalist-transculturating horizon that contextualizes his essays, and which counter-maps the subaltern as a productive theoretical problematic for literature. Thus to begin to position Lins's oeuvre within the paradigm of the Latin American Neo-Baroque and against the Latin American Subaltern Studies debate, I invoke Alejo Carpentier's concept of "lo real maravilloso" and Severo Sarduy's "elementos para una semiología del barroco latinoamericano." I then turn to Alberto Moreiras's interpretation of the Neo-Baroque as a textual practice of immanence and critique, and José Rabasa's understanding of subalternist *elsewheres*, in order to negotiate Lins's aesthetic of ornaments as a vanguard practice, Neo-Baroque for sure, which marks an inscription and powerful interrogation of the impasse of literature and subalternity in the 1960s.

Chapter four provides a comparative reappraisal of the revolutionary functions that Jean-Paul Sartre and David Viñas assigned to their respective, post-War literary generations in France and Argentina. For Sartre, in *What is Literature?* (1947), literature's problematic was defined as a matter of violence, understood broadly as the historical divorce between intellectuals and the proletarian masses. Regarding literature's relationship to the past and its revolutionary function in the present, the committed writer's task was to utilize the novel as a means to "restore to the event its brutal freshness" (185). Literature for Sartre, in this way, constituted itself as a horizon of perception and free communication with the reader, and disclosed the modifiable character of historical time. In Argentina, Beatriz Sarlo has argued that Sartre's tract served as an "ideological password" for the post-war generation of writers, who were writing in a context sutured by discourses of national popular revolution, decolonization and economic underdevelopment (128). Therefore in this chapter, I reexamine Sarlo's claim against David Viñas's proposal for a *literature of limits* in *De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (1970). If the matter of violence contextualizes Viñas and Sartre, I argue that the critical force and originality in Viñas's proposal resides in the ways in which the literary negotiates its very limits in the novel form. In order to shed light on what these limits entail in the literary text, I provide a reading of Viñas's existentialist inspired novel, *Un dios cotidiano* (1957). Winner of the prestigious "Premio Kraft" for the best Argentine novel in 1957 that has since received scant critical attention, I examine how *Un dios cotidiano* is a vanguard "political" novel which far from presenting an ideological "thesis," powerfully addresses the writing and texture of official history, anti-Semitism, politics and the Argentine literary tradition. In conclusion, I provide a theoretical reading of how Viñas's literature of engagement assigns itself the task, akin to the projects of Cabral and Lins in Brazil, of constructing the self-reflexive, allegorical novel in order to address the vanguard problematic of the function of literature and its mediation of politics, margins and neocolonialism in the 1950s and 60s in Latin America.

Notes

¹ By the "passion for the real," understood as an objective of the avant-gardes throughout the twentieth century, Badiou is referring to the "self-reflexive" modes by which the arts or literature "exhibit [their] own process, an art that wants to visibly idealize its own materiality" ("The Passion"

50-51). “The century does not hesitate to sacrifice the image so that the real may arise in the artistic gesture” (“Avant-gardes” 131).

² Mari Carmen Ramírez has suggested that the originality of Latin American vanguard art proposals and practices in the 1950s and 60s concerns a heightened focus and “deep seated questioning” on the “social function of art” (“A Highly Topical” 13; 5). In a lucid essay on the “constructivist impulse” in Brazilian arts and vanguard movements of the 1950s, she further suggests that the “subject-object duality” that contextualizes intellectual production and reception in the 1920s becomes challenged and “suspended” through the creation of “vital forms” that engage the spectator (“Vital Structures” 199; 191). In a challenge to Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that postulated the historical European avant-garde’s attack on art’s institutionalization, Gonzalo Aguilar has argued that the central problematic underwriting the Latin American avant-gardes from the 1920s to 1960s concerns the capacity of the avant-garde to “integrate itself within modernization in critical fashion” (Aguilar, “As formas” 41). No doubt in the 1950s and 60s in Latin America, we are concerned with a reflexive turn that emphasizes engagement and art’s concrete functionality and modes of intervening in the public sphere. This involves, as I will show in the ensuing chapters on Cabral, Lins, and Viñas, the mediation of the vanguard writer and her/his divorce from collective life and the problematic of neocolonialism, subalternity, and revolution.

³ With respect to vanguard literary debates and the legacy of the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s, this discussion included critiques and reappraisals of the legendary Brazilian Modernistas and Argentine Martinfierristas of the 1920s. Invoking a well-known lecture given by Mário de Andrade in 1942 on the legacy and failure of Modernismo to negotiate the political, and bemoaning what he calls “the reign of vanguard idolatry” in Brazil in 1962, Mário Chamie argues that the Modernistas constructed an aesthetic and subjectivist revolution or “pseudo-totalization,” and that the new Brazilian vanguards needed to construct a “consciousness of reading” that reflexively could mediate the literary and the language of the cultural industry in order to intervene as a form of “praxis” in the social sphere (Chamie 13; 9). In a fundamental literary review in Argentina in 1953, Juan José Sebrelí’s essay manifesto, “Los martinfierristas: su tiempo y el nuestro,” invokes a new generational struggle and provides a sociological and existentialist critique of the Martinfierristas of the 1920s, claiming that the post-War years in Argentina mark “the age of commitment” and “responsibility” and not that of “metáforas y exclamaciones [creacionistas]” and liberal, author-centered politics (1). For Sebrelí and the contributors of *Contorno*, the intellectual’s responsibility hinges on mediating not only the literary and the cultural but the advent of the Peronist masses in the Argentine public sphere, and re-assuming the national as a political and not solely aesthetic or identitarian problem for authors and poets of talent. I am suggesting that the vanguard context of the 1950s and 60s progressively witnesses the move from the dynamism of the subjective and the construction of a powerful poetic “I” capable of manipulating “the new” (Girondo 25-26), the structure of feeling of “authorial” talent and iconoclasm (Andrade 252-253), and the concomitant consolidation of a national literary tradition and language capable of cannibalizing the “fashionable” European modernist techniques of the 1920s (Viñas, “El escritor vanguardista” 61), to calls for invention and intervention that negotiate the alienation of writers from a public sphere marked by the cultural industry and the discourse of neocolonialism. Following Oscar Terán, if “the new was promoted again” in the 1960s, artists and writers sought “new legitimizing agencies” that generally hinged on looking to politics, the crisis of the masses and the Cuban Revolution (Terán 271). “The early avant-garde artists did not suffer the conflict between art and politics, inasmuch as they believed that art itself transformed the social order”

(Terán 272). According to Andrea Giunta, “art was increasingly both representation and action” in the post-Peronist years of the late 1950s and 60s in Argentina (16).

CHAPTER ONE

The Explosion of the Letter: The Politics and Crisis of Margins in João Cabral de Melo Neto's Morte e Vida Severina: auto de Natal pernambucano (1954-1955)

The canonical texts of Latin American postmodernity must be reread, perhaps reinterpreted, in the search for the way in which their own understanding of historical self-positioning can illuminate, rather than obscure, our own.

—Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (2001)

João Cabral de Melo Neto's hybrid and much celebrated dramatic poem "for voices," *Morte e Vida Severina: auto de Natal pernambucano* (1954-1955) [Death and life *Severina*: Nativity Play of Pernambuco] responds to what Cabral often bemoaned in his letters as the "impasse of modern poetry" or the "abismo que separa hoje em dia o poeta de seu leitor" [the abyss that separates today the poet from his/her reader¹] in Brazil (*Obra completa* 770). However, it would be theoretically insufficient for us to reinterpret his poetic oeuvre as a bridging mechanism that sought to resolve this abyss through what some have argued² to be an explicitly "participatory" and "engaged" vocation that Cabral ascribed to his poetry following the publication of *O Cão sem Plumas* (1950). Insofar as we surmise from Cabral's essays, this "impasse" concerned contemporary poetry as a genre *ill attuned* to the modern public sphere at the level of form, and at the level of content it signified for the figure of the poet author a desired yet absent or dubious sociopolitical force in the ever technified modern public sphere.³

An alternative critical frame may be carved out from within *Morte e Vida Severina* if we follow its formal consequences to their explosive finale. Indeed, by embedding a system of references to the poetic word within the plot sequence of events that the dramatic poem narrates, we find a powerful lens to read Cabral's response to the impasse of poetry in mid-century Brazil. While the socio-political referents in the poem are evident in Cabral's depictions of violence and oppression in the North Eastern hinterlands of Brazil, it is from a closer reading of the poem as a form-making activity that *suspends* content-driven ideas that we may begin to unravel Cabral's response to the impasse of the poetic. From a compositional standpoint, of extreme interest for Cabral, the rewriting and inverting of the medieval and popular Auto de Natal⁴ (Nativity Play), the work *foregrounds* the compositional process within the very figure of the hero, Severino, and within the dialogues and diction of the poem's characters. Would not the achievement of the poem's self-reflexivity and hybrid constitution as an inverted literary genre then provide us with a theoretical lens to re-envision a counter will to Brazilian modernity and as a response to the autonomization of the poetic?

This chapter unfolds over four principal movements. In the first, I contextualize *Morte e Vida* against the backdrop of the politics of cultural production in mid-twentieth century Latin America. Second, I gather my bearings by reading from within Cabral's extended *Ars Poetica*, *Psicologia da Composição* (1947) a principal *metapoetic* strategy that formidably shapes *Morte e Vida*. I then juxtapose the strategy of the metapoetic in *Psicologia da Composição* to the poetic vision that Cabral forges in three of his critical essays, "Da função moderna da poesia" (1954) [On The Modern Function of Poetry], "Poesia e composição" (1952) [Poetry and Composition] and "Joan Miró" (1950). My aim is to underwrite the points of convergence between poetry and aesthetic theory that Cabral's project articulates. I show that what unites this critical project is the properly political dilemma and compositional concern with constructing a critical, self-reflexive and functional textuality that *Morte e Vida Severina* addresses at both levels of form and content. Third, I read *Morte e Vida* as a work that articulates the impasse of the poetic in regards to the politics and crisis of margins. Indeed in Cabral, the poem is doubly constructed and cast: as a Nativity play the work negotiates the problem of

modern structural violence in the Brazilian hinterlands, and as an extended reflection on the compositional process, the poem self-reflexively negotiates its own status as a literary construct against the political problematic of representing the plight of the marginalized subaltern in a violent and uneven modernity. Invoking Fredric Jameson's re-elaboration of modernism as a narrative category and Alberto Moreiras's critique of Latin American cultural studies, I conclude with a theoretical and historical reassessment of Cabral's place in the debate over political and literary *vanguardismo* in the age of underdevelopment and highly politicized literary experimentation in Latin America.

1. *The Impasse of the Poetic*

It has been argued that poetry in the sphere of socially "engaged" literature, and not the realist or even "boom" novel, best articulated the predicament of cultural production and politics in Latin America during the polemical and revolutionary 1950s and 60s. Employing the example set by Pablo Neruda in his acclaimed *Canto General* (1950), Jean Franco argues that Neruda's poetry was more adequate to the task of staking out a socially viable place for the alienated poet in the fragmented public sphere.

Franco positions her argument during the Cold War years in Latin America which effectively witnessed in her view the "decline" of the Latin American "lettered city"—a concept, according to Angel Rama, that established the political and aesthetic articulation of the "lettered" Latin American intellectual with the *polis*. Of course, this "decline" of the lettered in her/his role with civil society brought with it an age of significant self-reflexive and political probing on the part of Latin American intellectuals who needed to rethink the status of art and intellectual authority. Neruda's case for Franco is exemplary to the extent that the poetry in *Canto General* is characterized by its fundamental formal hybridity and utopian Messianism based on Marxian categories, and on a "discontinuous" and "ventriloquist" poetic voice (*The Decline* 73). In other words, according to Franco, Neruda's project is "striving for a poetry of communion that might heal the fragmented subject" (*The Decline* 73). Franco is careful to remind the reader that Neruda's poetic activity combined poetry readings and performances with workers and party members:

The experience of reading his verse to worker at union and party meetings and his delight in these readings is reflected in the rhetoric of the poem, which constantly evokes the presence of these publics. The readings renewed not only faith in poetry as a civic and public form of address, but brought the unlettered into the circle of literature. In this respect, the poet had an advantage over the novelist. He could draw on vital traditions of popular poetry, such as the *décima*, as well as on such familiar oral forms as oratory, sermon, and litany. The "platitudes" reflect a counterhegemonic common ground between the writer and the public. (74)

The figure of Neruda the poet, then, condensed a "civic," "public," and socially engaged position that interwove political partisanship with a highly original poetic product. In Franco's perspective, Neruda reverted to rewriting and inverting classic models and popular forms of poetry to speak, in effect, for the "voiceless" Latin American worker and for the violently "dead," such as the pre-colonial Incan empire in "Las alturas de Machu Picchu" (75). Although fully delving into Franco's historical and political reading of Neruda's *Canto General* far exceeds the scope of this chapter, suffice it to say that her reading of Neruda as an exemplary model of "engaged" poetry that articulated a sustained drive to "heal" the Latin American political subject, and forge a novel, revolutionary link with the popular subject and Latin American worker, provides us with a ground of comparison for reassessing the case of Cabral's poetry.⁵

2. *Cultivating the Orchard Backwards: Graphing Poetry Writing*

Cabral enjoys a privileged status in the literary narrative of Brazilian poetry, and the extensive critical bibliography on his formal innovations and poetic mastery in Portuguese attest to his status as a towering figure. Indeed, acclaimed Cabral scholar Antonio Carlos Secchin has argued that Cabral's poetic production was so significant for the Brazilian tradition that it effectively introduced "a new poetic grammar" that would leave long lasting ripples for future generations of Brazilian poets such as the Concrete Poets (Del fonema 387). According to Charles A. Perrone, Cabral is "The Engineer-Bard,"⁶ who though chronologically aligned with the Brazilian Generation of 45, "opposes their cult of the sonnet, focus on psychic states, and bias toward elevated poetic lexicon" (20). Renowned for cultivating a poetics that reincorporated Medieval Portuguese and Spanish verse forms, such as the *octosílabo*, *décima*, and the *redondilla* and for his aversion to free-verse following his first book of poetry, *Pedra do sonho* (1942), the figure of this poet author is demarcated by formal rigor, metric precision, and an emphasis on his response to the free-verse inspired modernista generation of the 1920s.

I draw attention to the formal features of Cabral's work in order to better situate it theoretically for my reading of *Morte e Vida Severina*. For like Neruda, the extent to which we understand *how* Cabral works within traditional and modern verse forms to invert them and to bring about a novel poetic and socially communicative effect in mid-twentieth century Latin America—an entirely different strategy from Franco's understanding of Neruda's political poetics rooted in the perspective of the "artist as demiurge"—is an effective gauge that we may use to review his poetic will to *control* the text and its corresponding critical reception from a theoretical standpoint (*The Decline* 84).

Cabral's desire to control the text, to implant within the very structure of the poem and its representational scheme an hermeneutical model for reading it, was first achieved in his *Psicologia da Composição*.⁷ Consisting of eight sections, which could be read as small theoretical prisms on the "psychology" of composing poems, Cabral articulates a powerful dialectical vision in which the will to represent the poetic subject matter, composition proper, is constantly undone by a counter will to question the nature and psychology that goes with constructing an aesthetic representation or system such as a poem.

The poem begins by establishing a "poetic I" who strategically describes the genesis of the poem. From the very first word, "saio," we are relayed a striking simile: an ambiguous "it" irrupts from the poem onto the blank page as though the "it" or poetic subject matter had escaped his hands in washing them:

Saio de meu poema
como quem lava as mãos.

Algumas conchas tornaram-se,
que o sol da atenção
cristalizou; alguma palavra
que desabrochei, como a um pássaro.

Tal vez alguma concha
dessas (ou pássaro) lembre,
côncava, o corpo do gesto

antigo, que o ar já preencheu,

tal vez, como a camisa
vazia, que despi. (*Duas Águas*, 93, 1-12)

[It left from my poem
as someone who washes her hands.

Some shells transformed themselves
that the sun of attention
crystallized; some word
that I unfastened, like a bird.

Perhaps one of those shells
(or bird) remembers,
concave, the body of that ancient
gesture, that the air filled up.

Perhaps, like a shirt
emptied, that I shed.]

The nucleus of the poem—the matrix point in which the string of similes and symbols constellate in the idea of poetic composition—is located in verses five and six, “alguma palavra/que desabrochei, como a um pássaro” [some word/that I unfastened, like a bird] (93). Thus “poema” and “alguma palavra” establish the poetic subject, and the poetic I organizes the text by means of a striking subjectivism.

I call attention to the dilemma of the poetic I here in our attempt to understand the metapoetic, self-referencing drive in *Psicologia da Composição*. By the metapoetic, I am referring to a literary procedure whereby a poetic text calls attention to its textual and semiotic status as poetic.⁸ The poetic I speaks from a position of loss and uncertainty: the “it,” or the *becoming meta-composition* of the “poema,” has left him from the very get go, and his attempts at controlling it are prefaced by a cautious and repeated “tal vez.” The poetic I, like Narcissus, stares at his reflection from the very words that have just left his hands.

The final section of *Psicologia da Composição* may be read as a productive site in which the subjective dilemma and self-reflexive probings of the poetic I—his will to control the poetic field and extract its formal sense—becomes inverted and displaced by the composition’s drive to the metapoetic.

Cultivar o deserto
como um pomar às avessas.

(A árvore destila
a terra, gôta a gôta;
a terra completa
cai, fruto!

Enquanto na ordem
de outro pomar
destila o tempo
palavras maduras).

Cultivar o deserto
como um pomar às avessas:

o tempo não mais
destila: evapora;
onde foi maçã
resta uma fome;

onde foi palavra
(potros ou touros
contidos) resta a severa
forma do vazio. (100, 1-20)

[Cultivate the desert
like an orchard backwards.

(The tree distills
the earth, drop by drop;
the earth completes
falls, fruit!

Inasmuch as in the order
of another orchard
time distills
mature words).

Cultivate the desert
like an orchard backwards.

time no longer
distills: it evaporates;
where there was an apple
now there is left a hunger;

where there was word
(ponies or bulls
contained) now what is left
is the severe form of emptiness.]

Structured by the refrain “Cultivar o deserto/como um pomar às avessas”[Cultivate the desert/like an orchard backwards], the poem insists on the “minerality” of the word and thematizes the operation of *inversion*, so key to Cabral’s project (100, 1-2; 11-12). The refrain should be read in the imperative and as a prolongation of this extended *Ars Poetica*. Far from proffering a personalized poetic

prescription that is proper to the *Ars Poetica*, the poem builds from the poetic nucleus of the “palavra,” “desert orchard” and the absent “apple” a metonymical rewriting of the story of the Garden of Eden in the Biblical Book of Genesis.

By highlighting the operation of *rewriting* and inverting the Biblical creation story, the poem violently upends the logic of the *personal* poetic prescription that is proper to the *Ars Poetica*. This poetic garden is built “backwards”: “onde foi maçã/resta uma fome;/onde foi palavra/(potros ou touros/contidos) resta a severa/forma do vazio[,]” [where there was an apple/now there is left a hunger;/where there was word/(ponies or bulls/contained)/now what is left/is the severe form of emptiness] (100, 15-20). In Cabral’s meta-poem on the art of composing poetry, the very Verb of Genesis is countered by the textualized “severe form of emptiness.” Connoting the blank page, but also the semiotic “minerality” of the composition in its textual performance, “the *severe form* of emptiness” is the poem’s phenomenological ending. It is also the suspension of sense one final time in which the word “forma” powerfully mirrors back to the reader the very fact that representation in this project is always already double.⁹

Cabral’s *Psicologia* articulates an effective theory of composition from within the scheme of poetic mimesis. This theory pushes forward a vision of the poetic text that highlights its textual composition and demands of the reader active participation. By layering poetic representation with metaphorical chains that ultimately point back to the work’s constructed status, the metapoetic gaze in this project dynamizes the field of representation and highlights the blank page as a site for poetic co-creation. In the wake of the editorial success of *Psicologia da Composição* and as a diplomat in Barcelona and London,¹⁰ Cabral would only continue to build on his theoretical literary gaze and quest for literary relevance by writing poems “para vozes,”¹¹ of which *Morte e Vida Severina* is unquestionably the most popular and acclaimed example.¹²

Before embarking on an assessment of *Morte e Vida Severina*, I now turn to Cabral’s theoretical writings on modern poetry and aesthetics in order to bridge the meta-poetic vision staked out in *Psicologia* with Cabral’s theses on the impasse of the poetic in Brazil and the ethical, theoretical, and “communicative function” that he ascribes to his poetry.

Towards a Theory of Poetic Composition: An Art of the Surface

On repeated occasions, Cabral characterized the modern free-verse lyric as irreparably “divorced” from the “modern reader” in its subjective lines of lyrical flight. Cabral’s solution to this impasse was to compose “functional” poems, rigorously crafted in meter and rhyme, that in his view were better adapted to the communicative context encircling the modern reader, conditioned as she/he was by the radio and the cultural industry. Metrification, rhythm, and technical rigor, for Cabral, insured a communicative function: the creation of an affective, poetic language that communicated “determinate messages with poetic sense,” open to interpretation for sure, but which allowed the reader to collaborate in the creation of the poem’s meaning (*Obra completa* 755; 736).

In the conference paper entitled, “Poesia e Composição,” Cabral wrote of the modern reader: “o homem que lê quer ler-se no que se lê[,]” [the man that reads desires to read himself in what he reads] (736). In so doing, Cabral placed his finger over what he considered a major obstacle that contemporary poets faced with respect to their audience. Although Cabral admired to a certain degree what he considered contemporary poetry’s “common denominator,” which was “seu espírito de pesquisa formal”(Da Função Moderna 767), he viewed the free-verse, “subjectively inspired” turn of

modern poetry as symptomatic of poetry's alienation from the people and "sua possível função social de comunicação" [its possible social function regarding communication] (Da Função Moderna 770). Modern poetry, according to Cabral, was therefore paradoxically "anacrônica," insofar as it failed to adapt its formal exploration of language and depictions of modern reality to those of the "modern reader" (769).

The "subjectively inspired" poet is the antithesis of Cabral's counter model for the modern vanguard poet: the poet intellectual and critic:

porque se coloca no lado oposto ao da porta por onde entram os adeptos mais numerosos da teoria da inspiração—os filhos da inspiração. [...] O trabalho artístico é, aqui, a origem do próprio poema. Não é o olho crítico posterior à obra. *O poema está escrito pelo olho crítico*, por um crítico que elabora as experiências que antes vivera, como poeta. [...] *O artista intelectual* sabe que o trabalho é a fonte da criação e que a uma maior quantidade de trabalho corresponderá uma maior densidade de riquezas. [...] Durante seu trabalho, o poeta vira seu objeto nos dedos, iluminando-o por todos os lados. (Emphasis added, 733-34).

[because, among other reasons, this type of poetry is the opposite of the numerous adepts of what we may call the theory of inspiration—the children of inspiration. [...] Artistic effort and craft is, here, the very origin of the poem. It is not born from the critical eye that polishes the work a posteriori. *The poem is written by the critical eye*, by means of a critic who elaborates experiences that she/he has lived before, and these as a poet. [...] *The intellectual artist* knows that effort, work, craft is the fountain of creation and that a larger quantity of work makes for a greater density of riches. [...] During his work, the poet turns over and over his object with his fingers, illuminating it from every angle.]

Cabral is careful to reiterate that these two styles of poetry are based on an *attitude* and a conscious choice [*esta segunda atitude é muito menos freqüente*] (733). Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's imperative that a committed writer "write for his time," Cabral fashions a view of literature that must perforce "violate" her/his engrained individualism that tends toward the production of an author-centered, solipsistic, and so alienated poetry:

Seu trabalho é assim uma violência dolorosa contra si mesmo[.] [...] Para o poeta de hoje essa exigência é violenta porque em sua sensibilidade ele não dispõe senão de formas pessoais, exclusivamente suas, de ver e de falar. Ao passo que no autor identificado com seu tempo não será difícil encontrar a mitologia e a linguagem unânimes que lhe permitirão corresponder ao que dele se exige. (734; 736-37)

[His work is thus a painful violence waged against himself. [...] For today's poet this demand is violent because his sensibility has nothing to offer but personal forms, exclusively personal, his own personal way of seeing and speaking. On the other hand, should today's author feel identified with his time, it will not be difficult to encounter the unanimous mythology and language that will permit him to write in such a way that he fulfills his collective vocation.]

Cabral's theory of composition re-locates the poet as an *intellectual* with a *collective function* as its centerpiece. And like Sartre, the collective function that he ascribes to the writer entails that Brazilian poets no longer neglect the radio and other mass media (770). Yet the "violence" that Cabral mobilizes in this strategy is due to his understanding of an increasingly individualistic and fragmented

society. If the “poets of inspiration”—shorthand for the avant-garde Modernistas of the 1920s and the metaphysical “pure” poets of the Generation of 45—have enriched the subjective perception of modernity through their explorations of the unconscious, dream, and automatic writing experiments, for Cabral they have failed to articulate its “objectivity,” its material conditions, structural violence, and plight of its multitudes.

Cabral’s paper conferences on the “function” of modern poetry clearly intertwine a theoretical preoccupation with composition and what we may articulate as an ethical “attitude” geared towards the “impasse” of the poetic letter with the public sphere. Consequently, in his theoretical search for a means by which poetry could reestablish its link with the modern reader, Cabral crossed the arts by mobilizing an interpretation of Catalonian painter, Joan Miró. In his essay “Joan Miró”(1950), written during his stay in Barcelona as a diplomat and in which he befriended Miró and several leading Catalonian poets, Cabral saw in Miró’s painting a kindred *theoretical* preoccupation with a form of composition that radically renewed the relationship of the spectator with the artistic object of representation.

Benedito Nunes has argued that Miró’s oeuvre served as an effective mirror and hinge for Cabral’s own desire to overcome the impasse of the poetic:

É sobre a motivação pressionante de uma crise que a arte de ambos se desenvolve: a do lirismo em Cabral, a da visão pictural em Miró. Respondendo a essa crise [...] Miró rompe com a profundidade da perspectiva, João Cabral com a poesia profunda. Depois dêsse primeiro rompimento, o catalão encaminha-se para uma *arte de superfície*[.] [...] Anàlogamente, afastando-se das profundezas da vida subjetiva, João Cabral encaminha-se para uma *poesia da superfície*, cuja intencionalidade, voltada na direção das “coisas feitas de palavra”, lhe permite compor ao decompor a experiência subjetiva como matéria da expressão lírica, fazendo da depuração e do esvaziamento as leis de sua poética negativa. (*João Cabral* 157-158).

[It is with respect to the pressing motivation concerning the crisis of art that both of their projects unfold: the lyrical problem for Cabral, and the pictorial vision in modern painting for Miró. Responding to this crisis [...] Miró breaks with profundity of perspective, while João Cabral breaks with profound poetry. After this first rupture, the Catalonian develops an *art of the surface*[.] [...]Analogically, separating himself from the profundities of subjective life, João Cabral develops a *poetry of the surface*, whose intentionality, turned in the direction of “things made by the word,” permitted him to compose in such a way that he decomposed subjective experience as in the material for lyrical expression, making the poetic activity of word “purification” and “emptying out” his negative poetics.]

However, in my reading of the essay, I want to go a step further than Nunes’s descriptive analogy by focusing on the “ethical” and “theoretical” position that Cabral extracts from Miró’s “art of the surface.”

Cabral begins his essay on Miró by presenting the aesthetic problem of perspective and mimesis from Renaissance paintings to the present in 1950. For Cabral, the Renaissance is the cornerstone of modern painting. In constructing the illusion of the third dimension or depth in painting, the Renaissance accomplished three things with regard to the spectator’s perception. First, the surface of the painting is nullified. The spectator’s gaze is carried away by the construction of an ideal theoretical point:

A terceira dimensão em pintura anula a existência do dinâmico (essa riqueza da antiga pintura decorativa) porque para ser percebida, em sua ilusão, exige a fixação do espectador num ponto ideal a partir do qual, e somente a partir do qual, essa ilusão é fornecida. (*Obra completa*, 692)

[The third dimension in painting nullifies the existence of what we call the dynamic (that rich quality of antique decorative painting) because in order to be perceived, in its illusion, it demands the spectator's focusing in on an ideal point from which, and only from which, this illusion is established.]

The second consequence of the construction of the third dimension in Renaissance painting is the fact that the spectator's gaze becomes essentially contemplative and impassive. Cabral reiterates that the contemplative relationship that holds between spectator and object of representation ultimately "priva o espectador de usar livremente de sua atenção" [takes away from the spectator his capacity to freely use his gaze] (692).

The third consequence is the establishment of an artistic style whose function is to ensnare the gaze in an ideal point and to establish an equilibrium of the senses. The experience of the aesthetic is therefore one of control: the spectator must perforce suspend judgment in order to contemplate the harmony of elements in their illusory depth. She/he, we could say according to the logic of Cabral's argument, gets lost in representation, in the precept that requires an equilibrium of perspective, line, angle, focal point, etc. Cabral bemoans the fact that this modality of mimesis is couched in an instantaneous relation with the spectator. The illusion requires instantaneous contemplation. The spectator must focus on the ideal point immediately. There is therefore no possibility of a different time of representation, one that is mediated by the spectator, or dynamized by the possibility of the spectator's discontinuous and mobilized gaze.

This is why line takes on significance in Miró's work. Line, like Cabral's meta-textualization of the poetic word in *Psicología*, becomes re-functionalized. Instead of being sacrificed at the expense of the representational figure of which it is invariably a part, the line takes on a life of its own. The line becomes, in Miró, a polysemic entity that not only points up to figures to be contemplated, but which on the contrary guides the spectator in novel temporal and semantic relationships. Inasmuch as line becomes the "guiding thread" and a "disassociative element," the surface of the painting becomes dynamic, a site in which the instantaneity of illusion is debunked by discontinuous play on the part of the spectator (705):

Miró parece haver compreendido perfeitamente a força de sua linha. [...] Observemos suas formas, essas manchas tão simples — tão limitadas como vocabulário, como literatura — luas, estrelas, circunferências. [...] Essas formas [...] incitam a que as exploremos completamente, em todos os milímetros de sua fisionomia e de seu contorno, mesmo quando não existentes como linhas em si, mais como limite de uma figura e de uma mancha. Aí, ainda, é uma luta contra o estático da atenção que vemos em Miró: uma dupla luta, contra o estático próprio da cor e contra o estático próprio da contemplação de figuras conhecidas e aprendidas de memória. (704-705)

[Miró seems to have perfectly comprehended the force of his line. [...] Let us observe his forms, those stains that are so simple —so limited as vocabulary, as literature — moons, stars, circumferences. [...] These forms [...] incite us to explore them completely, in all the

millimeters of their physiognomy and their contour, even when they are not even lines in themselves, but when they function as the limit of a figure or a stain. There, still, is the struggle against the staticism of attention that we see in Miró: a double fight, against the staticism inherent in color and against the staticism inherent in the contemplation of known and memorized figures.]

This mode of painting which calls attention to texture and fabrication against the grain of “memorized figures,” for Cabral, is the “ethical” and “theoretical” dimension of Miró’s will to style (705; 713). According to this view, Miró’s art hinges on the modes by which the granular, liminal form and the circumferential stain deterritorialize the moment of figuration. These half-forms evoke the gesture of composition and trigger an immediacy and dynamism of perception insofar as they draw attention towards the surface and construction of the canvas. In other words, far from simply Cubist, Miró’s liminal forms not only create an ensemble of dissymmetrical perceptions that impede and blur mimetic illusion and passive contemplation, but rather underscore the artisan gesture through the rudimentary smudge and artifice character of lines. Miró’s forms therefore frustrate what Cabral understood as the ensnarement of the spectator through figuration and illusory depth.

And yet throughout the essay, Cabral is at pains to demonstrate how Miró’s oeuvre is built around a rebellion against any kind of norm or aesthetic principle of mimesis. By invoking a “theoretical” dimension to art forms, it could be said that Cabral is pointing up to a common aesthetic procedure that links his self-conscious metapoetics with Miró’s “surface art:” by a will to composition that intercepts representation and forces the reader into a position of self-reflexivity vis-à-vis the constructed text or canvas. With respect to Cabral’s poetry—the meta “psychological” composition, as we have seen—beckons a self-reflexive reader, insofar as the text mobilizes a return to the basic elements of composition and to their materiality: word, metaphor, compositional standpoint. Word and work for the reader and spectator become mobile, re-capacitated, demystified, tools.

Cabral’s critical pieces illuminate and nuance the theoretical issues we have explored in *Psicologia da Composição*. In all of these works, there is a pronounced preoccupation with the reader and spectator. When Cabral crossed the arts and delved into problems concerning perspective and line in the paintings of Miró, we have seen such notions as the possibility of a “theoretical work,” and an “ethics” derived from aesthetics surface as key features to his argument. However, we have still to see how Cabral fashions his response to the impasse of the letter and the commons with actual sociopolitical referents, although the critical pieces have placed us in a theoretical position to reassess his most popular poetic work, which was also performed as a play and achieved a mass audience: *Morte e Vida Severina: auto de Natal pernambucano*.

3. *The Drama of Language*

Morte e Vida Severina begins with a long soliloquy by the dramatic poem’s protagonist, Severino. But before drama and the presentation of Severino’s *ethos* and heroic dilemma—economic destituteness, rampant violence in the backlands, and possessing a too common name—, we are relayed the work’s *hermeneutic* stage instructions: “O RETIRANTE EXPLICA O LEITOR QUEM É E A QUE VAI” [THE BACKLANDER EXPLAINS TO THE READER WHO HE IS AND WHERE HE’S GOING] (45).

The opening monologue which follows this entirely *textual* setting is written in the archaic poetic form of *octosílabo* and *rima asonante* that Cabral gleaned from the great Spanish tradition of the

Iberian Romancero.¹³ Would not this sort of narrative and metric “reactionism” vis-à-vis the free-verse inspired poetics of the Brazilian modernista avant-garde and the “pure poetry” generation of 45 point us to a peculiar zone of impasse with respect to poetic production in the 1950s? In Cabral, as we will see throughout *Morte e Vida Severina*, to write would come to constitute a desire to negotiate and dramatize the impasse of the poet with respect to the polis in a violent, peripheral modernity. The terms of this response and negotiation are specifically *hybrid*, *self-reflexive*, and *duplicitous*. The aim of what follows is to track these terms from within *Morte e Vida Severina* as Cabral’s will to articulate the radical complexity of the crisis of the poetic and the political in mid-twentieth century Brazil.

Framing Severino’s soliloquy with hermeneutic instructions gives way to another textual duplicity. I am referring to the initial pun contained in the title, “Morte e Vida *Severina*” [Death and Life *Severina*] a play on the common North East Brazilian name, Severino. Connoting severity and lack, the pun-neologism “severina” points up to Severino’s *originary* dramatic conflict, which is one of *linguistic* individuation, of separation from the other backlander subjects who bear the same name, Severino¹⁴:

– O meu nome é Severino/não tenho outro de pia./Como há muitos Severinos,/que é santo de romaria,/ deram então em me chamar/Severino de Maria;/como há muitos Severinos/com mães chamadas Maria/fiquei sendo o da Maria/do finado Zacarias./Mas isso ainda diz pouco:/ há muitos na freguesia,/por causa de um coronel/que se chamou Zacarias/ e que foi o mais antigo/senhor desta sesmaria. (45, 1-10¹⁵).

[– My name is Severino/I don’t have another from Baptism./Since there are many Severinos/with mothers named Maria,/who is the Patron Saint of pilgrimage,/they ended up calling me/Maria’s Severino;/ since there are many Severinos/with mothers named Maria/I ended up being called/ Severino of the deceased colonel Zachariah./But this still explains little:/there are many in this region,/in reason of a colonel/who was named Zachariah/ and who was the oldest/ landowner of this abandoned region.]

From the problem of the proper name and the difficulty of distinction, Severino’s second conflict concerns his familial namesake, that of the colonel Zachariah, “que foi o mais antigo/senhor desta sesmaria” [who was the most ancient/Land Proprietor of this region](45, 9-10).

Far from providing Severino with a principle of individuation in the familial name, the colonel’s proper name ironically evacuates Severino’s individual characterization. Could we not then stipulate that this initial dramatization of the eponymous familial namesake constitutes an allegorical problem with respect to the notion of naming and the *patria*, or the letter and the nation-state?¹⁶ Put differently, let us posit this dramatization of *naming* in the opening scene—its lack, its irony, its political economy, its founding fiction in the form of the illegitimate namesake— as a will to national allegory in *Morte e Vida Severina*.

Severino’s opening soliloquy thus foregrounds for the reader the problem of identity, of having the power to possess and articulate a proper name in uneven and violent economic conditions. But like the “scene” directions that named and implicated the reader as spectator, it could also be said that Severino’s impasse also connects the meaning and conditions encircling his name with the *literary* problem of destiny or “sina.”

According to Benedito Nunes, Severino, as well as all the characters in *Morte e Vida*, should be understood as “personae dramatis, que representam tipos e encarnam princípios, num plano alegórico,

de significado religioso ético” (83). Indeed, Severino’s “sina” is far from unique: “Somos muitos Severinos/ iguais em tudo e na sina [...] e iguais também porque o sangue/que usamos tem pouca tinta”(46, 37-44). And yet beyond the allegorical evocation of “sina” proper to the medieval *auto pastoril*, we find inscribed within this sequence a metaliterary device that highlights the work’s constructedness. For in addition to possessing the same pun-layered name, the particular attribute that binds together all the backlander subjects is the fact that they possess the same type of blood, which is described as having “little ink.” The metaphorical double entendre not only points up to his very real economic depravity in the fact that his blood is diluted [*tem pouca tinta*], but refers to the activity of writing or the pen in its relation to marginal subjects.

What these meta-textual figurative devices produce are subtle interpellations of the reader. As in *Psicologia da Composição*, the poetic text forces us to think from a compositional standpoint. The metaliterary figuration of Severino’s life force—his “pouca” ink-blood— discloses the palimpsestic quality that structures his collective, entirely textual identity, and thematizes the political problem of writing about the “institutionless” backlander subject [*a gente sem instituto*](67).

The semiotization of Severino’s name is striking for several reasons. Plot sequence is first deferred and displaced by a problem of names and naming. Second, Severino’s first “physical” steps from the Sertão to the coastal city of Recife are delayed to the very end of this scene, and are significantly framed by means of a metaliterary insinuation: “Mas, para que me conheçam/melhor Vossas Senhorias/e melhor possam seguir/a história da minha vida,/passo a ser o Severino/que em vossa presença emigra,”[But, so as to get to know me/better Your Excellencies/and so that you may better follow/the story of my life,/I now become the Severino/that in your presence migrates] (46, 59-64). Severino’s first steps out of the Sertão are thus marked by his *transformation* [*passo a ser o Severino*] into a “figure” that migrates—as a shifting metaphorical signifier in front of “Vossas Senhorias,” the second *direct* interpellation of the reader as spectator.¹⁷

What specific *literary* effect is achieved by insisting on the transformation of Severino into a metaphorical figure that migrates to Recife as a modern promised land? What kind of political gaze is crafted over the regional backlander subject through the constant disruption of mimesis through metaliterary figures and devices? We will have to explore these issues through the plot adventure of *Morte e Vida Severina* to tie form to content, frame to object of representation, the letter to the “pouca tinta” metonymy that structures the characterization of Severino as hero.

The Framing of Violence: to Hear the Call

Marked by a sequence of encounters with backlander sociological types such as Brothers of Souls (pall bearers), a Troubadour, and a professional mourner, Severino’s journey from the Sertão to Recife is figured as a flight from the space of death and irrational violence, as well as a Messianic journey to modernity in mid-twentieth century Brazil.

In the second scene, we are confronted with a remarkable passage that highlights a key structuring feature to the poem: that of Severino’s hearing the Brothers of Souls’ call. Severino’s capacity to hear the call of the pallbearers—his ability to listen and respond to the bearers of the violently dead in the Sertão—embeds within the play a number of theoretical problems. First, Severino’s drive to self-reflexivity in the soliloquy form cedes to polyphonic chorus. Second, Severino’s itinerary digresses into the story-within-the-story [*história intercalada*] of the dead Severino “the Laborer”:

[SEVERINO:] – A quem estais carregando,/irmãos das almas,/embrulhado nessa rede?/dizei que eu saiba./ [OS IRMÃOS DAS ALMAS:] – A um defunto de nada,/irmão das almas,/que há muitas horas viaja/a sua morada./ [SEVERINO:] – E sabeis quem era ele,/irmãos das almas/sabeis como ele se chama/ou se chamava?/[OS IRMÃOS DAS ALMAS:] – Severino Lavrador,/irmãos das almas,/Severino Lavrador/mas já não lavra. (47, 1-16)

[[SEVERINO:] – Who are you carrying,/Brothers of Souls,/wrapped up in that net?/say so I can know./[The Brothers of Souls:] – A dead man of nothing,/Brother of Souls,/many hours has he traveled/on his way to eternal slumber./[SEVERINO:] – And do you know who he was,/ Brothers of Souls/do you know his name/ or how he was named?/[THE BROTHERS OF SOULS:] – Severino the Laborer/Brother of Souls,/Severino the Laborer/but now he no longer labors.]

The formal duplicity and parallelism of this choral exchange is striking. This “dead man of nothing” [*defunto de nada*] serves as a refracting frame in which the reasons for Severino’s flight from the Sertão become mirrored through choral incantations.

Severino the Laborer was murdered, the Brothers of Souls chant, for he desired to “Ter uns hectares de terra”(48, 53). The political narrative of violence that encircles Severino the Laborer—stray bullets, ambushes, corrupt boss barons—fills in the historical nullity we know about Severino the protagonist and hero. Centrally, Severino not only listens to the Brothers of Souls’ story of the Laborer, but near the scene’s close he “hears their call” [*ouve nossa chamada*] to mourning:

– E onde o levais a enterrar,/irmãos das almas,/como a semente do chumbo/que tem guardada?/– Ao cemitério de Torres,/irmão das almas,/que hoje se diz Toritama,/de madrugada./– E poderei ajudar,/irmãos das almas?/vou passar por Toritama,/é minha estrada./– Bem que poderá ajudar,/irmão das almas,/é *irmão das almas quem ouve/nossa chamada*. (Emphasis added 49, 89-104)

[– And where are you going to bury him,/Brothers of Souls,/with the chumbo seed,/ that he has kept?/ – To the Torres Cemetery,/Brother of Souls,/that today is called Toritama,/of midnight./ – Could I help,/Brothers of Souls?/I will pass through Toritama/it’s on my path./ – Indeed you could help us,/Brother of Souls,/the *Brother of Souls is the one who hears/our call*.]

Although critical literature has commented at length on the rigor of Cabral’s adherence to strict formal poetic metrics in his borrowing from the Iberian *Romancero* in the construction of *Morte e Vida Severina*, little has been established with respect to the explicit and repeated thematization of Severino’s hearing [*ouvido*], and the mediating function ascribed to it with respect to the collective backlander subjects. In Cabral, to thematically *hear* and poetically inscribe the voice of the other in the backlander’s speech was to invoke histories of violence and communal identity. Severino’s bent ear to the dead’s stories served to seize hold of the past as a political problem facing the Brazilian nation and reframed it in terms of choruses that chant from a popular, metaphorical register. Hearing henceforward in *Morte e Vida* will serve as a structuring point of view through which Severino will not only overhear and engage in poetic exchanges with popular subjects on the topic of death in the Sertão [*morte severina*] but will gain knowledge about the oppressive conditions that backlanders face in modernity.

However, it would be insufficient for us to subsume Cabral's will to literary form as a speaking for, or in the name of the backlander subject.¹⁸ Effectively, to write the innovative text for Cabral was to construct this nomadic subject, the subject possessing "blood with little ink," like many of his Brazilian literary predecessors.¹⁹ Beginning with Euclides da Cunha's acclaimed *Os Sertões* (1901), this *regional* subject came to be imagined as an exceptional site for literary experimentation and as a synecdoche for the modern political subject of impasse regarding the public sphere and the chaos of the backlands. And yet in Cabral, the literary blending of genres and the complexity of the work's point of view attest to the difficulty of this problem of representation. Just as the persistent encoding of the metaliterary in *Morte e Vida* constitutes a suspending mechanism within the dramatic representation and experience of reading the work, Severino's hearing of the popular regional voice becomes a structuring point of view that repositions the fabular storyline.

Finally, there is a form of Messianism invoked in the Brothers of Souls' "chamada." Time in the Sertão, put differently, is built around the crisis of the law, and the metaphorical register that Severino and the backlanders employ to speak of possible salvation and redemption. As Severino follows the course of the Capibaribe River to Recife, he characterizes the hamlets that align its shore as a "rosário de nomes" where Recife is the "derradeira ave-maria/do rosário" (63, 38-39). This form of Messianism corresponds to the Nativity Play structure that underwrites Severino's adventure. Therefore, the extent to which Severino offers to help the Brothers of Souls bury the Laborer at the level of the plot [*E poderei ajudar,/irmãos das almas*]—the very moment when Severino becomes a "Brother of Souls"—is the measure of an ethical code concerning the violently dead (49).

Burying the Laborer and hearing his tragic story in choral polyphony, displaces Severino's economic driven will to separate from the community, reintegrating him in a collective ritual of mourning. As soon as Severino decides to offer his help, the Messianic frame is ushered in via the spiritual terms "nossa chamada": "—Bem que poderá ajudar,/irmão das almas,/é irmão das almas quem ouve/nossa chamada" (Emphasis added 49).

Following John M. Tolman's observation that the "primitive dramatic structure" of the work may be likened to "a series of *tableaux* [scenes]" we could establish that Severino's flight from the Sertão, structured in nine scenes, corresponds to the liturgical *Via Crucis* or the first Nine Stations of the Cross that lead up to Christ's Crucifixion (Tolman 59).²⁰ If the Cross is laid on Christ at the Second Station, here Severino helps the Brothers of Souls carry the dead Laborer, initiating his "pilgrimage" to Recife. As a point of view connoting redemption and brought into focus through Severino's hearing the backlanders in chorus, this fraternal, Messianic call will be recast in powerful and ambiguous terms through the Nativity that takes place in Recife.

The Mapping of Modernity: The Subaltern Exception

Severino's flight from the Sertão inevitably ends in Recife, what he characterizes as the "fim do rosário de nomes [...] Recife/derradeira ave-maria do rosário"[endpoint of the rosary of names [...] Recife/last Ave-Maria of the rosary](63, 37-40). Following the structure of the Nativity Play that frames the poem, it is in this coastal metropolis that Severino will witness the birth of a "Messianic" backlander. And yet, the stage instructions provide us with an hermeneutical key for gauging Severino's decisively *uneven* symbolic entrance into modernity and the time of the Messianic: "CHEGANDO AO RECIFE, O RETIRANTE SENTA-SE PARA DESCANSAR AO PÉ DE UM MURO ALTO E CAIADO E OUVE, SEM SER NOTADO, A CONVERSA DE DOIS COVEIROS" (64). Visually introduced

from behind a dilapidated wall, heroic deed and action are once again displaced by Severino's hearing the other.

But for once, time and space are organized, delimited, and made into an economy of relations. Different from the poetic and polyphonic speech that characterized the drama of language and violence in the Sertão, the gravediggers take individual turns articulating what we could call a map of modernity for Severino. In a word, in their mapping of Recife they trace divisions of labor, profession, class and income, and point out that the backlanders have "no institution," and no "reason":

– É a gente *sem instituto*,/gente de braços devolutos;/são os que jamais usam luto/e se enterram sem salvo-conduto./ – É a gente retirante que vem de Sertão de longe [...] e uma coisa notei/que jamais entenderei:/essa gente do Sertão/que desce para o literal, *sem razão* [...] – E esse povo lá de riba/de Pernambuco, da Paraíba,/que vem buscar no Recife/poder morrer do velhice,/encontra só, aqui chegando/cemitérios esperando./Não é viagem o que fazem,/vindo por essas caatingas, vargens;/*aí está o seu erro:/vêm e seguindo seu próprio enterro.* (Emphasis added 67-68, 124-178).

[– It's a people *without institution*,/a people with sagging arms,/ who never dress for mourning/and bury themselves without liturgical license./ – It's the backlander folk that come fleeing the Sertão from afar [...] and one thing I noticed/that I'll never understand:/these Sertão folk/who descend by the river way, come *without reason* [...] – And that folk over there on the bank/from Pernambuco, of Paraíba,/who come looking in Recife/to die at an old age/encounter only on arriving/cemeteries waiting./It's not a trip that they make,/coming by way of the brush swept hinterland;/*that's their error:/they come following their own burial.*]

The city death space [*cemitérios esperando*] is bound to the impasse of the letter. The modern map has a crack. There is no place in the city for the backlanders insofar as they have no "reason." Death, far from chaotic and caused by lawless gunfire as in the Sertão, is therefore rationalized. After all, this is a *scene of initiation*, paralleling Severino's first encounter with the Brothers of Souls. Just as the Brothers of Souls judged Severino as a fellow Brother because he decided to help bury Severino the Laborer and observe the *call* of collective mourning [*noossa chamada*], the gravediggers' judgment or *economic* condemnation of the backlander in the play is decisive.

In a word, Severino is constituted as a counter-institutional, counter-rational subaltern subject. The idea of being "without institution" and "without reason" underwrites the Latin America Subaltern Studies Group's Founding Statement on the subaltern. Accordingly, the subaltern is "by definition *not registered* or *registrable* as a historical subject capable of hegemonic action," and "To represent subalternity in Latin America, in whatever form it takes, wherever it happens (...) to find the blank space where it speaks as a sociopolitical subject, requires us to explore the *margins of the state*" (Emphasis added 136, 144). Following Walter Mignolo, it could be said that Severino's city entrance represents a "local history" and problematic "border design" in this administered, epistemological, and political mapping of Brazil in mid-twentieth century.²¹ I am emphasizing the symbolic spatialization of this problem. Note Severino's peripheral point of *non-enunciation*—listening in a cemetery in the "subúrbio dos indigentes"(64, 67). "Without reason" and "without institution" he remains speechless from behind a dilapidated wall.

Not a speaking for, Cabral's text constantly re-frames the *textuality* of this dichotomous tension: between the writing of an innovative dramatic poem "para vozes" and the problematical representation of the backlander as a political subject without institutions. From the utopian promise of *vida* in the city, Severino's arrival projected poetically as the "derradeira ave-maria do rosário," we are relayed the stark allegorical projection of the backlanders as the counter-rational, "institutionally dead."

From the Collective Call to Poetry

Severino's rude introduction to Recife and modernity leads him into existential crisis *qua* subaltern as he mulls over the gravediggers' condemnation. He contemplates committing suicide by tossing himself off a bridge into the Capibaribe: "E chegando, aprendo que/nessa viagem que eu fazia,/sem saber desde o Sertão,/meu próprio enterro eu seguia. [...] A solução é apresar/a morte a que se decida" (69, 21-34). The extent to which Severino believes in the fatality of the economic "reason" of the gravediggers is the measure in which his life becomes meaningless. However, Severino's death wish and ultimate isolation are soon intercepted by Seu José, a squatter who lives off the banks of the riverside.

Seu José symbolically stands for Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. As Joseph and Jesus hailed from Nazareth, Seu José is from the Pernambucan city, *Nazaré da Mata*. We thus return to the structure of the Nativity Play and the question of its poetic and political inversion and rewriting in Brazil.

It could be said that the Nativity in *Morte e Vida Severina* is organized around the thematization of prose and poetry. In what is the shortest section of *Morte e Vida Severina*, a woman enters the stage and interrupts Seu José shouting out that his son has been born:

– Compadre, José, compadre/que na relva estais deitado:/conversas e não sabeis/que vosso filho é chegado?/*Estais aí conversando/em vossa prosa entretida*:/não sabeis que vosso filho/saltou para dentro da vida?/Saltou para dentro da vida/ao dar seu primeiro grito;/ e estais aí conversando;/pois sapei que ele é nascido. (Emphasis added 72-73, 1-12)

[– Brother, José, brother/lying on the grass/wrapped up in your conversation don't you know/that your son has arrived?/*You're over there conversing/absorbed in your prose*:/don't you already know that your son/jumped from within life?/He jumped from within life/as new life in his first whimper;/and you're over there conversing;/well know now that he is born.]

This messenger reprimands the "prose" [*vossa prosa entretida*] of Severino and Seu José's conversation. Something other than prose and other than the total administration of culture and human society has occurred: the eruption of a new life.

While this is the common plot understanding of Seu José son's birth—the triumph of new life over the doldrums of an uneven modernity and Severino's anguish—I want to probe deeper, by connecting the event of the child's birth to the messenger's word choice, "prose," and set it against the problem of literary heritage invoked by the Nativity Play. By invoking the word "prose" a shift occurs at the level of the plot. Calling attention to textuality, the mentioning of prose serves to highlight *Morte e Vida's* formal hybridity as a fusing of poetry and theatre but also connects back to Severino's death wish and to the idea of redemption inscribed in the Nativity.

Strategic and serving as a disruption to Severino's suicidal thoughts, the lady messenger's admonishing "vossa prosa entretida" prefaces the birth of Seu José's son and the central Nativity scene. In this way, the notion of "prosa" is powerfully framed against the choral and poetic Nativity scene as antithesis. What is more, prose is customarily defined as the converse of poetry. In his analysis of the "prosaic nature" of modern, capitalist society depicted in the nineteenth century novels of Balzac, Flaubert, and Tolstoy, Georg Lukács deploys the term "prose" as an allegorical index of economic rationalization proper that is destroying the "poetry of life."²² It can be said, following Lukács, that Severino's suicidal thoughts stem inextricably from his "disenchantment" with the "prosaic nature" of the city: "esperai, devo dizer/que ao menos aumentaria,/na quartinha, a água pouca,/dentro da cuia, a farinha,/a algodãozinho da camisa,/o meu aluguel com a vida" (69). On the one hand, then, we could say that the notion of "prosa" connects back to a central problematic in *Morte e Vida*: the "prosaic nature" of the gravedigger's graphing of Recife's uneven class relations which expel the backlander from the city's map [*que os sacudissem de qualquer ponto/dentro do rio e da morte*] (68).

In contradistinction, the Nativity gift giving sequence in *Morte e Vida* articulates what we might call a measure of "poetry in the world." Performed in choral song and through metaphorical chains of signification, it will take us back to the epistemological problem of hearing and mediating the voices of the backlanders in Recife. Although Severino does not take part in the Nativity procession and chorus, he overhears the metaphorical, redemptive, and prophetic chorus of the poor. Following Fredric Jameson, the contrasting dimensions of "prosa" versus "poetry" in *Morte e Vida* may be productively seen as a problematic, allegorical horizon of writing that Cabral was interested in breaching: one that recreates the popular Nativity play as a powerful *poetic, communicative, and critical act*.

The Nativity scene, in *Morte e Vida*, inscribes a poetic state of exception into the very heart of impasse that is staged in the work. As a form of response to Severino's existential query concerning the meaning of life and thoughts of suicide, a chorus of shore squatters, backlanders, and gypsies enter the scene celebrating the birth of an unlikely Christological child. In unison they sing of how the world has reached a sort of still point, where the clouded muddy waters of the Capibaribe have become clear and where all the earth and sky sing in adoration of the newborn babe. As the wise men who brought to the baby Jesus precious gifts such as gold, frankincense and myrrh, the poor offer presents to the babe. They announce their gifts in choral song—crawfish, breastfeeding, a newspaper to be used as a blanket for warmth, etc.—and invoke their offerings with a poignant refrain, "Minha pobreza tal é" [My poverty is such]. Prefaced in terms of poverty and lack, the economy of gifts that the backlander entourage proffer are *regional* in nature, products gleaned from the Capibaribe shore and Pernambuco region. An *alternative economy* to the one of the gravediggers is therefore established, an economy of gift giving from the community which consists of natural products that are endemic to the region and which, far from alienating subjects, bind them intimately such as the mother who offers to breastfeed the babe because she has no other possessions to give:

– Minha pobreza tal é/que não trago presente caro:/como não posso trazer um olho d'água de Lagoa de Carro,/trago aqui água de Olinda,/água de bico do Rosário. [...] –Trago abacaxi de Goiana/e de todo o Estado rolete de cana./ –Eis ostras chegadas agora,/apanhadas no cais de Aurora./ – Eis tamarindos de Jaqueira/ e jaca da Tamarineira./ – Mangabas do Cajueiro/e cajus de Mangabeira. (74-75,19-24; 41-48)

[– My poverty is such that/I do not bring an expensive present:/such as a pinch of water from the Lake de Carro,/I bring here instead water from Olinda,/water from Rosario [...] – I bring

pineapple from Goiana,/and all the State replete with sugar./ –Here’s some recently arrived oysters,/gathered from the Aurora quays./Here’s some Jaqueira tamarinds/and jack fruit from Tamarineira./ – Tropical fruits from Cajueiro/and cashews from Mangabeira.]

This economy of poetic objects places emphasis on the gifts’ regional provenance, and is important for several reasons. First, through them the choral backlander subjects and their entourage of gypsies build, we could say, a counter map to institutional or liberal modernity in the gravedigger’s sense, “de profissões liberais/que não se liberam jamais”(66, 79-80). Distinct from the world of capital and the dishonoring of the dead that characterized the gravediggers’ mapping of Recife, this “poetic” map is composed in choral song, and enounced as a form of *gift* in the Derridean sense,²³ as an alternative economy of signification outside the logic of exchange value. Indeed, this gift giving chorus, that inverts the wise men trope and substitutes the importation of gold and frankincense from far away dynasties with regional “poor” products, has a remarkable poetic vocation. Not only do they reorganize this shabby manger scene with their discourses on miracles, but their very language inseminates their gifts and their description of the Messianic babe with polysemic connotations: “é tão belo como um sim/numa sala negativa./É tão belo como a soca/que o canavial multiplica./Belo porque é uma porta abrindo-se em mais saídas./Belo como a última onda/(...)É tão belo como as ondas/em sua adição infinita”(78, 39-48).

The gypsies’ prophecy reframes these conflicting economies—the former based on exchange value and exclusion (gravediggers), the latter on a regional sequence of gifts fashioned out of poverty and poetic expansion (backlander Nativity chorus). Like the angels that greeted and guided the wise men in their journey to the manger in Bethlehem, the gypsies guide the reader and spectator through a teleological narrative in which the backlander babe will eventually acquire a job in a factory and thereby transcend his marginalized status as an institutionless squatter on the banks of the Capibaribe, “Não o vejo dentro dos mangues,/vejo-o dentro de uma fábrica” (77). The wording of their oracular telling, however, takes us beyond the mere economic plotting of this newborn’s future life. Just as Severino in his dramatic departure described himself as a metaphorical figure “passo a ser o Severino/que em vossa presença emigra,” the two gypsies employ a vocabulary that incorporates numerous references to the constructed status of this newborn, as if his very life were symbolic, mimetic, an aesthetic object that required another level of interpretation:

– Atenção peço senhores,/para *esta breve leitura*:/somos ciganas do Egito,/lemos a sorte futura. [...] – Atenção peço, senhores,/ também para *minha leitura*:/também venho dos Egitos,/vou *completar a figura*. [...] Minha amiga se esqueceu/de *dizer todas as linhas*;/não pensam que a vida dele/há de ser sempre daninha./ Não o vejo dentro dos mangues,/vejo-o dentro de uma fábrica:/se está negro não é lama,/é graxa de sua máquina,/coisa mais limpa que a lama/do pescador de maré/que vemos aqui, vestido/de lama da cara ao pé. (Emphasis added 75-77, 1-4; 32-35; 41-56)

[– I ask your attention, ladies and gentlemen/for *this brief reading*:/we are gypsies from Egypt,/we read future fortunes. [...] – Attention I also ask, ladies and gentlemen/for *my reading*:/I also hail from the Egypt,/I will complete the figure. [...] My lady friend forgot/to tell you the rest of the lines;/Please don’t think that this babe’s life/ will always be rough./I don’t see him forever scavenging in the swamps,/I see him inside a factory:/and if he’s there black,/ it’s not from mud,/it’s from the grease of his machine,/a thing that’s cleaner than the mud/of a riverside scavenger/that we customarily see in these parts,/clothed in mud from face to foot].

By layering the gypsies' fortunetelling with references to the constructed quality of the babe as "a figura," the stakes of representation are multiplied before us. I am referring to how the gypsies' prophecy is underwritten by a system of self-referencing meta-textual devices: "atenção peço para esta breve leitura," "minha amiga se esqueceu de todas as linhas," "vou completar a figura," etc. Consequently, the metaliterary references interrupt the gypsies' prophecy and mediate its contents, multiplying its possible meanings. The prophecy of the Messianic future factory worker is duplicitous [*vou completar a figura*]. Because this Messianic babe is duplicitously figured as an object and metapoetic "figura" of writing, Derrida's notion of semiotic *différance*²⁴ proves productive in helping us decipher the semantic plurality that underwrites this system of writing. I am pointing to how the drive to the metapoetic in *Morte e Vida* imposes a double text that always already exceeds the order of an absolute signified or meaning. Accordingly, we can no longer take this poetic object and theatrical staging at face value. Like the gypsies in this entirely textual scene of reading and interpretation, we are implicated as critics. To respond and decipher, to "complete the figure" of the Messianic babe, is to actively reposition it in its multiple levels of textual unfolding.

The Spectacle of the Poem: The Explosion of the Letter.

Morte e Vida Severina famously concludes with a monologue by Seu José, father of the Christological backlander babe. In it, he returns to Severino's query concerning the sense of existence. It will be recalled that Severino was driven to existential anguish and a suicidal death wish on entering the city of Recife and overhearing a pair of gravediggers literally state that the droves of nomadic backlanders who flee the violent Sertão, like Severino, "follow their own death" in their pursuit of *vida* or the promise of modern life in Recife. Following the birth of his son, Seu José's final response to Severino is highly ambiguous insofar as it is constructed through metaphorical chains and organized around the semantic constellation of "response" and "explosion."

While critical literature has tended to view Seu José's "resposta" as the solid affirmation of his son's new life and as a sort of moral resolution to Severino's death wish—where new life is seen almost wishfully as an antidote²⁵ to the ills and violence of modernity—it is my contention that Seu José's "response" is suspended by the formal features at play in this concluding passage to *Morte e Vida Severina*. In other words, I want to argue here for a reading that negotiates a more *dynamic* response implied at the level of composition, and which triggers us to reengage the theme of hearing the other and the literary problem of rewriting the Pernambuco Nativity in mid-century Brazil.

Seu José's response is organized by Severino's faculty of hearing and his existential impasse, which are relayed to us from the play's final stage directions: "O CARPINA FALA COMO O RETIRANTE QUE ESTEVE DE FORA, SEM TOMAR PARTE EM NADA" "[THE CARPENTER SPEAKS WITH SEVERINO WHO WAS OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, AND DIDN'T TAKE PART IN THE PROCESSION] (80).

Throughout the work, Severino's penchant to listen or even eavesdrop on the voices of popular subjects constitutes a formal structuring mechanism. Hearing the other suspends Severino's heroic action as protagonist and quest for modern life, and ushers in a plural "cantoria" of voices that Severino must negotiate through soliloquies. This will to self-reflexivity through the soliloquy form as response to the subaltern oral chorus is paired by the sedimentation of metaliterary devices that call attention to the poem's literariness, and to its altogether constructed constitution as a work of literature. In this final scene, Severino listens and *significantly* does not enter into a self-reflexive

soliloquy. His action and economic itinerary have been suspended—reduced to a zero degree of listening. Why does the poem conclude with this reduction of the hero's agency? Put differently, what is implied by a literary project that emphasizes “response” by means of hearing a community of voices who sing from the margins of the Capibaribe? What is meant by the metaphorical “explosion” that Seu José monologue reiterates?

The “explosion” sequence that constitutes the poem's denouement may be seen as a site from which these theoretical problems are negotiated in powerfully suggestive fashion. After having responded to Severino that he effectively doesn't know whether or not suicide is worth it, Seu José points out to Severino that the birth of his newborn is indeed a response: “ela, a vida, a respondeu/com sua presença viva”[that birth, life, responded/with her vivid presence] (80).

Seu José response to Severino does not stop with the affirmation of his son's birth: “E não há melhor resposta/que o espetáculo da vida:/vê-la desfiar seu fio,/que também se chama vida,/ver a fabrica que ela mesma,/teimosamente se fabrica,/vê-la brotar como há pouco/em nova vida explodida”[And there is no better response/than the spectacle of life:/watch it unwind its thread,/that is also called life,/watch the fabric that this very [spectacle]/obstinately fabricates,/watch it flower like just now/in new exploded life](80). This “spectacle of life” that “unwind[s] its thread” connotes the implicit textuality of the work in its present performative textual inscription. As a hybrid genre, *Morte e Vida Severina* is a long “poem for voices” and also the rewriting of the Portuguese Medieval Nativity Play.

As a theatre piece but also as a modern poem that rewrites a variety of genres and incorporates a Medieval verse scheme, it is patently a work of mimesis, “a spectacle of life” or project of aesthetic representation whose threads are the textual written word. In so far as Seu José's response takes on a metaliterary dimension, his response to Severino at the level of the plot is momentarily intercepted. We are confronted with the problem of representation proper and how it “fabricates” life. His answer to Severino concerning suicide and the meaning of his newborn are therefore put under erasure, semantically “exploded,” by the metaliterary build up of the notion of “response.” This category connotes ethical imperatives and is framed in terms of Severino's existential dilemma, but is also very significantly following the turn to the metaliterary in Seu José's response, a “reading” of the chorus and the newborn baby.

If intellectual “responsibility” and the “becoming political” of the literary were ideas that defined a generation of intellectuals in Latin America during the 1950s and 60s as Beatriz Sarlo has convincingly argued, we are faced with the problem of aesthetic strategy concerning the representation of the “people,” “the subaltern,” and the “impasse” of the autonomized letter (142-143).²⁶

And if Severino's dramatic flight from the violence of the backlands ended in bleak prospects of an uneven modernity, the metaliterary explosion that concludes *Morte e Vida Severina* articulates a powerful will to negotiate the alienation of the letter from the commons. I am referring to the dynamic and duplicitous field of representation that characterizes this writing project. Transcending the confines of the Medieval Nativity Play whose endpoint traditionally served to strengthen faith in the Christian religion and provided a response to death through spiritual transcendence, *Morte e Vida Severina* explicitly inverts and secularizes the Messianic promise: the new Messiah here is a backlander babe who will join the ranks of an emerging industrial proletariat, and whose future is entirely uncertain as Seu José relates to Severino. The economic teleological prophecy²⁷ of this newborn allegorizes the violence of modernity in the North East of Brazil, and may be seen as a counter political drive whose utopianism attempts to rewrite social contradictions from the sphere of aesthetics

(Fredric Jameson).²⁸ The dynamic, duplicitous gesture in this project that I wish to highlight, however, is found in the metaliterary dimension of the work that suspends the plot's representation.

Seu José's response to Severino, then, may be read as the condensation of an ethical appeal: by exploding the object of representation and by marshalling in a Messianic political subject in the form of the industrial proletarian babe, the reader is placed at an impasse of interpretation whose line of demarcation not only separates text from reader but provides a cognitive mapping of the poetic letter and the impasse of speaking for or writing about the subaltern. Exploding the form of response in *Morte e Vida Severina* is ultimately an explosion of the letter. Just as Severino had to hear the call of the other to find sense and purpose in the chaos and violence of modernity, so the reader is enjoined by the metaliterary to heed the spectacle of the explosive, dynamic, and duplicitous written word. Semantic *life* from the poetic explosion of the field of representation configures a counter-drive to violence and hegemonic strategies of representation that exclude Severino from modernity's map.²⁹ *Vida severina*—the neologism connoting a utopian “response” that ultimately stands for the Messianic babe but also for a form of writing that auto-severs its connection with the plot sequence in its metaliterary drive, and in so doing, for a consequent heightening of the severity of its political objects insofar as ideological conclusion is put under erasure, suspended, metaphorically “exploded”—is just that overcoming of the impasse of representation and death space from which Cabral de Melo Neto builds his case for vanguardism and political relevance in the poetry of the 1950s.

4. *The Politics of Vanguarda in Cabral de Melo Neto*

As a concept, and *not* as a descriptive metaphor, I am deploying the notion of vanguard [*vanguarda*]—in contradistinction to the Brazilian Modernista avant-garde culturalist, anthropophagic, and constructivist paradigm born from The Week of Modern Art in São Paulo, 1922—to designate what I have called Cabral's will to negotiate the politics and crisis of margins and poetic form in mid 20th century Brazil. What I wish to theoretically maintain in the concept of vanguarda can be *divergently* associated to Fredric Jameson's assessment of the concepts of modernity and high modernism in his book, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (2002). For Jameson, modernity and modernism are best framed as dialectical historical and aesthetic categories. Most importantly, these dialectical frames enable and mobilize a theoretical reading of the modern(ist) past from the vantage of the (postmodern) present, and from the aesthetic thrust of utopia and transfiguration implicit in the domain of the modernist aesthetic (*A Singular Modernity* 136).

Jameson's reading strategy in regards to the modernist paradigm unfolds over the dilemma of the interpretation of the past. How can we productively read past modernist inspired art forms, by which I mean, following Jameson, works that endeavor to construct new subjectivities and to transform and transgress the normative discursive structures that configure the biopolitical subjection of life? Not only formally hybrid and innovative, I have shown how Cabral's *Morte e Vida Severina* thematizes Latin American subalternity and imposes a counterfocalization of this “modern” problematic through Severino's faculty of hearing and the metapoetic “explosion” of the poetic letter.

What do we do with the specificity and unevenness of different forms of literary “modernism” and “modernity” in Latin America as Julio Ramos stresses in his *Divergent Modernities* (2001)? What can a reassessment of Latin American *vanguarda* in the fields of history, politics, the arts, literature and theory do for us with regards to our understanding of the present? How can we sidestep and challenge the “colonization and commercialization of the Unconscious” proper to late capitalism (12)? What sort of new theoretical perspectives and rewritings of the past can we achieve from a dialectical

understanding of the recent (modernist) past, especially from the vantage of mid-twentieth century Brazil?

In his analysis of the modernist category, Jameson holds that a productive reading of this term, of course connoting transfiguration, progress, revolution—tied to a statist, industrial vocabulary and rhetoric, alongside all the European avant-garde movements and subjectivities such as those pushed by Surrealism and Dada, for example—requires that we rethink it first as “a narrative category” and then as one of an aesthetic of “adaptation” (94-95). What this means is that, for Jameson, it would be insufficient for us to solely describe aesthetic inventories and formulae in terms of textual *effects*. And yet, if we are to dialectically “narrate” in our readings of modernism, or in my case, Latin American vanguardism in the 1950s and 60s, we also have to undo the deadlocks that fasten us wholly to the historical period in which the work was conceived. Modernism’s aesthetic dimension for Jameson is crucial in this regard, and points up, among other theoretical constellations surrounding the concept, to his recasting of modernist subjectivity in terms of “depersonalization” and as an allegorical projection through artistic form of a desired social “transfiguration”:

It is on the face of it perverse not to hear the great modernist evocations of subjectivity as so much longing for depersonalization, and precisely for some new existence outside the self, in a world radically transformed and worthy of ecstasy. What has so often been described as a new and deeper, richer subjectivity, is in fact this call to change which always resonates through it: not subjectivity as such, but its transfiguration. This is then the sense in which I choose to consider modernist ‘subjectivity’ as allegorical of the transformation of the world itself, and therefore of what is called revolution. The forms of this allegory are multiple; yet all the anecdotal psychologies in which it finds itself dressed – in their stylistic, cultural and characterological differences – have in common that they evoke a momentum that cannot find resolution within the self, but that must be completed by a Utopian and revolutionary transmutation of the world of actuality itself. (136)

Jameson has here taken the standard assumption regarding the subjectivist adventures and experimentalism in European modernism to another, historically rich level. The will to inscribe subjectively unique and innovative aesthetic forms spells out, from an allegorical, historical, and renarrativized level, a project of transfiguration whose ultimate referent is the modern nation state and its polis or multitude. Jameson is careful to remind us that his reading is allegorical and not literal. He thereby preserves the aesthetic specificity of the text’s formal projection, but “adapts” the text to the present. Depersonalization as an allegorical trope for reading modernist subjectivity also importantly articulates a variety of topics regarding the institution of art, the place of the professionalized artist in society, and the reception of the work with respect to bourgeois civil society and the multitude.

Peter Bürger called the fundamental characteristic of the historical European avant-gardes the attack on the institutionalization of art and the desire to bring art back into the praxis of daily life (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 49). Bürger’s position thereby regards the vocation of the European avant-garde as a drive to abolish the bourgeois category of the aesthetic as a disinterested sphere outside production and praxis. Jameson’s reading of modernist subjectivity seems to pick up on this motif, but makes a significant rearrangement by constantly locating his critical position in the postmodern: Jameson narrates aesthetic products and their ideological contents from an allegorical position that regards modernist art as an endeavor to transform social reifications. Accordingly, the modernist subject’s drive for subjective plenitude through art forms is an invented and imagined utopian resolution to the

capitalist division of labor and the fragmentation and dissipation of the faculties that Jameson frequently bemoans. Reassessing modernist literature and artworks through this dialectical, collective, and utopian key allows one to not only delimit the instability of the present from an historically informed and aesthetically diverse perspective, but perhaps more crucially for Jameson, it provides a theoretically productive standpoint to take political positions and re-imagine modernist strategies of utopia and revolution in an increasingly mediated present (11; 102; 167).

In the context of Latin America and the contemporary collapse of the national popular state, a similar reading strategy is expressed by Alberto Moreiras. According to Moreiras, the historical modalities and movements of Latin American literatures are to be reread as “genealogical ciphers” of a Latin American intellectual and cultural history that is concerned with the representation and preservation of an alternative Latin American modernity which includes the engaged representation of and upon the radically “other” (32) :

The canonical texts of Latin American postmodernity must be reread, perhaps reinterpreted, in the search for the way in which their own understanding of historical self-positioning can illuminate, rather than obscure our own. If subalternism then comes to appear as the inescapable horizon of critical Latin Americanism in times of late-capitalist globalization, the previous traditions of Latin American thinking and writing survive as the genealogical cipher of a history that cannot be merely refuted; on the contrary, it must be actively affirmed at the very moment in which one takes critical distance from it. (*The Exhaustion* 165).

What connects Jameson’s model to Moreiras, then, is the idea of an allegorical “historical self-positioning” that one can extract from a reading of texts or artworks. Of course, instead of Jameson’s “utopian drive” and “depersonalization” derived from the texts and artworks of European modernism, for Moreiras the focus is the contemporary turn to Latin American Cultural and Subaltern Studies and the historical emphasis in Latin American literatures on giving form and engaging in local, historical, and contingent representations of cultural singularity, which includes the subaltern other on the margins of state:

The Latin American literary tradition is almost exclusively definable as the quasi-systematic exploration of the specificity of the Latin American alternative modernity from what today are outdated concepts of identity and difference. [...] Our immediate past’s critical project, at least those of us formed in Latin Americanist humanities, was very precisely to understand the Latin American alternative modernities in their various specificities.[...] The aesthetic was therefore a means toward historicism[.] [...] The Latin American national-popular state, which defines or sutures symbolic production in the region, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the late 1970s, was a form of aesthetization of the political[.] [...] Critical reason for that period was an aesthetic-historicist project that looked to preserve and reinforce the specificity of the Latin American (and Argentinean, Mexican, etc.) social power against an invasive and threatening outside. (4; 13-14).

If we are to retrace Cabral’s will to form from a vanguard position in the Brazil of the 1950s, it is from the way by which the poem negotiates the impasse of the poetic letter with the commons and subaltern margins, and from a more profound textual self-reflexivity and “historical self-positioning” that we extract from his poetic texts. We have shown how the metapoetic drive in *Morte e Vida Severina* constitutes the text and its poetic objects as duplicitous, dynamic, and critical. Insofar as the dramatic poem stretches the limits of representation in poetic and political senses through this self-

referencing strategy, the work forges a difficult and demanding theoretical vocation for poetry and the social referents that it takes on as objects. Just as Seu José's final response to Severino is underwritten by a metapoetic double entendre [*E não há melhor resposta/que o espetáculo da vida:/vê-la desfilar seu fio,/que também se chama vida*], it suspends Severino's existential dilemma and death wish, and forces the reader to think of his "resposta" from a compositional standpoint and from the vantage of the political problem of Latin American subalternity and the crisis of speaking "for" the margins through poetic writing (80). Through the metapoetic the poem suspends the reader's judgment even as it configures for her/him a textually complex and socially critical position.

Vanguard, Underdevelopment, and the Aesthetic of Communication

"A minha geração é uma geração crítica."

—Antonio Candido, "Plataforma da nova geração" (1943).

The complexity of Cabral's textual strategies with respect to the subaltern and the impasse of poetry should be understood against the notion of vanguarda as a narrative concept in Latin America. The idea of Latin American vanguardism in the 1950s and 60s coincides with what Tulio Halperín Donghi has established as the gradual but definitive establishing of the Keynesian planning state across the region. The world wide market debacle of 1929, which witnessed the implosion of the international credit system and the general demise of an uneven "neocolonial" Latin American export-centered economic model, serves as the lens that allows us to rethink the emphasis in Latin America on the function of a more "rugged," "nativist" popular nation state and its well documented strategic substitution of foreign imports for industrialization (209). In effect, in Halperín Donghi's view, the collapse of the world market ushered in the first of three important paradigm shifts regarding the new powerful state era in Latin America:

The economic crisis that began in 1929 radically redefined the context in which Latin American economies operated, as the volume of international trade contracted by half in three years. The disintegration of the financial system cut off the flow of credits and investments that had kept more than one Latin American economy afloat during the previous decade. [...]

National states were now the only economic entities rugged enough to navigate in such high seas, but measures to palliate the disaster had to go well beyond state management of international trade, and Latin American states began to exercise functions and adopt techniques unimaginable only a few years before. (209)

The rallying call for national industrialization, and the concomitant economic strategies of quelling overproduction, setting prices, erecting larger bureaucratic structures to manage the state's institutions, and even the destruction of surplus production effectively nullified the so-called "laissez-faire" neocolonial economic order (210). The second paradigm shift is brought about by the advent of World War II. During this juncture, especially at the War's inception, the once primary Latin American export sector was crippled by lost European and Asian markets, and an extensive reduction in international commerce. If import substitution had been uneven before the second War, state intervention in the international political economy now became normative. Finally, the third paradigm shift may be located at the War's close, a moment in which the Latin American planning states had at once "recovered" at the level of industrial production and regulated international trade, but had also seen the ripening consequences of an inherent structural problem since Latin American state consolidation in the form of "the regional unevenness of development": many workers lived in shantytowns, state services were marked by scarce resources, and the new middleclass standard of living brought about by industrialization was generally difficult to maintain (214-215). In the words

of Halperín Donghi, the postwar period was a decisive time for the Latin American nation state, that though marked by structural “imbalance” and “unevenness,” held “optimistic” prospects for overcoming dependency:

In 1945, it was generally recognized that Latin America had reached a crossroads, that the accumulation of old and new problems called for nothing less than a complete economic restructuring. The moment seemed ripe for the region to escape the peripheral role that it had played in the international economy during the colonial and neocolonial periods. [...] For the first time in their history, Latin American countries had become creditors, rather than debtors, to Europe and the United States. (214)

Against the backdrop of state ascendancy, industrialization, and the economic chaos that these years witnessed (1929-1945), we see a corresponding rise in novel political currents, counter ideological platforms, and an invigoration of hitherto marginalized political sectors such as the communist, socialist, and anarchist parties which were likewise strengthened by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In this uneven yet rich ideological terrain, contextualized by the advent of the radio and a nascent cultural industry, the dissemination of the economic theories of underdevelopment and thirdworldism proved key for the political left and the subsequent vanguard ideological stances cultivated in the post-war Latin American lettered city.

The articulation of the Latin American nation state with the lettered, and the central role of literature in this formative dialectic, has been amply theorized. In what follows I will discuss two leading Brazilian intellectuals’ views on the relationship of literature to the state during the age of underdevelopment, statism, and popular nationalism. I will close with a discussion on Cabral’s place in this epochal relation of nation and letters.

The place and institution of literature in Brazil, and for that matter across Latin America at this key mid-century conjuncture, was directly influenced by a constellation of problems that arose with the planning, national-popular state. Leading critics that came of age in this period, such as Angel Rama, Antonio Candido, Roberto Schwarz, David Viñas, Noé Jitrik, and Ferreira Gullar have written extensively on the properly political topics that literature began to address with force. The literary act was generally seen by these thinkers as a mode of questioning and engaging the problematical discourses of underdevelopment, economic neocolonialism, North American hegemony, cultural dependency, and the crisis of the national-popular state. Another important factor directly influencing the self-reflexive and politicized production of literature, as Beatriz Sarlo stresses in her important volume on the period, *La Batalla de las ideas (1943-1973)*, is the continental wide influence of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Marxian existentialism that posited the writer as totally situated and responsible for engaging through literature and intellectual production such political problems as colonization and alienation. As Alberto Moreiras has it, the Latin American literary institution, inextricably tied to the preoccupation of the national popular state and cultural dependency, became an active site in which literary texts were seen as “countermovements to cultural dependency” (*The Exhaustion* 168), and where the literary topic of regionalism became the “master paradigm” (173). A new concept of *vanguardia* was thus wrought from these polemical discourses, or in Sarlo’s formulation, a “battle of ideas” over the status of the popular multitudes, the underdeveloped nation-state, and the significance or place of literature and the Latin American intellectual.

Antonio Candido’s essay “Plataforma da nova geração” [Platform for the New Generation] published in the periodical, *O Estado de São Paulo* (1943), already presents in kernel form the problems of a

Latin American literary vanguard position with respect to the cultural problematics of underdevelopment and Latin American literary production that he monumentally theorized in 1971 in his now classic essay, “Literatura e subdesenvolvimento” [Literature and Underdevelopment]. Writing under Getúlio Vargas’s Estado Novo, which also significantly contextualizes Cabral’s first volume of poetry *Pedra de Sonho*, Candido weighs in on the place of literature and the role of the Brazilian intellectual in her/his relation to the state. The rhetoric of his essay adopts a structuring “developmentalist” frame, in which the Brazilian intellectual is cast as a self-reflexive critic that questions the “disorganization” and “historical development” of the Brazilian social sphere (shorthand for the problem of the multitude against the backdrop of the Second World War), and begins to shed foreign influence and “intellectual immaturity” by adopting a sociological, self-reflexive gaze over her/his intellectual production in relation to the historical development of the nation state (238; 244).

Significantly, the essay is couched in a manifesto idiom, in which Candido compares the “new generation” of Brazilian intellectuals to that of the Brazilian Modernistas of the 1920s—a common strategy of legitimation and confrontation for Brazilian intellectuals in mid-century in their articulations of a vanguard concept of intellectual activity. Candido’s contention is that Brazilian Modernismo was a generation of “artists,” and his is one of social critics who are coming to full, self-reflexive, and critical maturity. The national-popular preoccupation is here foregrounded insofar as Candido stipulates that the new generation’s purpose is to question and build on what the Modernistas inaugurated in their drive to literary autonomy and cultural anthropophagia. His narrative of Brazilian literature, in other words, comes into focus through a developmentalist teleological lens with Modernismo being the narrative starting point to the extent that it sedimented once and for all “the liberty of the artist” in her/ his relation to the state. However, Candido reads Modernismo as a promise that ultimately failed because of its “hedonistic” experimentalism and intellectual exhibitionism (239).

Countering the Modernistas, in a position that Candido will repeat throughout his critical writings—discourses that serve as a veritable archeology and stethoscope for sounding the concepts of the national and Latin American literary vanguards in the age of dependency and neocolonialism—he posits that the 1930s witnessed the true “origin” of Brazilian literature with the cultivation of the regionalist paradigm:

Para falar a verdade, com os de 30 é que começa a literatura brasileira. Surgem os escritores que pouco devem o modelo estrangeiro, os estudos que começam a sistematizar o estudo do Brasil e proceder à análise generalizada dos seus problemas. A geração de 20 foi mais um estouro de “enfants-terribles.” [...] A de 30 é o historicismo grande-burguês de Gilberto Freyre, e é também o realismo histórico de Caio Prado Junior [...] dos romances de José Olympio e do planteamento dos problemas sócias no Brasil. (239-240)

[To speak truthfully, the 1930s is when Brazilian literature begins. We are faced with the emergence of writers who owe little to foreign models, and with an upsurge in studies that begin to systematize the study of Brazil and interpret its core problems. The generation of 1920 was a group of “enfants-terribles.” [...] The generation of 1930 is one influenced by the liberal historicism of Gilberto Freyre, and is also the moment of historical realism established by the cases of [national interpretative] essayist Caio Prado Junior [...] and of novelist José Olympio and their establishing of social problems confronting Brazil through novels [and sociopolitical interpretative essays.]

The sociological study and literary representation of national particularity is built up at the expense of aesthetic formal virtuosity à la the avant-garde poetry of Mario and Oswald de Andrade. Put differently, could we not see Candido's celebration of the drive towards regional particularity in literature as a productive site to reinterpret the planning Estado Novo? Could we not go on to establish that shedding "foreign influence" and "developing" through the mechanism of literature the particularity of the Brazilian regional subjects as a key component to the historical and politicized re-laboration of the concept of *vanguarda* in Latin America?

The regional subject³⁰ is posited in this early writing by Antonio Candido as the epistemological ground of an identitarian, state-centered discourse of authenticity that literature's task is to build and question. And literature is imagined as a mode of cultural production that builds the regional subject even as it questions the social and discursive disorder of the times. The figure of the vanguard intellectual is therefore constituted in the interstices of this problematic as a "civil" writer with an ethical obligation to question readymade notions, foreign influence, and whose gaze is aimed at developing from intellectual immaturity [foreign influence] to one that focuses on the nationally proper in the form of the regional subject—a synecdoche for an uneven, still underdeveloped, yet "authentic" Brazilian identity (245).

Critic and renowned poet, Ferreira Gullar forges a vision of Brazilian *vanguarda* that reiterates and strengthens Candido's claims concerning the new critical generation of Brazilian intellectuals in his *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento* (1969) [Vanguard and Underdevelopment]. For our purposes, the essay is significant for two interrelated reasons. First, Gullar offers a sustained meditation on the concept of *vanguarda* against the international context of Latin American underdevelopment. Second, the essay mobilizes the aesthetic problem of incorporating social referents and realism, popular culture, and the cultural industry in art—key for Cabral's decisive turn to sociological referents following *Psicologia da Composição* in 1947, and central to a reassessment of *Morte e Vida Severina*.

Gullar's running thesis is that the normative, Eurocentric understanding of vanguard activity as the formal quest for the new in art and literature in Latin American and other underdeveloped nations must be rethought and rewritten with the purpose of "liberating" the consciousness of an entirely "massified" society. The skillful crafting of the "new" in aesthetics is inverted by the quest for adequacy and relevance with regards to the new in a total social context. And the new context for Gullar includes the "massification" of culture by the cultural industry which is at once negative and reactionary for it diminishes the popular subjects' critical faculties and is controlled by the capitalists; however, it performs a universalizing, and to a certain extent, important internationalizing role with respect to the multitudes. This is important for Gullar, and directly bears on the problem of vanguard and form. European forms and epistemological apparatuses, though necessary, also serve as a principle of subjection. Brazilian intellectuals of the past have been tied to a trenchant Eurocentrism that in the end derail and displace the national vocation and project of cultural singularity and autonomy that underwrites a literature conditioned by cultural dependency. It is precisely here that the concept of a Latin American vanguard for Gullar becomes a critical one, as in Candido, of mediating Eurocentric modes of knowledge and addressing through art the particularity of the Brazilian collective subject:

Mas essas "vanguardas" trazem em si, embora equivocadamente, a questão do novo, e essa é uma questão essencial para os povos subdesenvolvidos e para os artistas desses povos. A necessidade de transformação é uma exigência radical para quem vive numa sociedade dominada pela miséria e quando se sabe que essa miséria é produto de estruturas arcaicas. *A grosso modo*, somos o passado dos países desenvolvidos e eles são "o espelho de nosso futuro". [...] Temos

necessidade do novo e o novo “está feito”. O velho é a dominação, sobre nós, do passado e também do presente, porque o nosso presente é dominado por aqueles mesmos que nos trazem o novo. [...] Assim, o novo é, para nós, contraditoriamente, a liberdade e a submissão. Mas isso porque o imperialismo é, ao mesmo tempo, o novo e o velho. O novo é a ciência, a técnica, as invenções, que são propriedade da humanidade como um todo, mais estão em grande parte nas mãos do imperialismo, que é o velho. Por isso mesmo é que a luta pelo novo, num mundo subdesenvolvido, é uma luta antiimperialista. Isso é tanto verdade no campo de economia, como no da arte. A verdadeira vanguarda artística, num país subdesenvolvido, é aquela que, buscando o novo, busca a libertação do homem, a partir de sua situação concreta, internacional e nacional. (8)

[But these “vanguards” carry with them, albeit equivocally, the question of the new, and this is the essential question for the underdeveloped countries and for the artists of these countries. The necessity of transformation is a radical exigency for whoever lives in a society dominated by misery and when that person knows that that misery is a product of archaic structures. In *grosso modo*, we are the past of the developed countries and these countries are “the mirror of our future.” [...] We have a necessity for the new and the new “is already made.” The old amounts to domination, on us, from the past but also concerning the present, because our present is dominated by the countries who bring us the new. [...] Thus, the new is, for us, contradictorily, freedom and submission. But this because imperialism is, at the same time, the new and the old. The new is science, technique, inventions, which are the property of all humanity as everything else, but they are largely in the hands of imperialism, which is the old. For this reason the struggle for the new, in an underdeveloped world, is the anti-imperialist struggle. This is equally true for the field of economics and the field of the arts. The true artistic vanguard, in an underdeveloped country, is that which, in its quest for the new, seeks the liberation of man, beginning with his concrete, international and national situation.]

Contextualized by an increasingly repressive Brazilian military dictatorship that began with the coup of 1964, which ousted populist President João Goulart, and published by the famous and polemical leftist *Editorial Civilização Brasileira* in Rio de Janeiro, Gullar’s essay, like Candido 26 years earlier, argues in a developmentalist key and ushers in a politicized concept of *vanguarda* as a mode of transforming and dialectically inverting through intellectual activity and artistic production the relationship of national subjection and cultural dependency. Insofar as art and literature exist in a more or less “autonomous relation” to the institutions that structure the public sphere, for Gullar, vanguard literature for an underdeveloped nation like Brazil has the capacity to enact an important political vocation with respect to the popular multitudes. The object of *vanguarda* is to articulate and disclose the actual social conditions that constitute the “authenticity” and plight of an underdeveloped state: “de exprimir em termos atuais, a problemática do homem brasileiro” [to express, in actual terms, the [sociopolitical and ideological] problematics facing Brazilian [society]](84).

If the historical avant-garde (Modernismo) entailed the cultivation and exploration of new aesthetic techniques mostly drawn or “cannibalized” from Europe, for Gullar *vanguarda* in underdeveloped societies such as Brazil must perforce displace the emphasis on formal innovation to a realist function that concerns national subjects relevant to the impasse of cultural dependency in an international context. And similar to Candido’s teleological narrative of Brazilian literature running from intellectual “immaturity” (because foreign inspired and idealist) to self-reflexive critical regionalism (his concept of *vanguarda*), Gullar’s notion of a Latin American vanguard position in literature is one that is underwritten by a critical questioning of the status of the underdeveloped nation in a

neocolonial international context that must negotiate the advent of “mass culture” or the cultural industry which has become the structuring principle, essentially “conservative,” for Gullar, and mystificatory of Brazilian reality:

De fato, essa complexa rêde de imagens, símbolos, palavras e modos de expressão, tecida e entecida diàriamente pelos veículos de comunicação, é a própria atualidade formulada do homem contemporâneo. Em que pêsse o esquematismo e a superficialidade dessa formulação, é nela, não obstante, que a maioria dos homens vê refletida, pelo menos, a face cotidiana, imediata, de sua existência. Uma visão estética que rejeita em bloco essa linguagem, rejeita, ao mesmo tempo, a formidável massa de experiências que nela se acumula, e, mais que isso, a própria atualidade que emerge nessa linguagem.

[...]

A aceitação crítica da linguagem da arte de massa é decorrência natural de uma visão cultural participante de atualidade. (129-130)

[Indeed, this complex network of images, symbols, words and modes of expression, woven and interwoven daily by the vehicles of communication, is reality proper, in its articulation of contemporary man. In that in spite of the schematicism and the superficiality of this formulation, it is in it, nevertheless, that the majority of men see themselves reflected, at least, the immediate, quotidian face of their existence. An aesthetic vision that rejects in block this language, rejects, at the same moment, a formidable mass of experiences in which accumulates, indeed more than man himself, actuality proper that emerges from this language.

[...]

The critical acceptance of this art of mass language is the natural step [one should take] in a cultural vision of participation in contemporary society].

Vanguard art is therefore conceived as decisively political and whose goal is ultimately one of establishing participation and communication as the political principles that determine aesthetic activity. This vision is grounded by a radical inversion of the notion of the Modernista avant-garde. Far from formalist, the idea of vanguarda is obtained in its *critical* function, rooted in the notion of the “reality” of “contemporary man,” which introduces a principle of dynamism in the debate on economic underdevelopment and cultural dependency in Latin America.

As we have shown throughout our analysis of Cabral’s theoretical writings and experimental texts, the problem of formal innovation and constructing a “modern poetry” for a “modern reader” were veritable obsessions for the poet. As Ferreira Gullar’s concept of vanguarda, and in line with Antonio Candido’s thesis on the intellectual thrust of the “new generation” of Brazilian writers at the onset of the age of Latin American underdevelopment, Cabral was only too aware of the crisis and tenuous place of poetry in the modern public sphere. The chaos of “mass communications” and “personal poetic positions” on the part of experimental poets effectively exacerbated poetry’s alienation from the commons and social praxis. All three thinkers coincide in the critical and ethical place they assign to the production of literature, and its need to overcome the “aestheticist” tendency of the avant-garde Modernistas of the 1920s. Literature had to “develop” into a critical apparatus that re-engaged the particularity of Brazilian subjects, and had to renounce the “personalist,” “formalist,” “subjectivist” often Eurocentric views that emerged following the Modernista revolution in the arts. Furthermore, the office of the writer was judged generally in terms of her/his engagement with the problem of communication and the construction of new modes of responding to the advent of mass

communications and apprehending through the arts the popular subjectivities that the cultural industry irreducibly conditioned and shaped.

The emphasis on the regional in literature is particularly enlightening with respect to this latter topic. The shift to a regional emphasis in Brazilian literature may be interpreted as the construction of a gaze that turned away from the normative mode of cultural production in the metropolis of a São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, and diverted its attention to the cultural and political materiality of the popular subjects in the hinterlands of the Sertão, as in Cabral, Graciliano Ramos, or João Guimarães Rosa. Far from constituting a sheer writing pad or aesthetic repository of themes and locally colored poetic objects for formal innovations in literature, the regional subject fulfilled, in its very peripheral position and marginal locus of enunciation, for these intellectuals the requirement of particularity and authenticity in their drive for the construction of a Brazilian literature that served as the expression of a culturally distinct yet problematic, still “unaccomplished” and uneven modernity in Latin America.

The regional subject—like Severino—presented a powerful example of an uneven mode of production, and all the violence that ensued from the chaos of an exceptionally deficient modern ordering of social life. Allegorically speaking, following Fredric Jameson, the concept of *vanguarda* in mid-century Latin America had to meet the problematics of the dependent planning state and *substitute* a Eurocentric interpretation of the aesthetic and *reconstruct* its hegemonic formal modernist techniques in order to build a counter state in a more concrete, realist light: the formally innovative regionalist text as an allegory of a counter modernity. Could we not then posit that this formally abstract drive to resolve modern material conditions and build a counter political subject from the local and marginalized subaltern a properly Latin American political unconscious vis-à-vis the economic problematics of *neocolonialismo*? Indeed, for Candido, the turning to the regional in the 1930s constituted the point of origin of Brazilian literature. Questioning the legacy of the Modernista avant-garde and erecting visions of the social and political from their poetic production served as the hinge that allowed these intellectuals to build a concept of *vanguarda* as quest for social relevance and political force. If the Modernistas of the 1920s were concerned with the national question in the arts, their Eurocentric gaze oftentimes dislodged any serious engagement with the Brazilian “homem moderno.”

And yet, if an underpinning emphasis of Brazilian *vanguarda* at mid-century resides in the specific political and aesthetic problems that concern the particularity of the national, what are we to make of Cabral’s gaze from afar? As of 1947, Cabral served as an international diplomat for the Brazilian state in Spain, France, England and Dakar. To write from within a state institution, and from across the Atlantic, becomes, after all, a particularly striking site for an intellectual who wishes to construct a self-reflexive, functional and critical literature of communication with the regional popular subject of Brazil, and to reconfigure poetry within the ambit of social praxis.

In addition to the theoretical strategies that one may readily extract from his formal innovative texts that imbed the metaliterary and invoke and problematize the art of poetic composition such as *Psicologia da Composição* (1947) and *Morte e Vida Severina* (1954-55), Cabral crafts his own position on the much debated concept of Latin American *vanguarda* in his correspondence with renowned poet and cousin, Manuel Bandeira. For Cabral, the question of *vanguarda*, understood as producing an innovative, critical poetry that mediated the present and the impasse of the literary and Brazilian subalternity, only came into focus from afar and hinges on the crafting of a new “palavra” centered in poetic activity and strategies of composition as opposed to writing aesthetico-ideological manifestos. For Cabral, the impasse that made this vision viable concerned the international division and comparison of letters and their distinct historicities and social materialities, and a consequent calling

for the desacralization of historically hegemonic Eurocentrism in the Brazilian arts. In a letter dated 11 November 1951, and from within the Brazilian consulate in Barcelona, Cabral writes to Bandeira about the impasse of the poetic in Brazil, and carves out a vanguard position against the abstract tendencies of the Brazilian poetic Geração of 45:

Por que v. não toma a frente de um movimento contra essa arte abstrata? Você vai responder que está cansado e desinteressado. [...] Mas você com sua autoridade podia muito bem tomar a frente de um movimento de denúncia do abstracionismo em pintura, de seu equivalente atonalismo da música e do neoparnassianismo-esteticismo da Geração de 1945. Eu namorei nessas coisas quando estive no Brasil. E quando vim para a Europa compreendi o que havia por debaixo de tudo isso e o trágico que é para nós brasileiros nos entregamos a todos esses requintes intelectuais. Porque da Europa é que pude descobrir como o Brasil é pobre e miserável. Isto é: depois de ver o que é a miséria européia— enorme da Espanha, Portugal, dura na França, na Inglaterra— acho que é preciso inventar outra palavra para a nossa, cem vezes mais forte.

Por tudo isso ser abstrato é trágico e ridículo para um brasileiro. [...]

[...]

Hoje eu compreendo melhor como para qualquer artista brasileiro deixar de ser brasileiro para ser “universal” significa empobrecimento. [...] Si eu tivesse algum prestígio escreveria alguma coisa sobre tudo isso. Mas a um autor já firmado é que deve caber a iniciativa. E além de tudo há o trabalho aqui no consulado e há a distância do Brasil para atrapalhar. Pensei em tratar desses assuntos num prefácio a uma edição de meus livrinhos de poesia já publicados [...] Mas desisti de prefácios. Podia parecer vontade de atrair a atenção sobre mim mesmo pela discussão e, como o Atlântico no meio, é impossível manter a discussão. Por isso saem os livros sem mais explicações. (*Correspondência de Cabral* 245-246).

[Why don't you put yourself at the front of a movement against this abstract art? You're going to reply that you're tired and uninterested. [...] But with your authority you could put yourself at the front of a movement that denounces abstractionism in painting, or its equivalent in music, atonalism, and the Neo-Parnassian Aestheticism of the Generation of 1945. I fell in love with this sort of things when I was in Brazil. And when I came to Europe I comprehended that underneath this [tendency in the arts was something] tragic: it resides in the fact that we Brazilians commit ourselves to these intellectual sophistications. Because from Europe is where I could discover how Brazil is poor and miserable. That is to say: after having seen what is European misery—enormous in Spain, Portugal, hard in France, in England—I think that it is necessary that we invent another word for ours, one hundred time stronger.

For all this, being abstract [in the arts] is tragic and ridiculous for a Brazilian.

[...]

Today I comprehend better how for any Brazilian artist [who follows the formula that requires that one evacuate their] Brazilian identity [*ser brasileiro*] in order to be “universal” signifies impoverishment. [...] If I had any prestige I would write something about all this. But an author already consecrated is the one who should take the initiative. And aside from everything else there is the work that must be performed here in the Consulate and the distance from Brazil that one must make up. I thought about dealing with these issues in a preface in one of my little books of poetry already published. [...] But I desisted from prefaces. It could seem like a desire to draw attention around my person, and [around the fact of starting a polemical] discussion, and, with the Atlantic in between, it is impossible to maintain the discussion. For this reason the books are born without any [extra] explanations].

Cabral's letter traces the international division of cultural and material production and underwrites the peripheral "misery" of the Brazilian nation-state as the condition of possibility for a position of poetic vanguarda in Latin America in the 1950s.

However afar Cabral's gaze may have been as an international diplomat, what Bandeira chided him for as being "fora completamente da *mêlée*" [completely outside the [national literary] *mêlée*], his project proves exemplary for two reasons (*Correspondência de Cabral* 140). On the one hand, in *Morte e Vida Severina* we witness the willed incorporation and figurative "explosion" of a subaltern subject into the field of literature. Severino's heroic exodus from peripheral "miséria," the violent hinterlands and suicidal death wish in Brazilian modernity (Recife), becomes a simultaneous allegorical synecdoche of an uneven Brazilian modernity and an explosive hybrid palimpsest that betrays mimesis and foregrounds the functionality and materiality of composition. To survive as a genre, it was necessary to write a more modern poetry, Cabral insisted, whose function would be dialectical and accomplished, via the metapoetic, the effective dynamization of the surface of the text and its relation to the reader. A poetry, Cabral wrote, that would be "capaz de levar a poesia a porta do homem moderno" [capable of carrying poetry to the door of modern man] (*Obra completa* 770). The final shape of this totally composed and hybrid text would employ the case of the modern subaltern backlander. The subaltern Severino thus became the site—opened up page for metaliterary reconstructions and interpretations—of Cabral's will through poetic form to pass beyond mimetic description. A will to a poetic style that can be seen as a socially symbolic act in its own right, and as Jameson describes it, an allegorical projection of utopia: to transfigure, through constant interpellations of the reader and an ever expanding hermeneutical horizon, the mid-century sociopolitical problematic that congealed over the debate on experimental letters, intellectuals, planning states and popular multitudes, and a vanguarda of Latin American underdevelopment.

For Cabral, the modernizing function that he assigned to poetry was not relativistic nor based on any single subject matter like the subaltern. Nor did it require writing under any single aesthetic paradigm. And yet, if at the time when *Morte e Vida Severina* was written, modernization theory and cultural dependency became the hegemonic discursive field that conditioned Latin American civil society, that very lettered city, in his view, had utterly failed to *modernize communication* via the more independent and self-reflexive sphere of experimental letters. Poetry, it seemed, had no place in the teleologies of underdevelopment. To construct the *functional* poem, to bring poetry to the door of the common man, as Cabral liked to say, then a poetry that was fundamentally hybrid and dynamic was called for: simultaneously the inversion of an epic narrative, a polyphonic play for voices, and a self-reflexive, critical poetry that mapped two emergent fields of modernity by rewriting the genre in a Medieval rhyme scheme, or *redondilha*, the aesthetic dimensions of *Morte e Vida Severina* articulate a countermovement to Brazilian modernity even as they frame, dynamically so, the politics and crisis of the poetic and subaltern margins in the 1950s.

Notes

¹ Although an English translation of a portion of Cabral's poetry exists, *Selected Poetry, 1937-1990* (1994), trans. Elizabeth Bishop, et al.; and *Education by Stone* (2005) trans. Richard Zenith, his essays and letters have yet to be translated. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² For example, see Haroldo de Campos's *Metalinguagem* (1967), 67-78. De Campos's otherwise brilliant analysis of Cabral's place in Brazilian poetry sidesteps *Morte e Vida's* formal achievements: "o Auto: "Vida e Morte Severina [sic]" (1954-1955), sua obra *menos consumada e mais diluída nessa vertente de participação*, embora de boa fatura e interessante como experiência de poesia dramática" (Emphasis added 73). See especially Benedito Nunes's remarks on this topic in *João Cabral: a máquina do poema* (2007), 50-53.

³ See Cabral's conference papers, "Da função moderna da poesia" (1954), and "Poesia e composição" (1952) in *Obra completa* (2006), 776-770; 721-737. A number of previous works on this topic have been fundamental for this article. See Noé Jitrik, "An Emerging Poetry," (2004); Antonio Candido, "Literatura e subdesenvolvimento," (1973); Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento*, (1969); Ángel Rama, "El "boom" en perspectiva" (1984).

⁴ For a lucid discussion on the *auto* form in *Morte e Vida Severina*, see Frederico Barbosa, 1-40. For the actual text that inspired Cabral's recreation of the *auto* in Pernambuco, see Francisco Augusto Pereira da Costa, *Folk-lore pernambucano: subsídios para a história da poesia popular em Pernambuco*.

⁵ See Gwen Kirkpatrick, "Dos Poemas Narrativos de los años cincuenta: *Morte e vida severina* y *Canto General*," 159-170. Commenting on the narrative-epic function the two poets ascribed to poetry, Kirkpatrick argues that the post World War II, neocolonial context in Latin America perhaps best explains and interconnects the innovative, yet "retro" writing styles that Cabral and Neruda adopted: "*Canto general* de Neruda se desliza a través de la naturaleza de dos continentes, y por la historia centenaria de América Latina en particular. La forma del viaje épico en Cabral está más circunscrita, pero no es menos ambiciosa. Tal vez retrospectivamente no sea tan difícil ver por qué ambos poetas escogieron formas antiguas para hablar de realidades muy presentes, el legado del colonialismo o las migraciones del interior causadas por la pobreza y el desplazamiento. No hay duda de que la crisis de las convenciones literarias que emergió a mediados del siglo cuestiona las posibilidades de todo tipo de escritura" (167).

⁶ The famous etiquette ascribed to Cabral began with his volume of poetry *O Engenheiro* (1945), which included an epigraph by French architect Le Corbusier, "...machine à emouvoir..." On the connection of modern architecture to Cabral's poetry, see Justin Read, "Alternative Functions: João Cabral de Melo Neto and the Architectonics of Modernity" (2006), 65-93.

⁷ See Benedito Nunes, *João Cabral: a máquina do poema* (2007), especially pp. 100-114. The original text included two long poems, "Fábula de Anfion" and "Antiode," and was dedicated to critic and friend, Lauro Escorel. In "Fábula de Anfion," Cabral rewrites Paul Valéry's theatre-piece (mélodrame), *Amphion* (1931), which Valéry conceived as a "liturgical melodrama" to be accompanied by music, and first staged in the Paris Opera in 1931. Although *Psicologia da Composição*, "Fábula de Anfion," and "Antiode" are published together in one volume, Cabral saw the three works as essentially interrelated on the topic of poetic creation.

⁸ For a discussion on this topic, see Roland Barthes' essay "Littérature et Méta-langage" (1959), in which he characterizes the constitution of "meta-language" in literary works as "un masque qui se montre du doigt" (*Essais critiques* 107). Meta-language, for Barthes, may be viewed as the instance in which literary language divides itself into a "language-object" and a mimetic representation "à la fois regardant et regardé" [simultaneously producing a point of view and gazing at itself as a literary

artifact] (106). See also Haroldo de Campo's *Metalinguagem* (1968) a work that is particularly insightful regarding Cabral's poetry and Brazilian Concrete Poetry movement, 67-77.

⁹ See Cabral's essay, "Esboço de panorama" (1953), in *Obra completa* (2006), 741-756. Cabral writes, "O que existe por debaixo nos novos valores introduzidos poderia ser resumido dizendo-se que são portas para fugir da realidade que se reclama dos escritores de hoje. Para isso, substituiu-se o objetivo pelo subjetivo; deixou de exigir de uma obra de comunicação para exigir-se expressão; passou-se a renunciar ao que na literatura pode ser instrumento de influência coletiva[.]" (755)

¹⁰ On Cabral as a diplomat in Barcelona, see Nicolás Fernández-Medina. "Tradição e ruptura: João Cabral de Melo Neto em Barcelona, 1947-1950," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 42.2 (2005): 89-109.

¹¹ *Morte e Vida Severina* was first published in the volume *Dois águas* (1956) as part of Cabral's collected works. Benedito Nunes has pointed out that the original manuscript contained an author's explanation of the title which read: "*Dois águas* querem corresponder a duas intenções do autor e — decorrentemente — a duas maneiras de apreensão por parte do leitor ou ouvinte: de um lado, poemas para serem lidos em silêncio, numa comunicação a dois, poemas cujo aproveitamento temático, quase sempre concentrado, exigem mais do que leitura, releitura; do outro, *poemas para auditório, numa comunicação múltipla*, poemas que, menos que lidos, podem ser ouvidos" (Emphasis added, *João Cabral* 74).

¹² See Secchin, "Entrevista de João Cabral de Melo Neto" in *João Cabral: a poesia do menos* (1985), 325-333. In the interview, Cabral outlines the circumstances surrounding the genesis of the poem as well as the popular sources he draws from to construct the Auto. The work was commissioned by playwright Maria Clara Machado (1954-1955), who initially rejected Cabral's manuscript. Accordingly, Cabral decided to publish it in the first anthology of his collected poetry, *Dois águas* (1956). In 1958 the play is finally performed in his native Recife, and directed by Maria Syliva Nunes. In 1966 the play is performed by O Teatro da Universidade Católica (TUGA) with musical accompaniment by Chico Buarque de Holanda in São Paulo. The play goes abroad and becomes a smash in Lisbon and France. Cabral scholars Secchin and Nunes have both written at length about the incredible reception of the play in Brazil and how it has been staged countless times on television, radio, and film and been reedited over 50 times ("Del fonema 388). With respect to the popular sources that layer *Morte e Vida Severina*, Cabral relates, "Com *Morte e vida severina*, quis prestar uma homenagem a todas as literaturas ibéricas. Os monólogos do retirante provém do romance castelhano. A cena do enterro na rede é de folclore catalão. O encontro com os cantores de incelenças é típico do Nordeste," (*A Poesia do Menos* 330-331).

¹³ See Manuel G. Simões, "Morte e vida severina: da tradição popular à invenção poética" (2000), 99-103. See also, Nicolás Extremera Tapia, "João Cabral: De Brasil a España"(2000), pp. 215-228

¹⁴ Interpreting the problem of Severino's name from a different angle, Marta Peixoto observes, "Como substantivo, "Severino" designa tanto um indivíduo quanto uma classe da qual cada membro pouco se distingue; como objetivo, quando associado a "vida" indica uma condição mínima de sobrevivência, sempre na iminência da "morte severina." Para todos os habitantes da região, a pobreza corrói o nome próprio assim com a subjetividade individual"(90).

¹⁵ Though unmarked in the text, I enumerate the lines of verse according to the different dramatic scenes. Of the 18 scenes which comprise *Morte e Vida Severina*, each new scene will thus begin with a verse number of 1.

¹⁶ For a discussion on literature in Latin America as a mode of intervention with respect to the nation-state, see Alberto Moreiras, *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001), especially pp. 162-183. See also Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), 65-88; and Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory""(1987), 3-25. Regarding questions of literary heritage and the allegorical form in *Morte e Vida*, see John M. Tolman's "Allegory in João Cabral's "Morte E Vida Severina"" (1978), 57-68.

¹⁷ Similar to critics who have pointed out Severino's generic, allegorical characterization (Tolman, Nunes), Paul B. Dixon argues that Severino is strategically "underdeveloped" as "a sort of semantic sponge, which soaks up associations from all sides" (35).

¹⁸ On this topic see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?,"(2001), an argument that was first published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988). In Spivak's perspective, "the colonial or postcolonial subaltern is defined as the being on the other side of difference, or an epistemic fracture, even from other groupings among the colonized" (2207). Spivak's text is thus not concerned with a proper subaltern speech, or with extracting "speech" from this "other" through critique and analysis: "knowledge of the other is theoretically impossible" (2204). I am suggesting that we theoretically come to terms with Cabral's self-reflexive *literary mediation* and *critical recognition* of this epistemological and national fracture.

¹⁹ At the immediate level of Brazilian literary heritage, the celebrated works of Euclides da Cunha and Graciliano Ramos, for example, took the nomadic backlander as a principal literary subject and problematic synecdoche for the Brazilian Nation's ontological "originality" and political and civil ills.

²⁰ Of course, I am aware that there are fourteen canonical Stations of the Cross, and that the Eleventh Cross is the Crucifixion. The Stations of the Cross leitmotif is inverted when Severino arrives in Recife. Different from the Passion of the Christ, on arriving to Recife Severino will contemplate committing suicide in Scene Eleven and Twelve. His thoughts of suicide will be disrupted by the birth of Seu José's "Messianic son" and the Nativity scene, which is the fourteenth. My special thanks to Connie and Allison de Laveaga for our illuminating discussion concerning the possibility of reading the *Via Crucis* symbolically in *Morte e Vida Severina*.

²¹ The fact that Severino can only overhear the gravediggers and is characterized as "a gente sem instituto" foregrounds the problematic. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, And Border Thinking* (2000), ix-xix; and, 49-91. "[T]he fractured locus of enunciation from a subaltern perspective defines border thinking as a response to colonial difference [...] It is a fractured enunciation in dialogic situations with the territorial and hegemonic cosmology (e.g. ideology, perspective)"(x).

²² See *Studies in European Realism* (1964), especially pp. 134-149. According to Lukács, the European realist novels of the nineteenth century arise out of the conflict with the essentially "prosaic nature of bourgeois life" (149). The prosaic nature of bourgeois life refers to the reification of human relations under the capitalist mode of production. The "poetry of life," connoting the multifaceted

character of human perception and the experience of life in all its subjective and communal dimensions, is being undermined by commodity fetishism and a diminishing of the human faculties(149).

²³ In Cabral's Nativity, the canonical ordering of the precious *economical* gift *qua* gold, frankincense, and myrrh is interrupted by a new order of giving that is based on the river squatters' destitution, and by the fact that their gifts efface the identity of the donors. Second, their gift giving becomes *a mode of giving metaphorical form* to the babe which interrupt and introduce new modes of apprehending the babe's Auto canonical inscription as a Christ figure. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992), 6-33. Concerned with any form of economy and its relation to the order of presence, Derrida argues that, "for there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me what I gave to him or her, there will not have been a gift"(12). Significantly, this alternative form and understanding of giving, outside the logic of calculation, debt, and restitution, interrupts the circuit of debt based modalities of exchange: "There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol" (13), such that "it must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of calculation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure" (7). For an insightful reading of Derrida's figure of the gift, see Pheng Cheah, "Obscure Gifts: On Jacques Derrida"(2005), 41-51; on metaphor in relation to the gift, see Susan Bernstein, "The Gift of Metaphor"(2005), 76-87.

²⁴ Juxtaposing Cabral's textual writing style to Derrida's notion of *différance* proves productive in the extent to which I am arguing that the metaliterary in Cabral functions as an underlying system of signification that disrupts, expands, and is constantly interwoven in the plot adventure and Auto structure. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," 1-28. Regarding Derrida in relation to *Morte e Vida Severina* and the construction of metaphor and the leveling of hierarchies, see Maria José Somerlate Barbosa, "Nivelamento em *Morte e vida severina*" (1993), pp. 30-37.

²⁵ See John M. Tolman, "Allegory in João Cabral's "Morte e vida severina": "[Cabral] offers the reader a limited solution to the will to survive of the life force within a community where shared poverty provides a humanizing solidarity. There is further ambiguous promise of relative improvement in the quality of the Severine life itself" (66). According to Paul B. Dixon, "All that was death-like in the work has reversed itself, gratuitously. Life is a factory generating itself. The poem ends with this moment of reconciliation. Even though life may be a "vida severina," it is surely a "presença viva" that is its own justification"(39). Benedito Nunes, for his part, argues that the open-endedness of the explosion finale articulates an ethical position. In other words, since we do not know what action Severino will take following the final scene, "um outro possível plano de ação aberto [abre-se] [...] e entregue, para além da linguagem e de sua realidade textual, à responsabilidade ética decisória dos indivíduos" (89).

²⁶ This problem underwrites Cabral's conference papers on modern poetry and the problem of communication as well as his critique of the Generation of 1945. The unevenness of Latin American literary autonomy has been well documented in Rama. See "El boom en perspectiva"(1984), 91-110. On commitment and intellectuals during the 1950s and 60s in Latin America, see Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fúsil: debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (2003), 143-183. See also, Ferreira Gullar, *A cultura posta em questão* (1965).

²⁷ I am referring to how the birth of the “Messianic” babe stands allegorically, like Severino, for a collective subject. Just as the gypsies’ economic prophecy foretells the babe’s future as factory worker, in the Nativity choral sequence, the babe is described in poetic terms that emphasize his humanity in terms of his “materiality”: “tem o peso de homem,/de obra de ventre de mulher./(...) é uma criança pálida/é uma criança franzina/mas tem a marca de homem/marca de humana oficina./(...)mas a máquina de homem/já bate nele, incessante. (...) as mãos que criam coisas/nas suas já se advinha”(77-78).

²⁸ Jameson’s theory of literature as a socially symbolic act is productive in two senses. Jameson locates a text’s political importance not in terms of proffering rote ideology but in terms of its extended, allegorical figuration: “the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions” (*The Political* 79). Consequently, a text’s will to rewrite the social, its political unconscious, hinges on its *formal* and *textualized* moments of contradiction, always sedimented in discursive layers, and must be pried loose from a rigorous analysis of form and allegorical figuration (80). The text’s relation to material conditions and politics is one of “texture”(81).

²⁹ On this point, William Rowe writes, “To speak of a necessary relationship between the poem and what is not known is to locate the writing—and reading—of poetry in some other place mapped by the analysis of ideology or of discourse. [...] What poems can do is prior, that is, make its own ground (16).” Following Rowe, we might say that innovative poems like those of Cabral shatter the very foundation of hegemonic and administered symbolic production. According to Rowe, “The issue is crucial: if literature is still significant in society, then it will have something to say about the symbolic. [...] What matters, however, is the capacity of [poetic] writing to intervene *at the level of the formation of symbols*, because where (or when) symbols are formed is the location of the poetic imagination’s power” (Emphasis added, 12).

³⁰ See Noé Jitrik’s article “An Emerging Poetry” (2004). One can productively link Candido’s celebration of regionally specific topics in Brazilian Literature (beginning in the 1930s) to Jitrik’s thesis concerning the will to innovative “modernista” style that underwrites the production of Latin American poetry up until the 1950s. According to Jitrik, Latin American poetry in the first half of the twentieth century and across the continent should be seen as an emergent drive for cultural specificity and linguistic particularity: “Whatever the paths we take to describe the process of Latin American poetry during the first half of the twentieth century, taken as a whole it can be said to contain an affirmation of identity, not as a reflection of or reproduction of feelings of belonging, nor as a conviction or ideology of identity, but rather as the expression of an ownership, the possession of a particular idiom and structured language”(267).

CHAPTER TWO

Writing Violence From an Aesthetic of Ornaments in Osman Lins's O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina (1966)

"Indeed, the struggle over the literary within Latin American studies today—as well as the discussion concerning modernity and postmodernity in the continent—hinges, to a great extent, on the stance that one takes toward the legacy of the boom." —Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999).

Due to the 1960s international market success of Latin American literary production, it has been argued that the literary reached a pinnacle of sorts and brought with it an age of intellectual rigor and political self-consciousness. While the so-called Latin American "Boom" did launch a handful of Latin American writers into the international market arena, its critics and proponents alike argued that *at last* Latin American intellectuals from across the continent had succeeded in articulating a general consensus: a we that consolidated its authority through the signs of literary renewal and a subset of common conceptual and political adversaries: the United States' recent cultural, military, and political hegemony in the international landscape, and the Latin American elites' entrenched Eurocentrism that betrayed the ethos of national popular revolution and agrarian reform that pervaded the structure of feeling of underdevelopment and "dependency" across Latin America.¹

A discourse of a new type of Latin American novel and intellectual thus emerged, and coalesced around the cultural, economic, and political problematic affecting Latin American nation states in the post-World War II conjuncture. Its more outspoken proponents, such as Carlos Fuentes and Alejo Carpentier, pushed forward arguments and positions, gave talks and interviews, claiming that the new Latin American novel had to surpass description *a la* the *novela de la tierra* in their depictions of Latin American cultural life.² This meant that the new Latin American narrative was assigned the task of extending its gaze beyond national borders, and had to found a discursive authority under the rubric of the common continental problematic highlighted above: underdevelopment, modernization theory, and neocolonialism. "Dependency" infected, in short, all walks of Latin American cultural life. Latin America, not unlike the 19th century's founding pronouncements, was therefore once again imagined as united: a consolidated historical subject that was advancing in time through its cultural expression and historical, political, and economic will to develop. Its literary production, posited as the "crowning" instrument of its cultures by a leading theorist of the time, Angel Rama, became the privileged discursive site to authorize this vision³ (Rama, *Transculturación* 19).

The cracks in this discourse, however, were never unapparent in a material sense: from the fringes of the state there were many subalterns left out of national discourses, who in consequence, were left out of state planning interventionism and claims of literary triumph, while the literary itself was being quickly superseded by the advent and cultural hegemony of the television, cinema, and radio as critics such as David Viñas and Idelber Avelar have pointed out.⁴

The historical "decline" of the Latin American lettered city was paradoxically the time of literature's will to international and political relevance. However much one agrees or balks at contemporary critiques of magical realism and literary transculturation in the wake of the collapse of the national popular state and Keynesian economic theory, one could also say, indeed, that after the nightmare of World War II and the onset of a new form of nightmare in the Cold War and nuclear arms race that directly involved Havana, the activity of experimental writing and newfound claims of literary and

cultural *vanguardia* became a forceful and imaginative way of negotiating these dilemmas that many Latin American intellectuals recognized.⁵

Accordingly, this chapter is representative of an attempt to problematize and reengage what Idelber Avelar has called the historical, political, and discursive “struggle over the literary” that came to a head in Latin America in the 1960s (Avelar, *The Untimely Present* 24).

The purpose of this chapter is to produce two sorts of overlapping maps that connect back to the epistemological problematic underwriting Cabral’s explosion of the poetic letter and mapping of the subaltern. By continuing to focus on cultural production in Brazil, I aim to interlink the historical legacy of the Spanish American Boom with Brazilian writer Osman Lins. On the one hand, I shall trace and discuss through Lins’s letters and essays produced during the 1960s his vision of literature and politics. On the other, I read his experimental narrative, “O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina”(1966), written at the onset of the Brazilian military dictatorship, as a powerful precursor to Latin American subaltern studies that resets the terms of the debate in the 1960s about margins and experimental letters, evincing a forceful vision, indeed, of the struggle over the literary.

1. *A Duplicitous National Horizon*

No doubt, the notion of the literary as a vehicle of consciousness and linguistic authenticity is representative of the post-World War II discursive formation that hinged on the "becoming global" of Latin American culture, and highlighted the novelist author as capable of breaking through "the insularity" of the region (Fuentes 97-98). The Boom novelist, in this perspective, imagined himself at the vanguard of the global market, as a harbinger of an alternative language, and as the rightful international representative or ambassador of the continent. From continental philosophical trends that were impacting in Latin America, we could say, following Michel Foucault, that the new primacy of language or the so-called "linguistic turn," explains, in part, the drive to becoming parodic, playfully textual, and semantically "universal" of the Boom novel (Foucault 383).⁶ The other perspective, of course, would take into consideration the national popular horizon of underdevelopment and the ethos of decolonization that contextualize the 1960s.

This latter notion is significant. This is so because the North was seen as an *invader* and Eurocentrism became a problematic site of literary and political struggle throughout the left in Latin America in the 1960s. Accordingly, the violence of invasion, infiltration, and exploitation proper to neocolonialism had for the region's thinkers significantly morphed into the locus of *culture*: one forceful way that historical Eurocentrism could be challenged was through the so-called identitarian vision that Boom novels erected. A discourse on the ethics and intellectual responsibility of the literary writer was therefore propagated throughout literary reviews, journals, and cultural supplements. Not unlike Jean-Paul Sartre's widely distributed *What is Literature?* (1947), intellectuals, as Beatriz Sarlo argues, began to speak of the writer's vocation in society in terms of politics and class, and articulated sociological theories of the literary in its historical relationship to the public sphere and nationalist ideologies.⁷

To the extent that one overarching objective inhering in this epochal vision of *literary ethics* was to decolonize knowledge, this maneuver was not unproblematic in an epistemological sense. Paradoxically for the writers of the Boom, the method to critique North American cultural hegemony and Eurocentrism's legacy was to recast the region as universal. Universalization, in this perspective, was not viewed in the least as a colonizing gesture by the privileged writer.⁸ Imagined as universally

common by virtue of neocolonialism and underdevelopment, it was commonplace to argue that the Latin American nation state needed to develop, on all levels, into a form of international parity with the forces of the market. Consequently, the literary became the vehicle authorized and charged to unite the voice of this “we” and lay bear a vision of the entire continent’s political and historical “coming to consciousness.”

For Osman Lins writing in Brazil, oft ignored by narratives of the Boom, the invasion of the North American cultural industry on Brazilian soil was imagined as the *raison d’être* for erecting his own ornamental, neo-baroque literature, whose technical procedures could very well be compared to narrative transculturation and magical realism with its emphasis on fusing the regional with the literary (universal).⁹ In a fundamental letter to his French translator Maryvonne Lapouge, dated 11 August 1969, Lins recalls the dilemma of imagining the national in the wake of the full-blown onset of cultural neocolonialism:

A falta do sentimento nacional é alarmante. Não se deve ser xenófobo. Mas também não se pode ser tão negligente como somos em relação aos nossos valores próprios, a nossa individualidade. Assim, não pode haver terreno mais propício a invasão cultural. E o que é mais grave, a invasão cultural da pátria de Nixon e de *Mad*.¹⁰

[The lack of national sentiment is alarming. One shouldn't be xenophobic. But also one cannot be as negligent as we are in relation to our our own values, our individuality. Thus, there cannot be a more proper terrain [to speak of this] than that of the cultural invasion. And what is worse, the cultural invasion by the country of Nixon and *Mad* [magazine]].

Faced with historically imposed cultural models and the problem of defending the national, Lins’s discourse turns in two divergent directions. Just as Cabral's *Morte e Vida Severina*, in Lins's "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" the national subject is postulated as marginal: the backlander in the Brazilian hinterlands. A problematical synecdoche and *symbolic wound* in Brazilian literature that runs from Euclides da Cunha canonical *Os Sertões* (1901) to Clarice Lispector’s final novel, *A hora da estrela* written in 1977, we have seen how in Cabral the nomadic backlander became the site for cognitively mapping the cracks in state-centered discourses of national identity and culture. For Lins, who was born in the Northeast, the backlander trope persists as a problem and fissure of the nation-state. And like Cabral, the backlander configures something like a *tabula rasa* and ethnographic subject for fusing innovative writing procedures with the sociopolitical and epistemological problem of giving representation to subalternity.¹¹ If Cabral’s Christmas play fused Medieval popular sources with his explosion of the poetic letter to highlight the limits of literary representation with regard to subalternity, Lins’s aesthetic for the novel and for negotiating subalternity, what he dubbed the *ornato* or ornament, was inspired by baroque art forms, Medieval retables, and the novelistic *will to style* that he gleaned from French proponents of the *nouveau roman*.¹²

The intellectual, for Lins, legitimizes his social vision and authority from the construction of a unique style that lays claim to an integrating function that includes the subaltern: “Nesta época de grandes fracionamentos, pelo menos o escritor, praticante de um ofício unificador por excelência, recuse ser também um agente de fragmentação” [In this age of great fractures and alienation, at least the writer, practitioner of a unifying vocation *par excellence*, refuses to be an agent of fragmentation] (*Guerra* 213). To integrate the fractured national subject from the locus of literature was to construct texts that negotiated political realities and representation proper. Images of scales, clocks, measuring sticks, writing utensils, and tableaux of cosmological order line the pages of *Nove, Novena* (1966) and

Avalovara (1973). It could be said that these symbols of order and measurement, when read across the ornamental structure of Lins's experimental narratives, configure on the one hand an apposite allegory of his writing style.

According to Sandra Nitrini, Lins's ornamental poetics ultimately reflect his idealism, and should be read philosophically as an engrained platonism that inscribed a "nostalgic view of humankind's lost unity" against the reifying forces of capital (268-269).¹³ And yet on the other hand, with and against this view, it is my contention that far from simply affirming Lins's idealistic penchant for constructing aesthetic harmony as a desire "to recover humankind's lost unity" as Lins himself liked to claim, Lins's chains of signification also articulate what I shall call a halting, heterotopic mapping of the subaltern against the discursive formation of neocolonialism and underdevelopment in the 1960s.¹⁴ At a deeper level, like Cabral, Lins's writing project had to become not more modern and craft-like but more significant, in so far as it self-reflexively mapped its own finitude and status as "ornamental" —as a device and technique of representation—, and simultaneously as it imposed for its narrative plot sequence the problem of mapping subalternity.¹⁵

And yet, to legitimize his discourse in the Brazil of the 1960s, Lins had to theorize and promote his own work from a national perspective. His tirades against publishing houses and corrupt editors, the absence of state support for writers, and his avid statistical reports on the number of books bought and distributed in the country documented in *Guerra Sem Testemunhas* (1969) clearly demonstrate that the intellectual, for Lins, had to make the national the ultimate horizon of viability even as he championed, like the Spanish American Boom, the international and universal dimensions of literary culture.¹⁶

The figure of the writer, in Lins, thus coalesced around the sign of a collective national will in a threatened literary marketplace: a fragmented historical subject understood as the Brazilian subaltern nation that had to modernize and develop, and had to be shown by the writing literary subject, not unproblematically as I will discuss at length, how to view its more "vital nucleus" of identity that the cultural industry had contaminated. "Como povo ainda pobre," writes Lins, "temos de estar vigilantes contra a infiltração em massa de valores estranhos e até nefastos à nossa cultura em plena formação"¹⁷[As a poor nation, we have to be vigilant against the massive infiltration of foreign values, often toxic, to our own culture in full development] (*Guerra* 111).

Second, at a deeper level and in spite of Lins's nationalist and literary ideology, Lins's ornamental figure for an inventive writing subject becomes, through the critical force and lines of flight of the literary signifier, something like a relentlessly questioning ethnographic *gaze* that suspends any pretense of speaking for "the other." Following Michel Foucault's understanding of ethnographic discourse, this means that, in Lins, the task of the writing subject was to not only depict histories and cultural identities outside the purview of the literary *ratio* and national public sphere. It means, rather, that the literary became a fundamentally duplicitous instrument for negotiating subaltern otherness.¹⁸ This is so because the literary in Lins simultaneously traces the very frontiers of its representational modality as a disseminator of ornamental artifice [*ornato*] that form a semiotic totality or narrative structure, and by charting, at the same moment, the epistemological problem of subalternity with subaltern subjects that are most blatantly characterized and cast as nothing but an array or semantic field of artifices.¹⁹

This uncanny ethnographic gesture that is not invested in giving the subaltern other "without history" a "realist" or even "logical" system of signification based on European categories and language rewrites

what Lins means when he refers to the novelist's task, rather floridly, as one of achieving compositional "plenitude."²⁰ The writer for Lins, in sum, was imagined as an intellectual, self-critical, and capable of weaving through multiple perspectives simultaneously the "plenitude" of the emergent subaltern nation [*nossa cultura em plena formação*] and exposing its fissures: "O escritor, na sociedade, representa essa voz, esse rumor; é uma força espiritual, a consciência de um momento, a secreta luz de um povo" [The writer, in society, represents this voice, this rumor: his is a spiritual force, the consciousness of the moment, the secret light of the people] (*Guerra* 111; 216). The rich fissures and frontiers of representation, the epistemological "secret" casting of the ornamental subaltern signifier, as I will show later on in this chapter, are one of the principle reasons a reassessment of Lins is in order today.

With respect to recent critiques of the Boom's teleological appropriation of "the regional other," or even Eurocentric stance on culture, does Lins's project ultimately point to a new form of Occidentalism and subaltern orientalism? What do the discourses of transculturation do for us in our remapping of Lins's historical self-positioning? How are we to negotiate the Boom's so-called "triumphant assertions" of the literary against the problematic of subalternity and the epistemic of representation that Brazilian writers such as Cabral and Lins negotiated in their literary texts?

2. *The Struggle Over the Literary and the Thematization of Writing*

Regarding the subject of the crisis and politics of representation and the discursive struggle over the literary that informed Latin American literary production during the 1960s, Idelber Avelar has offered an ambitious and imaginative reading of the Boom that merits our reappraisal.

Avelar announces a radical critique of the Boom as a discursive formation and seeks to situate it within what I have been calling the age of underdevelopment, neocolonialism, and narratives of "modernization." By the term "modernization," Avelar designates a teleological structure and ethos of historical material evolutionism that underwrites cultural, economic, and literary practice in the 1960s. "Modernization" especially contextualizes the Boom, and places the status and practice of the literary in jeopardy. Quite bluntly, "literature had lost its functionality," Avelar argues, in a public sphere that no longer needed it (31).

Modernization, however, does not liquidate the literary in Latin America, but places it in crisis. It is from this crisis and literature's lost "functionality" that Avelar pushes forward his most complex and innovative theoretical articulation. Recasting Walter Benjamin's concept of mass art in the age of technical reproduction, Avelar argues that Latin American literature in the age of the technocratic loses its "aura." By the loss of literature's aura Avelar refers to what Angel Rama described as the Boom writer's total professionalization and the Latin American book becoming a commodity form. In a nutshell, the loss of the aura refers to the Boom's autonomization from the state. However separate from the nation state, the literary conserves itself as a totality by positing an auratic "outside" to North America and Europe, and to the market and the logic of "massive technologization"(31). This is what Avelar calls the Boom's substitutive or "compensatory mode" of negotiating the teleologies of underdevelopment but also the ousting of the literary from the public sphere. The rhetoric of the Boom therefore is enabled to claim its "universal" status and "Oedipal thrust": Latin American literature had at last arrived, so many of the Boom's spokesman proclaimed, at articulating its universal relevance through its advanced writing procedures, and through the construction of a genealogical "mythic" discourse of collective identity.

From the apparent aporia separating culture from the economic, the Boom “responded with an aesthetization of the political, or, more to the point, a substitution of aesthetics for politics”(30). This discursive offshoot of the Boom can be understood in two senses. First, the professionalization of the lettered led to a self-descriptive critical practice that championed and marketed the literary’s importance and political relevance in the international fold. Second, the extent to which the literary was granted “consciousness raising powers,” Avelar suggests, is the full measure of “an important shift” in Latin America’s relationship to modernization (31). The “compensatory mode” that marks the Boom’s historical specificity is evinced, in Avelar’s view, through the thematization of writing in Boom novels:

The insistent thematization of writing by boom novels performed the task of carrying out the rhetoricopolitical vocation. A writer-demiurge postulated a realm that could both account (precede) and overcome (succeed) Latin America’s unbearable cycle of politics and social repetitions. (32)

What Avelar counterposes to the decline of the lettered “aura” in Latin America is the Boom’s epochal project to “restore the auratic against the grain of a secular, modernized world”(32). This project of restoration involves generalizing the literary production of the Boom as well as the thorny political problematic of underdevelopment encircling its conditions of production and international distribution into a new *epistemic* of the Boom, which directly bears on the entire discursive archive of Latin American literatures and cultural formations. This is why Avelar highlights the thematization of writing in Boom novels. The thematization of writing in the Boom projects a second order of understanding, or epistemic, that takes us beyond the Boom’s claims of literary triumph and its epic plot sequences that we should take seriously if we are to understand the debates over the “struggle over the literary” that inform contemporary Latin American literary and subaltern studies.

The project of auratic restoration that Avelar assigns the novels of the Boom entails a momentous double gesture or encoding of the literary that one can decipher from the thematization of writing in the Boom by the novel’s author protagonists or what he calls “demiurges” following Jean Franco’s reading of Pablo Neruda’s “Las alturas de Machu Picchu” (Franco, *The Decline* 84). First, Avelar reads the magical-real, circular, or mythic plot adventures in Boom novels as organized around a “demiurgic” protagonist writer. This figure of the demiurge writer that founds the polis through an act of writing allegorically marks an author-centered revival and reinscription of the literary in the 1960s; it also significantly inaugurates a rhetoricopolitical modality of Latin American history and writing that is centered on a triumphant intellectual writing class that “speaks for” Latin America through literary culture.

Second, Avelar’s discursive genealogical reading of the Boom unearths what I am calling, following Roland Barthes, a second-order thinking of the Boom. This second-order thinking postulates the Boom’s compensatory projection of “universal language” and the founding of the polis by the demiurge as a political overcoming of the threat to the aesthetic by the market. The Boom’s utopian thrust, Avelar suggests, posited an outside to modernization and the threat to literary culture. For Avelar, the terms of this conflict, waged through the literary landscape in Latin America in the 1960s, is essentially rooted in conflicting dimensions of modernity; namely, tradition versus modernization: the restoration and reconstitution of the literary aura in a marketplace that liquidates its prestige and social relevance into a commodity form.

For Avelar, it is the figure of the demiurge writer and the thematization of writing in Boom novels that grounds, mediates, and allegorizes this conflict concerning divergent modernities: against the grain and threat of the fragmentary, secular, linear, and historical stagism of modernization theory, the Boom author attempted to create an elsewhere to the market and her/his very own professionalization by positing and thematizing in her/his book the time of myth and its writing, the time of the book versus the chaos and ephemeral character of the marketplace, and the alternative collective identity and polis versus that of the commodity and the consumer.

The Boom projects the Latin American novel, according to Avelar, as an object of exteriority that importantly is utopian, but which also is not unproblematic. This is so in the sense that writing, the epistemic inhering in this discursive formation, I emphasize, is circumscribed in his vision to the restorative function of the aura. Doubtless, the historical discursive formation of the Boom produced an ideology of the literary. But Avelar's plotting of the "thematization of writing" does not negotiate other modalities of writing and epistemics that literary culture in the 1960s negotiated. One that comes to mind, especially concerning the contemporary struggle over the literary, is the subaltern problematic and its literary mapping as we witnessed with force in the poetry of João Cabral de Melo Neto. Cabral clearly presented the case of a will to literary experimentation and actualization that informs the vanguard gesture—while simultaneously tracing the limits of speaking for the subaltern as an insuperable problematic that explodes our commonsensical understanding of the "other."

The point is not to critique Avelar for he has offered us a precious mapping of the Boom's discursive formation, and he himself qualifies his arguments as sketchily "outlined" (34). The point is rather to understand and problematize this ambitious historical and critical articulation so as to produce a counterfocalization of Latin American subalternity through the lens of the problematic of experimental writing in Latin America in the 1960s. Following John Beverley, the subaltern problematic is at the heart of contemporary debates over the historical struggle over the literary and the "displacement of the authority of the lettered" in Latin America in the wake of the nation-state's collapse and the advent of global capital (Beverley, *Subalternity* 19). Avelar's critical gesture is thus correct to assess the Boom as a pivotal discursive and political turning point, nodal point of crisis, regarding the status of intellectual culture in Latin America.

If the subaltern has proven us wrong time and again in an epistemological sense, as the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group has stressed, it is because the problem of "speaking for" is a colonial discourse of power that recognizes and depicts the "other" by reducing her/him to a Eurocentric conceptual framework. Indeed, how can we be critically sensitive and epistemologically attuned to the subaltern when our focus is also the literary? Must we read the literary as solely a historically privileged locus of discursive power that is underwritten by contradictions of class and the coloniality of power and Eurocentrism? What types of cognitive maps can the literary provide us with of the subaltern problematic?

Following the founding problematic of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group and its injunction to forge new modalities of thinking the political and the cultural by paying heed to the "structural dichotomies" that underwrite the historical relationship between intellectuals and subalterns and the crisis of the nation-state under global capital ("Founding" 142), I understand the subaltern as a mediational term, fundamentally refractive, of the limits of the letter and theoretical discourse. The subaltern, in this view, not only calls "the nation into question," but functions as a powerful constitutive fissure for reflection ("Founding" 143). No doubt, I fully recognize and affirm the limits of examining the subaltern problematic from the purview of literature. But that is not where the

problem resides, and it certainly does not concern representing or turning the subaltern into an “object” through literary discourse.

Following José Rabasa, it could be said that the force of subaltern reflection resides in its providing “elements of self-critique” for Western modalities of discourse including historiography and literature (“Elsewheres” 75). Accordingly, if the subaltern may be thought as “an elsewhere empty of positive characteristics,” it provides a forceful and refractive mediation of traditional literary discourse in Latin America and its pitfalls (“Elsewheres” 74). Against the grain of the Eurocentric and symbolic forms of violence, it depends on how one thinks with and through this horizon relationally and in the seams of theoretical, political, historiographic and literary discourses.

In the “Founding Statement,” the Subaltern Studies Group warns against elitist, nationalist, and literary “translation” of subalternity (144). While I take up the critique of literary transculturation, I aim to link the Group’s productive reflections on the subaltern frame to an altogether different line of theoretical questioning. As I hope will become clear in my reading of Lins and his aesthetic of ornaments, just as in Cabral’s explosion of the letter, the vanguard gesture of the metaliterary functions, like the subaltern, as a mediational frame and fissure of representational discourse, insofar as it self-reflexively traces the limits of the literary while it intercepts, suspends and deterritorializes the field of literary representation.²¹ In postulating this as a radical act of self-reflection and critique, marking the horizons and limits of the letter in the 1950s and 60s and the problematic of neocolonialism, I agree with Alberto Moreiras’s call to “turn literature against itself” by thinking through “the subaltern function of literary studies” (*The Exhaustion* 182;13). I seek to show that the metaliterary, like the subaltern, interrupts the narration of the state and its objects and modes of representation, implicating us to think the present state of affairs and representations reflexively, relationally and comparatively. In pushing forward this view, I suggest that it is time to move beyond the examination of Latin American literature from the standpoint and singularity of the Boom and its authorial proclamations and ideologies by returning to mediation, texture, self-reflexivity, the legacies of the vanguard, and the politics of aesthetics.

These questions doubtlessly outline many limits and fissures to the literary. And yet by tracing limits and fissures are we not freeing up alternative sites of critique and imaginative elsewheres?²² I now turn to a reading of Osman Lins’s “O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina” (1966) that reframes these theoretical issues. By paying heed to the specificity of Lins’s aesthetic of the ornament, it is my contention that we will begin to better diagram the problematic of Latin American subalternity and representation in the 1960s as seen through the eyes of a writer that was indeed, following Avelar, convinced of the “threat” to the literary, and who wanted to make literature more engaged and a vital form in the public sphere.

3. *An Aesthetic of Ornaments*

We lack a theoretical reading of Brazilian writer Osman Lins’s narrative aesthetics or what he called the ornament [*ornato*] beginning with the landmark publication of *Nove, Novena* (1966). We lack, in other words, an interpretation of Lins’s strategic re-distribution of realist literary form. By referring to Lins’s redistribution of the realist narrative aesthetic, which he denounced in his correspondences with his translators, I am following Jacques Rancière’s discussion on the politics that inheres in aesthetic form insofar as the aesthetic, or literary, presents us with a mode of sensible encoding of normative social order and community existence that is alternative to, and rearranges the ideological codes and structures that condition normative social reality.

The aesthetic, for Rancière, involves a practice of form making activity that “intervene[s] in the general ‘ways of doing and making’ as well as the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility”(Rancière, *The Politics* 13). The politics that inheres in aesthetic practices such as literature for Rancière hinges on the delimitation of the visible as experienced and shared by a community: "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (13).

While from a theoretical position attuned to the difficult epistemics encircling the subaltern problematic we would do well to critique Rancière’s “talent” trope as an ideology of coloniality, for politics also hinges on unknown figures such as the subaltern, the excluded, the nameless, and the unsaid as forms of possible contestation, insurgency and “visibility,” Rancière’s meditations provide a powerful plotting of literary art insofar as they demarcate a dividing line of intelligibility between power (ideology, state apparatuses) and form-making activity (the power to imagine and articulate alternative mappings and modalities of mappings of the social). While Rancière’s arguments are for the most part state-centric and prize European modalities of art, his re-plotting of art’s ways of doing and making allow us to view culture and literary form from an alternative position that contests power, whether state-centered or rooted in global capital.

For Rancière, art and literary practices articulate an “interface” between the politically hegemonic modes of making intelligible social existence such as global capital and the nation-state—and offer artistic counterfocalizations, imaginings, and plottings that redistribute the socially shared commons of power, language, and culture.

In terms of time, and the debate over modernity and Latin American alternative modernities, Rancière’s theory of art proves productive. Rancière argues that the interface that art forms produce in their redistribution of the sensible and intelligible involves a radically distinct understanding of temporality and the experience of space and form: “The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities” (26). Put differently, art forms, in Rancière, suspend hegemonic articulations of the social by redistributing the terms, forms, and formal texture of the hegemonic. In the tense gulf that divides yet conceptually interweaves the domain of the creative arts and authoritarian and programmatic structures of power, new plottings of the social and modes of imagining are opened. In Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of Rancière:

Politics proper thus always involves a kind of short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the ‘natural’ functional order of relations in the social body. The political conflict resides in the tension between the structured social body where each part has its place—what Rancière calls politics as police in the most elementary sense of maintaining social order—and the ‘part with no part’ which unsettles this order[.] (70).

Rancière’s delimitation of art’s interface with the social and the counter temporalities that inhere in its form, allow us to begin to rethink what is politically at stake when a novelist challenges a classical mode of representation and adopts a community of subaltern subjects on the margins of the state as its narrators. What is more, Rancière’s divergent mappings of the political and art center on tracing epistemic limits and divergences. Does not a critically attuned thinking about subalternity and literary experimentation require this type of constant self-reflexive vigilance and mapping of limits?

To grasp Lins' reworking of the realist aesthetic and the politics that inheres in this gesture, we would do well to begin by envisioning Lins's textual space and its system of semiotic objects: the setting, the narrator, the object of representation, the theme, the character, and the metaphor pass through a process of figural ornamentation. A narrator, for instance in Lins's aesthetic, possesses a name, such as Totônia or João, but is identified visually in the form of a symbol or semiotic indicator that has symbolic and cosmological connotations. For example, in section twelve of "Retábulo," entitled "Final Mystery," the infinity sign, ∞ , stands for a multitude of nameless subaltern narrators who chant and carry the narrative protagonist, Joana Carolina, to her anonymous and collective burial site in the Brazilian North East.

I am highlighting a *supplementary* reworking that Lins utilizes to inseminate his textual objects and narrative structures. For instance, in Lins's undulating comma-filled sentences, we often find a string of metaphors and synecdochal adjectives that force the reader to constantly re-imagine the object of representation as a shifting signifier whose sense is ongoing and accumulative. This accumulative technique is strengthened by the fact that narrative is almost exclusively produced in the present tense. The effect is that the reader, like a spectator attending a theater performance, is implicated in a privileged yet precarious intellectual position. She/he is interpellated by the actors but also enwrapped in the dynamic performativity of the self-actualizing word as it unfolds in acts and discourse in the now. And as in poetic discourse, chronological time, proper to narrative, is burst asunder in the overflow of voices, visual symbols, and rotating narrators that comment on the past in present time. The visual and temporal qualities of the narrative's texture become as important as the narrative content of the story. All of the tropes deployed serve as *framing mechanisms* that tie together objects into a structural unity but also significantly require a double or triple reading of the objects. It is as though the imperative of interpretation for the reader of Lins's ornamented text, following Jacques Derrida, were always already displaced by the iteration of semiotic meanings encircling the narrative signifiers.

In Lins, the narrative text is posited as an ornamental field that is being performed and semantically enacted in the time of the present. The ornamental field consists of a dispersion of frames that serve as *narrative and hermeneutic suspenders*, jolting the reader into a position of contemplation over that of conceptual subsumption of the particular text through universal categories.

Ornamental supplementation also informs the story's setting. The story setting in "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" is established by a sequence of twelve tableaux paintings that the narrators describe, comment on, or interpret for the reader. These tableaux are sometimes described at the beginning of the narration, or sometimes they are evoked in the middle or at the end of the narrative sequence. The tableaux not only serve as a setting; they constitute an alternative arrangement of semiotic objects that can be cross-read with the narration. Overlapping the tableaux, eleven of the twelve mystery narratives that constitute "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" begin with a riddle-poetic text that concerns, at the level of the theme of Joana Carolina's sainthood, one of Joana Carolina's miracles that are invariably non-supernatural and of an ethical sort. These riddle-texts that frame the story line also concern the cast of rotating narrators and their very own existential queries. Like stage directions, they map a sequence of questions and ideas that the narrator or narrators attempt to understand. Finally, the riddle-texts, serve as partitions separating the 12 tableaux that point up to Joana Carolina's ultimate canonization and apotheosis; they also correspond to the 12 astrological signs of the zodiac, and to 12 distinct phases in Joana Carolina's life.²³

As in Cabral's Christmas play, the twelve narratives also point to the Stations of the Cross insofar as the story of Joana Carolina's life is told in the key of violence:²⁴ although Joana suffers and witnesses

acts of exploitation on the part of corrupt landowners, all of her actions are contextualized by an enduring defiance and sub-theme of martyrdom.²⁵ I hasten to add that the reference to the *novena* in the title of the book points up to the nine days of prayer that commemorate the Christian Pentecost or arrival of the Holy Spirit and speaking of tongues. According to the *Novo Aurélio*, Portuguese Dictionary, the *novena*, from Latin, refers to: "1) o espaço de nove dias. [the space of nine days] 2) Rezas feitas durante nove dias. [A nine day period of prayer] 3) Grupo de nove coisas ou pessoas. [A group of nine things or people] 4) *Bras.* Castigo de açoites durante nove dias seguidos, que se inflige nos escravos" [*Brazil.* Punishment for slaves by whip for nine consecutive days] (1419). It is important to note that the *novena* in the context of Brazil also refers to the institution and violence of slavery; the *novena* thereby inscribes not only Christian religiosity and revolution in the title but suggests an overlapping theme of subalternity and exploitation. Allegorically speaking, we could say that the semiotic supplementation to narrative that constitutes Lins's aesthetic regime of ornamentation mirrors this plural speaking of tongues and the Messianism underwriting the acts of the Christian apostles. As we will show in our analysis of "Final Mystery," Joana Carolina is compared to Christ and her canonization is likened to a Messianic second coming by the subaltern multitude.

As we move from form to the aporias and ambiguities of content in the literary text, with Rancière, we could say that we lack a closer reading of how Lins's texts articulate a politics that underwrites his writing technique of ornamentation. Such a reading would clearly take us far beyond Lins's frequent denunciations of the commodification of the Brazilian public sphere, and the alienation of the intellectual professional writer. It is not the case that Lins's political statements in his interviews, correspondences, and essays must be overlooked. It is rather that we need to read his narrative art and how it far outstrips the subjective level of denouncing violence.

To the extent that the aesthetic of the ornament, in its most basic sense, is understood as a layering of the textual structure with "ornamental" signs that call attention to the *act of ornamenting and creating*, we could say that this narrative framing of the text calls attention to itself in an original sense:

Duas v^êzes foi criado o mundo: quando passou do na
 PALAVRA da para o existente; e quando, alçado a um plano mais su-
 CAPITUL til, fêz-se palavra. O caos, portanto, não cessou com o
 AR PALI aparecimento do universo; mas quando a consci^ência do
 MPSESTO homem, nomeando o criado, recriando-o portanto, separou,
 CALIGRA ordenou, uniu. A palavra, porém, não é o símbolo ou re-
 FIA HIE flexo do que significa, função servil, e sim o seu espí-
 ROGLIFO rito, o sôpro na argila. Uma coisa não existe realmente
 INCUNÁB enquanto não nomeada: então, investe-se da palavra que
 ULO CÓD a ilumina e, logrando identidade, adquire igualmente eg-
 ICE VER tabilidade. Porque nenhum g^êmeo é igual a outro; só o
 SO LETR nome g^êmeo é realmente idêntico ao nome g^êmeo. Assim, g^ê-
 A RECTO mea inumerável de si mesma, a palavra é o que permanece,
 PERGAMT é o centro, é a invariante, não se contagiando da flu-
 NHO ALF tuação que a circunda e salvando o expresso das trans-
 ABETO P formações que acabariam por negá-lo. Evocadora a ponto
 APEL PE de um lugar, um reino, jamais desaparecer de todo, en-
 DRA PLU quanto subsistir o nome que os designou (Byblos, Cartha-
 MA. ESTI go, Suméria), a palavra, sendo o espírito do que - ain-
 LETE PI da que só imaginariamente - existe, permanece ainda, por
 NCEL IL incorruptível, como o esplendor do que foi, podendo, mes-
 UMINURA mo transmigrada, mesmo esquecida, ser reintegrada em
 ESCRITA sua original clareza.

Fig. 1, Osman Lins, typescript,²⁶ "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina," "Nono Mistério," in *Acervo de Osman Lins*, Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro.

Not merely an instance of the metaliterary which self-references the very text that one is reading, as in Cabral's *Morte e Vida Severina*, Lins's ornament screams at you that it is being composed as *artful*.²⁷ What this means, ultimately, as we readily see above in riddle section of "Nono Mistério," is that the ornament not only ties together and decorates the story with a series of tableaux and symbols, for example, but more significantly points out a continuously unfolding self-reflexive *mapping of composition*.

And yet Lins's ornament, like Gilles Deleuze's conceptualization of the baroque fold from the philosophy of Leibniz, does not refer therefore to an essential characteristic that can be essentialized and deduced from his narratives, but is qualified by its *operative function*. The story line, in this sense, is always cavernous, generative, and active: the story becomes an *event of reading through multiple ornamental folds*. Maintaining the tense "interface" between the narrative and the ornaments which exceed the storyline transforms not only the textual objects but the *subject matter*. Not merely decorative, the ornament jars, defers, and suspends the reader's judgment. Like the performativity underwriting Lins's proliferation of commas and narrative modality in the present tense, it forces the two planes of narration and decoration to merge in a third semantic field of meta-performativity that prompts a halting, contemplative frame for interpreting it through its variegated modalities of interlocking unity.

I have made the point that we must go beyond the author's explicit denouncements to understand the political vocation underwriting his narratives and writing procedures, and the same must be said in advance regarding the issue of "representing" or giving articulation to the subaltern. I understand the subaltern from the definition by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group as a counter-empirical subject and whose voice is utterly marginalized from Latin American nation-state narratives. That is,

"the oral world of the subaltern, the structural presence of the unavoidable, indestructible, and effective subject who has proven us wrong" ("Founding Statement," 146). Lins, like many intellectuals of his generation such as David Viñas and João Cabral de Melo Neto, was aware of the seemingly insuperable divide between the intellectual and the institutionless "other." With this said, what are we to make of Lins's most famous narrative in *Nove, Novena*, "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" whose story line articulates the "beatification" of the subaltern Joana Carolina, making her into a saint figure for the downtrodden nameless "nobodies" of the impoverished and violent Brazilian North East? Similar to Cabral's "proletarian Christ" figure that was mapped but ultimately put under erasure, does Lins's text articulate a project of "speaking for" the subaltern through a subtext of Christian Messianism and the saint trope?

A first step in responding to this question is to go beyond biography however interesting: the story deals with much more than an articulate homage to Lins's paternal grandmother, Joana Carolina, who raised Osman in the Brazilian North East. To the extent that the story's narrative structure constitutes a field of ornaments that calls attention to its compositional procedures as they cognitively map the plight of exploited subalterns in the Brazilian North East, a starting point in bridging the gulf—the literary and the subaltern—is found in the notion of the secret or "mystery" structure that frames each of the twelve retable texts in "Retábulo."

4. "Eleventh Mystery": *Writing Violence from Ornaments*

I begin my analysis of "Retable of Saint Joana Carolina" with the Latin citation at the end of the "Eleventh Mystery": "*Populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris, videt lucem magnam*", which may be viewed as the terms by which the priest-narrator christens Joana Carolina as a saint ("Retábulo" 161). Further still, as a Biblical intertext, the quote refers to Jesus Christ's migration from his home in Nazareth, after having been tempted in the desert for forty days and nights by Satan's variegated and numerous guises, false promises and illusions; the quote literally inaugurates the Christian Messiah's nomadic preaching: "The people which sat in great darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up" (Matthew 4:16); it also refers back to Isaiah's messianic prophecy, which foretold of a Messiah that would serve as a "light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house" (Isaiah 42:6-7). The quote's representational valences also suggest a set of symbolic equations, and a generalized cartography of the narrative's plot sequence: Joana Carolina as a Christ figure; the desert as the Brazilian, North Eastern Sertão; the Devil's temptations as those employed by the landowner-narrator, a primary agent and representation of structural violence, to seduce and break Joana's resolve in Mysteries Six and Seven, which result in her mother's death, her children's illnesses, and her having physiologically aged twenty years in a span of seven. The reference to a "people in darkness" [*populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris*], and by inference to Gentiles and Jews alike, may be seen allegorically as referring to the subalternized peoples of the Brazilian North East.

The Christ-Joana Carolina comparison reframes Joana's pedagogic nomadism as a teacher-subject on a sugar and coffee plantation, and the mediation of her twelve miracles by a set of subaltern narrators. More specifically, in the case of the mystery of this eleventh "Retable," the quote at once becomes symbolic of the priest-narrator's epiphany regarding Joana's "secret beauty" [*aquela beleza secreta*] on her deathbed ("Retábulo" 112), and Joana's status as a saint figure: it is precisely here, in the priest-narrator's eyes, and via a canonical articulation in the Catholic Church's official discourse, Latin, that Joana Carolina becomes canonized, as her face, her representation on the retable, multiplies and

proliferates into a series of figures, phenomena, and conjectures that suggest the overcoming of poverty, duress, and exploitation that have been constant in her life [*daquela ressurreição fugaz*] (112). But the question remains: how does one negotiate the priest-narrator's epiphany, relayed in Latin and through a gamut of symbolic ornaments, and the problem of subalternity? How is subalternity imagined, inverted, and displaced by the literary?

Joana Carolina's beatification by the Catholic priest is ambiguous, semantically cryptic, for the conclusion of the narrative ends in a sequence of ornamentations that blur the narrative's chronological closure: the Latin citation from Matthew is relayed to us with the priest walking away, and the image of Joana Carolina in flames. In addition to the beatification theme, the text begins by imposing a duplicitous ontological query: "what is it?, what is it?" [*O que é, o que é?*] which points to a second (iterative) plane of interpretation that concerns, I suggest from the epistemic crisis that the text stages, the problem of writing and interpreting the subaltern as a site of redemption ("Retábulo" 156; Frizzi 109).²⁸

Looking closer at the duplicity of the question, what weaves together this ambiguous dispersal of ornaments are the self-referencing strategies that map the canonization of Joana Carolina as an object that "must be for an artist" [*como deve ser para um artista a forma anunciada*] (161; 113). This key trope, as we connect it to the references to art and writing that the text inscribes repeatedly over its objects, clearly articulates the way that Lins's ornament, as a modality of semiotic supplementation, stages an allegory of its own representational procedures and poetics of writing.

Does this literary encoding of Joana Carolina, and in consequence, of subalternity, reduce the problem to a discussion among artists and lettered? Is Lins's canonization of the subaltern Joana Carolina another instance of literary transculturation of the regional other into a universal subject? Are we faced with the appropriation of difference through a teleological logic of modernity? Is this not a literary restoration of the auratic?

The problem of epistemic limits, in Lins, hinges on the ways in which his texts trace the limits of literary art with respect to subalternity as *violence*, and begins in Mystery Eleven's opening mini-riddle text with the double inquiry:

O que é, o que é? Leão de invisíveis dentes, de dente é feito e morde pela juba, pela cauda, pelo corpo inteiro. [...] é filho, às vezes, de dois pedernais. Ainda que devore tudo, nada recusando a seus molares, caninos e incisivos, simboliza a vida. (109;156).

[What is it, what is it? Lion of invisible teeth, of tooth he is made and bites with his mane, with his tail, with his entire body [...] he is begotten, at times, by two flints. Even though he devours everything, denying nothing to his molars, canines and incisors, he symbolizes life.]

DÉCIMO PRIMEIRO MISTÉRIO

O que é, o que é? Leão de invisíveis dentes, de dente é feito e morde pela juba, pela cauda, pelo corpo inteiro. Não faz sombra no chão; e as sombras fogem se ele está presente, embora sejam, de tudo que existe, a só coisa que poupam sua ira e sua fome. A pele, mais quente que a dos ursos e camelos, e mesmo que a dos outros leões, aquece-nos de longe. Ao contrário dos outros animais, pode nascer sem pai, sem mãe: é filho, às vezes, de dois pedernais. Ainda que devore tudo, nada recusando a seus molares, caninos e incisivos, simboliza a vida. Domesticável se aprisionado, é irresistível.

• 109 •

Figs. 3: Osman Lins, "riddle" in "Décimo Primeiro Mistério," in *Nove, Novena*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1994, 109.

The astrological sign, Leo, and the element fire become the first terms in a sequence of ornaments that will layer and complicate the ensuing narrative sequence which is more interpretative than descriptive, more imagistic than chronological: the priest-narrator's *reading* of the eleventh panel, his *reading* of Joana's life in the moment of her last confession, and his *reading* of his own institutional status: "Vendo-a (ou deveria dizer *vendo-as*, de tal modo eu tinha ante meus olhos dois seres diferentes, ambos reais e unificados só em meu espanto?" [Seeing her, or should I say *seeing them*, for inasmuch as I held before my eyes two different beings, both real and unified, but was this so through my fear?²⁹] (112).



Fig. 4 *The Life of Saint Eulalia*, Tempera on wood, (Cathedral, Palma de Mallorca, 1350); rpt. in Emil Kren and Daniel Marx, *Web Gallery of Art*.

First reading: From the inaugural riddle, we move with the priest's eyes into the symbolic space of the panel scene. Angels hover over Joana as her hands hold feathers and a dry branch. The syntax is paused, meditative, littered with commas, while the objects in the tableau are distributed with very

few verbs. Narrative time of a sudden interrupts the still space of descriptive discourse, as the characters on the tableau leap out of the painting: "Vendo-me, segurou o meu braço. "Estou lembrando quando o senhor veio aqui pela última vez"; [When she saw me she grabbed my arm. "I remember when you came here last"] (110; 157). An inversion of power relations, we could say that narrative begins with the represented casting a counter-gaze to the enunciator of discourse, whereby the confessor forces the priest to confess his "sins" or weakness. In other words, the priest-narrator does not reply to Joana's evocation in the present, as her words become, like the panel scene, objects of contemplation through which he self-reflects: "Cultivo o hábito de esquecer. A um padre compete proteger-se da impregnação das coisas"; [I cultivate the habit of forgetting. A priest must protect himself from the infiltration of things] (110; 157).

Second reading: We are therein implicated into a space of contemplation, the priest's self-reflection in denial, a mental scene that likewise unfolds in the narrative now, and divides the narrative once again. The priest's narrative of this supposed confession, beginning with his description of the tableau, becomes a *multiple and fragmented reading space*, [*vendo-as, de tal modo eu tinha ante meus olhos dois seres diferentes*] (112). This space delineates a clear tension separating Joana Carolina (subaltern) from the priest. If at first sight she is an object of contemplation on the tableau, when she surprisingly gazes back at the priest and speaks, bursting the frame and entering the time of narrative, her words become *textual* objects that *distance* her from the priest, who avoids "the infiltration of things" and "cultivates the habit of forgetting." Like an ethnographic object, Joana Carolina becomes a frontier subject of the priest's discourse as opposed to a disciplined subject who confesses to the Church: "Mas dentre desse rosto, que adquiriu de súbito uma transparência inexplicável, como se na verdade, não existisse, fosse uma encrosta de engano sobre a realidade não franqueada à contemplação ordinária" [But within her face, which acquired of a sudden an inexplicable transparency, as if in truth, it were a crust of deceit covering a reality that could not be penetrated by ordinary contemplation] (111-112; 159).³⁰

Third reading: The priest's object of contemplation, Joana Carolina on her deathbed, but also Joana Carolina as a representation on the tableau, becomes a signifier of thresholds. The duplicitous depiction of Joana Carolina displaces the narrative unities of place, time, and action, and consequently, in its dispersion and multiplicity, her representation becomes no longer a simple object of discourse, but rather a counter-focal narrative point of view which shifts the gaze of the reader back at the priest. "Eleventh Mystery," in this way, is as much a narration of Joana Carolina's confession and death scene as a mapping of the priest narrator's rigid, institutionalized mental habits that eventually become dissolved by the aesthetic experience of recalling the tableau and Joana Carolina's death. As the two narrative points of view shift, multiply, disperse, and overlap they configure a supplementary system of signification that calls attention to the text's constructedness and textuality. In doing so, narrative perspective in "Eleventh Mystery,"—written in the speed of the present tense but haltingly reflective of past events and by shifting images on the tableau that burst into the scene of narrative—graphs a dizzying exchange of gazes and words that the priest ultimately *reads as text*.

To read the confessing "other," in Mystery Eleven, is to narrate the ways in which confession is suspended and launched back at the disciplining "rational" subject. And to narrate this final confession, this final taking inventory of sins so that the subaltern may be "purified" by the institution of the Church at the threshold of life and death, is to displace the solemn, passive, docile object of contemplation. It is to resemanticize the confessor, subaltern object, who progressively becomes subject of discourse that is accruing sense, multiplying perspective, and displacing the formulaic and repetitive. Or perhaps better, the object of discipline and cognition displaces the interpreter's gaze

who cannot “penetrate” it. If the encounter, rhetoric, and logic of disciplinary confession is riveted by displacements and semantic accumulation, and mimesis is betrayed by the fact that paintings jump to life, the gel that allows these temporal and spatial ruptures to hold together are the references to the text itself as artwork and as text:

Sua voz, perdidas as últimas inflexões, era um velho instrumento corroído, clarineta com líquens e teias de aranha. Custava-lhe unir as poucas palavras, tal como se as escrevesse. [...] Resplandecia, no âmago desses fenômenos, uma frase, uma palavra, um semblante, alguma coisa de completo e ao mesmo tempo de velado, como deve ser para um artista a forma anunciada, pressentida, ainda irrelavada, ainda inconquistada. (111-113; 158-161).

[Her voice, fading, was like an old corroded instrument, a clarinet full of lichens and spiderwebs. It was difficult for her to put together those last few words, as if she were writing them out. [...] Something shone in the heart of these phenomena, a sentence, a word, a semblance, something complete, and at the same time veiled, as the form announced, surmised, still unrevealed, still unconquered must be for the artist].

Fourth reading: But we would be mistaken to judge the priest’s readings of Joana as institutionally integrating, redemptive, and appropriative. Far from articulating fulfillment, though evoking the Biblical story of Adam, the giving of names to the subaltern ends symbolically in flames, recasting the initial tension of non-communication and riddle-riveted sense: “Dentro de mim, enquanto me afastava de cabeça alta, Joana era uma chama. *Populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam*”; [Inside me, as I walked away with my head high, Joana burned like a flame. *Populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam*] (113; 161).

Joana Carolina may be here canonized in the priest-narrator’s mind through the Latin reference to the Gospel of Matthew. But this canonization, indeed Joana Carolina becoming a Christ figure, is achieved inconclusively, in heterodox fashion, with the priest walking away, obliquely and metaphorically so, through a fusion of astrological and aesthetic elements that connote the text’s quality as an artifact and shifting semiotic map that defers the sedimentation of semantic sense or representational subsumption or closure.

I am suggesting that Lins’s will *to ornament the subaltern* entirely rewrites the subaltern problematic. The subaltern, in Lins, becomes *an object/subject-signifier of multiple writings*. The multiple semantic field that charts the subaltern reflects back the text and its objects as multiple sites of semiotic displacements that betray the realist vocation of representing “the other” or “the real.” More specifically, the ornament displaces, reframes, and inverts the logocentrism and coloniality inherent in the realist premise. The ornament, in this regard, serves an epistemological purpose: layering objects of representation with a second level of signification that suggest the text’s artificial and duplicitous semantic structuring, like the clarinet, the references to writing and weaving that encircle and frame Joana Carolina in the moment of her canonization that “must be for an artist,” highlight the utter artificiality and multiplicity of Lins’s writing procedures tracing their limits as potential political tools of representation. Far from passive, I am pointing out that there is a critical force in laying bare Lins’s ornamental system of writing as duplicitous, multiple, displacing and, above all, epistemologically limited with respect to the problematic of subalternity for which it provides multiple and mobile mappings.

Inverting the liturgical order, "Eleventh Mystery" also suspends the confessional logic of discipline in the Foucaultian sense. This inversion/ornamentation sequence preserves Joana Carolina's status as an indeterminate object of art, shifting ornamental signifier of contemplation that resists facile encapsulation or a violent "speaking for" in the name of administered institutions. She doesn't passively confess for us how she "agrees" with what has happened to her and the exploited multitude: "Padre, muitas vezes desejei matar"; [Father, many times I've desired to kill] (111; 158). She can't remember her "sins;" indeed, she is no noble "savage." Her canonization occurs at the level of an epistemic suspension and at the level of an accumulative unfolding metaphor. The text itself may be productively viewed as the way by which, as a sign for subaltern redemption, but also as a sign for art and writing, Joana Carolina is ambiguously woven across this plotting of borders and multiple readings. The giving of names, sanctification, and the mediation of this epistemic frontier that "Eleventh Mystery" explores thematically with the priest's phrase "a priest must avoid the infiltration of things," occurs precisely in the text's suspension of sense with synesthetic flames and Latin. To the double inquiry, riddle-form that inaugurated "Eleventh Mystery," the naming of "it" ends in flames, naming *is* flames, and this is a properly aesthetic gesture, the political interface of the literary ornament in Osman Lins.³¹ In this way we could say with Slavoj Žižek, the subaltern remains a sublime object not of ideology, but of aesthetic tensions.

5. *On Subalternism and the Suspension of Transculturation*

"There is, no doubt, something slightly disconcerting and perhaps not entirely welcome," writes Alberto Moreiras, in the "structural similarities between the superregionalist and the subalternist projects" (Moreiras, *The Exhaustion* 170). The problematic that Moreiras is placing his finger over concerns the epistemic projection of the superregionalist novel, understood as the "hegemonic Boom novel" and as "the master paradigm for the interpretation of Latin American culture throughout the 1960s, 70s, and even the 1980s"(170). The epistemic hiatus yet troubling link connecting the Boom novel to subalternist projects, Moreiras suggests, resides in the fact that the Boom novel becomes a "an appropriating machine" of cultural alterity and difference, while subalternist theoretical practice is "born in willed opposition to" any such appropriative schematics that subsumes alterity through the lens of the literary and a teleological evolutionism tied to the ideologies of the modernizing state (170). Radical difference, the very frontier of the literary, becomes appropriated, simplified, disciplined, and even effaced by the Boom novel's will to *translate* cultural singularity through the literary apparatus.

Moreiras is right in pointing out this hermeneutic dilemma concerning Latin American literary culture and any pretension it may have of "representing" subalternity. In 1982 Angel Rama published his impacting study on narrative transculturation and the cultural and political significance of the Boom in Latin America. The interpretative keys underwriting Rama's project are what we may rightly call *novelistic anthropology* and the radical alterity of the "the cultural peculiarity that has developed in the interior" [*la peculiaridad cultural desarrollada en lo interior*] (Rama, *Transculturation* 12). Rama's critical idiom deploys the discourse of anthropology to organize, unify, and map "the history" of Latin American cultural and literary production. Anthropological discourse is immediately suggested in the book's dedication to Darcy Ribeiro and John V. Murra where Rama qualifies their contributions to the field as "*antropólogos de nuestra América*." More to the point, the Boom novelist, in the example provided by Juan Rulfo, João Guimarães Rosa, and José María Arguedas, becomes a "transculturator" that immerses himself and studies the cultures and languages of the "other" or subaltern in order to incorporate and represent their voices and life-worlds. The anthropological task of the transculturator novelist is to "reestablish" or realign literary culture with the cultural "totality" of the continent:

Restablecer las obras literarias dentro de las operaciones culturales que cumplen las sociedades americanas, reconociendo sus audaces construcciones significativas y el ingente esfuerzo por manejar auténticamente los lenguajes simbólicos desarrollados por los hombres americanos, es un modo de reforzar estos vertebrales conceptos de independencia, originalidad, representatividad. (19)

For Rama, the Boom novel provides a corrective, rectifying “ethical” mapping of cultural singularities in Latin America. This is so because before the Boom, Latin American literary production represented “the other” through abstract categories gleaned from Europe and the metropolis and singled out the subaltern as a national object of folklore and emblem of singularity. The other, principle of Latin American “representividad” and “originalidad,” was imagined as a passive object. The object of representation, with the Boom, becomes subject through the process of narrative transculturation: “en vez de ser la excepción y de singularizar al personaje sometido al escudriñamiento del escritor, pasa a ser la voz que narra, abarca así la totalidad del texto y ocupa el puesto del narrador manifestando su visión del mundo” (42).

Rama’s transculturation theory is a universalizing theory based on an operation of “totalization” or appropriation and translation of the particular. The subaltern “speaks,” narrates and so becomes subject of discourse. The 19th century, Eurocentric, colonizing trope of civilization versus barbarism becomes inverted and leveled: the “barbarian” other speaks the language of the civilized through the literary apparatus. Rama is thus concerned with a libratory, decolonizing act, but the language of the “civilized,” the discourse of the literary becomes the crowning achievement of *all* cultures: “Las obras literarias no están fuera de las culturas sino que las coronan” (19). Subaltern languages and life-worlds are transcribed, but speak in and through the name of the literary and of the national which universalize “las particularidades culturales” of the peoples of the Americas (26).

Narrative transculturation is a problematic decolonizing discourse in spite of Rama’s claims to the contrary. Granted, Rama emphasizes the Boom novel’s “ethical” thrust, by which he means that Eurocentric paternalism and orientalism are burst asunder and the literary field becomes democratized. Subalterns speak and are protagonists in the novels of Rulfo and Guimarães Rosa. For Rama, by transculturating the subaltern’s speech and granting it agency in literary discourse, Latin American authenticity or his master categories that underwrite the totality, specificity, and archive of Latin American cultural production— “independencia”, “representatividad”, and “originalidad”— are preserved in the face of a torrid process of international modernization that homogenizes the planet under global capital and Euro-Western categories. The Latin American transculturating novel therefore articulates a counter technology, a counter culture, and a utopian fusion of subalternity and literary culture:

La única manera que el nombre de América Latina no sea invocado en vano, es cuando acumulación interna es capaz de proveer no sólo de “materia prima”, sino de una cosmovisión, una lengua, una técnica para producir las obras literarias. No hay aquí nada que se parezca al folklorismo autárquico, irrisorio en una época internacionalista, pero sí hay un esfuerzo de descolonización espiritual, mediante las capacidades adquiridas por un continente que tiene ya una muy larga y profunda tradición inventiva[.] (20)

But Rama’s definition of the literary and its decolonizing, synthesizing, anthropological, and utopian function constitutes ultimately an apparatus of Western knowledge based on a state-centric developmental model of history. This model arguably has little to do with indigenous modalities of

time, thought, and culture in spite of the Boom novel's recourse to myth and magic that Rama champions. In Rama, it is ultimately the literary that "crowns" and speaks for cultures in spite of its decolonizing pretensions.

In the context of the contemporary collapse of the national popular state and fierce critiques leveled at any variety of cultural essentialism, the examination of the interrelations holding between cultural forms and the state have become suspect. The subaltern problematic presents us with a particularly challenging hermeneutic horizon that may very well hold an interpretative key for our productively piecing back together the fragments of the past that tie the historical discursive formation of the literary in the 1950s and 60s to the state and its aporias. Or is it always ultimately going to be the case that the literary articulates the rounded national allegory, especially in the context of "Third Worlds?" With and against Rama's powerful study and mapping of the field, I am asking, more precisely, how and why did the subaltern problematic play an important role in the experimental literary culture of the 1950s and 60s? Was the subaltern solely the other democratized, totalized, and universalized through an act of literary transculturation, or did other discursive mappings fracture that ideology of the literary?

At first sight, Rama's thesis would seem to shed light on Osman Lins's ornamental narrative aesthetic. Subalterns from the North East of Brazil speak, and the protagonist saint, is a subaltern likened to Christ. She is ultimately canonized by a Catholic priest with a citation from Latin and the Gospel of Matthew. Lins's narrative fuses an ambitious, stylized literary technique that he had developed through his voyage to France in 1961 and study of the French *nouveau roman*. Images of clocks, measuring scales, and apparatuses of calculation abound as well through his text constituting a semiotic system that is blatantly Western. Following Fredric Jameson and Rama, is there not here a process of translation tinged with utopianism, the articulation of a national allegory whereby the subaltern particular, synecdoche for the national wound, in becoming saint and Christ-figure articulates a view of the social totality and all its contradictions? The answer is yes, and Rama is right, albeit partially. Lins's text indeed maps the social "totality" of modern class relations and articulates a counter myth to modernity as preserve of an originary culture. But how is the literary imagined from within the text through the ornament's self-referencing strategies? Is there a distinct encoding of the literary in its relationship to subalternity? More specifically, are we simply witnessing an epistemological "speaking for" that "crowns" the other's culture? Or does the literary in Lins provide an alternative mapping of this divisive gulf?

While trying to understand Lins in our time one never knows if one should read him solely from the vantage of form and aesthetics or from that of history and politics, "Retábulo"'s "Final Mystery" presents us with the case that fuses these dimensions by the fact that the subaltern narrator-chorus that carries Joana Carolina to her death bed is represented by the symbol of infinity, ∞ . Ornament and symbolic abundance are counter-posed to a textual field of infinite song but significantly characterized by the delay of restitution and semantic plenitude. I want to read "Final Mystery" as Lins's response to the impasse of representation provided in the case of the subaltern, and consequently, as a critique and suspension of narrative transculturation. I am not interested in unearthing Lins's technique in order to solely describe it, but am keen on demonstrating how the ornament implicates the reader in a critical relationship to this epistemological problem and how, at the very least, we may begin to re-imagine the ways in which the limits of literary discourse were plotted in productive ways as a problem by Latin American intellectuals of the 1960s. If the aura was restored by the Boom, I argue, it was also questioned, critiqued, and profanized. Subalternity, in effect, was imagined by the literary *otherwise*.

6. *Hesitation in the Ornamental Letter: Representation and Subalternity.*

“Final Mystery” is the account given by a multitude of “nobody” narrators who are carrying Joana Carolina’s corpse to a mass burial ground. This throng of subalterns, represented by the semiotic indicator of infinity— ∞ —lets us know early on that they, like Joana Carolina, are the despised, downtrodden, and poor. How she belonged to the life-world of the “nobodies,” a world that is described as dominated by the rich and powerful, is their topic. The narrative they construct of Joana’s life and ultimate burial develops along an axis of sweeping, musical descriptions of the countryside and city rendered in the present tense, and along a parallel Messianic register that paints Joana Carolina as a miracle worker and potential redeemer for the poor.

As in the Twelfth Station of the Cross where Christ dies as a martyr and introduces into the world the principle of a new law and the Pentecostal speaking of tongues, the twelfth “Mistério final” sequence constitutes a theoretically challenging denouement to “Retábulo.” Not unlike the mystery of the Cross, death, Messianic apotheosis, the bringing of a new law and language are its principal themes. And yet in its ornamental textual unfolding, “Mistério final” also points to a subset of themes directly bearing on the notion of literature, the arts, and politics. In so far as the textual sequence is chanted for the first (yet conclusive) time by a throng of dispossessed “nobodies” represented by semiotic infinity, ∞ , and the first-person plural pronoun “nós,” the text foregrounds with force the problems of subalternity and solidarity [*nós*] as a problem of representation [the sign of infinity] that Lins’s aesthetic of the ornament centrally stages in the 1960s.

“Retábulo”’s oscillation between prose, poetry, and theatre is well documented.³² And yet the infinity symbol denoting the narrator’s choral speech suggests a larger anomaly. This is so because the micro “mystery” riddle that has prefaced each of the eleven previous sections of “Retábulo,” and served as a regulating “partition” to separate and introduce the twelve distinct “mystery panels” of Joana Carolina’s life—its stations or seasons akin to the Messianic *via crucis*—is here removed.

I want to suggest that the text’s riddle and mystery³³ are inscribed and conflated in the choral host’s “narrative point of view” and the ornamental sign of infinity. Indeed, is it not the case that this infinite perspectivism of the subaltern chorus—designated by the signs “ ∞ ” and “nós”—implies an enigmatic breaking down, or shall we say, breaking out of the “mystery” panel’s representational scheme?

I will begin to answer these questions by turning to the narrative structure of “Retábulo,” which is based on the retable panel and its depictions of Joana Carolina. The panels function as dividing frames that separate “Retábulo”’s twelve “Mystery” narrative sections, and they also point to the Messianic feature that underwrites Joana Carolina’s story as a miracle worker. Indeed “novena,” from the title of Lins’s collection, connotes and commemorates the Christian Pentecost and speaking in tongues. Far from Babelic, it inscribes a *discursive doubling* with respect to what we could call the everyday “prose” of the stories told by “Retábulo”’s rotating narrators, such as the violence that they collectively suffer. Following Fredric Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious, I want to argue that the Messianic state of exception of the Pentecost serves as an allegorical horizon of interpretation in “Mistério final” that ultimately introduces the promise of an “other” revolutionary language.

And yet, Angel Rama’s notion of “transculturación” as a writing procedure proper to the Boom novel that incorporates, realigns, and transcribes indigenous and heterogeneous languages through the

literary, is curiously absent in Lins’s “Retábulo.” Akin to Franco Moretti’s reading of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967), we could say that language in Lins’s “Retábulo” is strikingly neutral, monotone, and, above all, artificial. But different from Moretti’s critique of García Márquez, I want to stress the critical potential and limits of this artificial discourse.

Language, in Lins’s “Retábulo,” does not deploy linguistic heteroglossia as a realist principle or strategy of *transculturación*, but functions moreover as a sequencing of epistemological or discursive registers that concern the arts, literature, ethics, subalternity, religion, revolution, cosmology, and solidarity. Indeed, one could say that the narrative indicators—ornamental signs such as the cross or the sign of infinity—inscribe precisely a discursive problem concerning the nature and limits of knowledge.³⁴

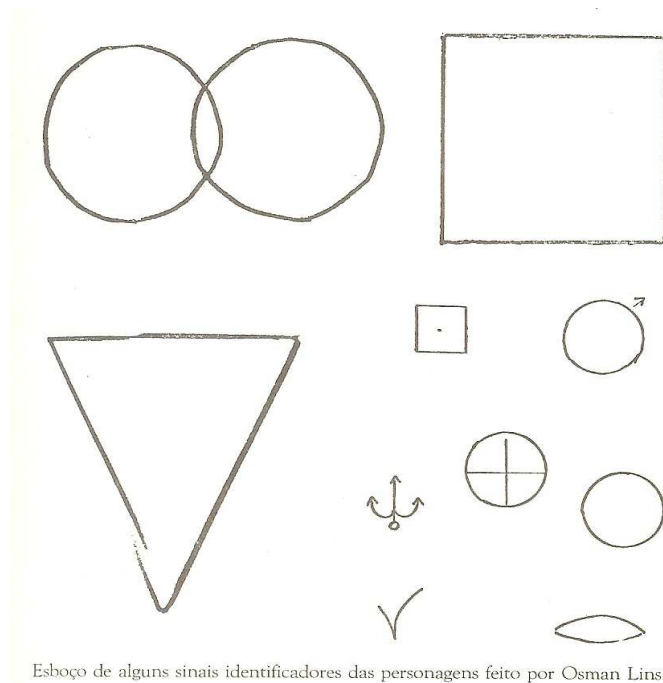


Fig. 5: Osman Lins, Sketches of Narrator Indicators. Rpt. in Sandra Nitrini, *Poéticas em confronto: Nove, Novena e o Novo Romance*. São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1987. 39.

Put differently, in Lins, the ornament-narrative indicator designates a theoretical frame that attempts to read the sense of Joana Carolina’s actions *and* depictions on the retable panel through a particular discursive register concerning distinct perspectives such as Christianity, subalternity, the cosmological, or the literary.³⁵ For example, in “Final Mystery,” the subaltern chorus, designated by the sign of infinity, utilizes a Biblical register that connotes an infinite, cosmological order and design of the universe that transcends human perception and knowledge: “nunca tivemos a impressão tão viva e tão perturbadora de que esta é a arca do Próximo Dilúvio, que as novas águas vingativas tombarão sobre nós quarenta dias e quarenta noites [...] e que somente Joana sobrevivera” [we never had such a strong and disturbing feeling that this was the ark of the Next Great Flood, that the new vengeful waters would fall on us for forty days and forty nights] (114; 163). Joana Carolina is inscribed as the “arc” announcing the advent of the “Next Flood.” She is also described as a Messianic maternal matrix and figure for redemption: “para depois gerar com um gesto os seres que lhe aprouver: plantas, bichos,

Javãs, Magogs, Togarmas, Asquenazes” [to [later] give birth with a gesture to the creatures she pleased: plants, animals, Javans, Magogs, Togarmahs, Ashkenazes] (115; 163).

The discursive registers that depict and interpret Joana Carolina’s death are far from uniform. The subaltern multitude also speaks from an almost verb-less, accumulative register:

Chapéus na mão, rostos duros, mãos ásperas, roupas de brim, alpercatas de couro, nós, hortelões, ferreiros, marchantes, carpinteiros, intermediários do negócio de gado, seleiros, vendedores de frutas e de pássaros, homens de meio de vida incerto e sem futuro, vamos conduzindo Joana para o cemitério, nós, os ninguéns da cidade, que sempre a ignoravam os outros, gente do dinheiro e do poder. (113; 161-162).

[Hats in our hands, hard faces, rough hands, denim clothes, leather sandals, we greengrocers, market vendors, butchers, carpenters, middlemen in the cattle business, saddlers, sellers of fruits and birds, men of uncertain means and without a future, are taking Joana to the cemetery, we the nobodies of this town, because³⁶ the others, the people with money and power, always ignored her]

The force behind this distribution of class is found in the fragmentary logic of its mode of narration. Connoting the lack of agency and representative power in the polis, the absence of binding verbs, the breaking of the grammatical subject-object-predicate sequence is the hinge that binds these countless subalternized occupations divided by a long string of commas. Infinity, the sign of a “higher” cosmological order and the promise of Messianic redemption that forms a bridge with the earth, also seems to point to an infinite absence—call it subaltern agency or restitution, the infinity sign of the multitude configures the site of an interrogation and postponement of fulfillment.

Of the subaltern in "Mistério final" Lins wrote:

Na parte final, que é a parte do enterro, ela é seguido pelos pobres da cidade, pelos homens do trabalho, pelos artesãos, pelos pequenos negociantes, pelos homens das mãos grossas, e tudo o enterro é construído num ritmo batido, altamente violento. Esta narrativa que parece característica de preocupações estéticas, na realidade, talvez de tudo o que escrevi até aquele momento, é a que tem mais preocupações políticas. *O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina* é a meu ver política, e altamente violenta, enquanto a maioria das pessoas tende a ver naquele texto uma narrativa quase religiosa, a partir inclusive do título, mas ele é a narrativa de um protesto violento contra o modo de como o pobre é tratado no meu país. (*Evangelho* 220)

[In the final part, which is the burial, she is followed by the poor from the city, by the workers, the artisans, the small merchants, by the men with rough hands, and the whole burial is constructed in a highly violent rhythm. This narrative which seems to be concerned with aesthetic problems, in reality, of all that I had written until that moment [in 1966], is the text with the most political problems. "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" is, in my view, political, and highly violent, although the majority of people tend to see in this text a quasi-religious narrative, beginning with the title, but the text is a narrative of a violent protest against the way that the poor are treated in my country].

A political text, a violent text, yet impossible to directly speak for the subaltern, Lins’s “Mistério final” imposes a common strategy of the Latin American Boom: the reversion to myth. And yet, far from a

compositional procedure entailing the ultimate transcoding of heterogeneous discursive modalities and the imposition of a mythos to resolve intractable social contradictions, Lins's "Mistério final" is a halting, interruptive text that inscribes tension in the very myth and perspective encoding structures that inform it.

Far from a rote rewriting of a Christian Saint's hagiography or the mythological trope of San Sebastião in the Brazilian North East, Joana Carolina functions as a *divided* ornamental signifier:

Viveu seus anos com mansidão e justiça, humildade e firmeza, amor e comiseração. Morreu com mínimos bens e reduzidos amigos. Nunca de nunca a rapinagem alheia liberou ambições em seu espírito. Nunca o mal sofrido gerou em sua alma outras maldades. (116-117; 165).

[She lived her life with meekness, with humility and firmness, love and compassion. She died with reduced possessions and [a reduced number of] friends. Never did the plundering of others unleash any ambitions in her soul. Never did the evil suffered engender in her soul other evils]

And yet, following Rancière, we would err in deducing the text's politics from such explicit moralizations on the part of the subaltern narrators.³⁷ This ethical sequence is part and parcel of the properly medieval, choral, and popular linguistic register that the text is self-consciously inhabiting: "Vamos carregando Joana para o cemitério, atravessando a cidade e seu odor de estábulos [...] entre Flores e Ruis, Glórias e Salvios, Hélios e Teresas, Isabeis e Ulisses, Josés e Veras" [We are carrying Joana to the cemetery, crossing the town and its stables [...] among Floras and Ruis, Glórias and Sálvios, Hélios e Teresas, Isabels and Ulisses, Josés and Veras] (116).

Like Joana Carolina, the subaltern multitude becomes a shifting, accumulative signifier, a sign that proliferates and deterritorializes a central optical plain. But through the dispersion of their names that are also metonymies of the natural world, "um pomar generoso," a strange *subjectivity* of the poor is articulated:

Morreu no fim do inverno. Nascerá outra igual na próxima estação? [...] Sob a terra, sob o gesso, sob as lagartixas, sob o mato, perfilam-se *os convivas sem palavras*. Cedros e Carvalhos, Nogueiras e Oliveiras, Jacarandás e Loureiros. Puseram-lhes — *por que inútil generosidade?* — o terno festivo, o mais fino vestido, a melhor gravata, os sapatos mais novos. Reunião estranha: todos de lábios cerrados, mãos cruzadas, cabeças descobertas, todos rígidos, pálpebras descidas e voltadas na mesma direção, como expectantes, todos sozinhos, frente a um grande pórtico através do qual alguém estivesse para vir. Um julgador, um almirante, um harpista, um garçon com bandejas. Trazendo o quê? [...] Tarda o Esperado, e os pedaços desses mudos, desses imóveis convivas sem palavras, vão sendo devorados. Humildemente, em silêncio, Joana Carolina toma seu lugar, as mãos unidas, entre Prados, Pumas e Figueiras, entre Azuçenas, Pereiras e Jacintos, entre Cordeiros, Gamboas e Amarílis, entre Rosas, Leões e Margaridas, entre Junqueiras, Gallos e Verônicas, entre Martas, Hortências, Artemísias, Valerianas, Veigas, Violetas, Cajazeiras, Gamas, Gencianas, entre Bezerras, e Peixes, e Narcisos, entre Salgueiros e Falcões, e Campos, no vestido que era o das tardes de domingo *e penetrada do silêncio com que ficava sozinha*. (Emphasis added 117; 165-166)

[She died at the end of the winter. Will another like her be born in the next season? [...] Beneath the ground, beneath the plaster, beneath the weeds, the silent guests appear [*without*

words]. Hawthornes and Myrtles, Hazels and Olives, Rosewoods and Laurels. They dressed them—why this [useless] generosity—in their Sunday suits, the finest dress, the best tie, the newest shoes. Strange reunion: all with their lips sealed, hands crossed, heads bare, all stiff, their eyelids closed and all facing the same direction, as if waiting, all alone, in front of a big portico in which someone was about to pass. A judge, an admiral, a harpist, a waiter with trays. Bringing what? [...] The Awaited One is tarrying, and the bodies of these mutes, of these immobile and speechless guests are being devoured. Humbly, in silence, Joana Carolina takes her place, her hands joined together, among Meadows, Wolfes and Burrs, among Lilies, Berries and Heathers, among Lambs, Quinceys and Amaryllis, among Roses, Lyons and Daisies, among Reeds, Crabs and Veronicas, among Martens, Jasmines, Irises, Hollies, Dales, Violets, Maples, Foxes, Ivies, among Cranes, and Fishes, and Ferns, in the dress she wore on Sunday afternoons and *enveloped [penetrada] by the silence that was her only companion.*]

This "useless generosity" of naming that closes "Retábulo," the useless dispersion of proper names that bespeak of flora and fauna, rewrites the subaltern narrator chorus, sign of infinity, as metonymies of writing. The giving of names is, after all, emphasized.³⁸ As semiotic ornaments, the first letters of their names suggest the letters of the alphabet even as they burst across the commas in plantlike offshoots, in symphonic crescendo.³⁹ But this scriptural economy that lines the text's denouement and Joana Carolina's burial in a mass gravesite, presents us also with a threshold, the contours of which delimit the problem of final meaning and redemption.

In charting this frontier, we should note that narrative voice here abruptly warps into omniscience. This *deus ex machina* voice from the outside interrupts the burial passage with questions concerning the arrival of an "Awaited" [*Tarda o Esperado*]. Everything happens as though this authorial birds-eye perspective were framing Joana Carolina's burial for us on the final partition of the retable tableau.

According to Maria Balthasar Soares, such abrupt shifts in perspective "accentuate the movement of writing in the story" (174). Dissonant closure, yet connoting a Messianic horizon of redemption, what follows is yet another proliferation of signifiers. To the question, "why the useless generosity?,"—of writing, of art, of naming?—Joana Carolina *and* the narrative point of view cross over into the "silent" hoard and deathbed from a plane of omniscience. This abrupt inversion of narrative perspective and its system of proliferating, warped, contrapuntal objects, presents, as in Cabral's "Psicologia da Composição," an inverted poetic Garden [*pomar generoso*].⁴⁰

Put differently, the "generous garden," in Lins, becomes an allegorized system of writing, a politics of aesthetics, that simultaneously displaces and fractures the transcendence of sense in the Saint signifier, and names and distributes its objects as ornaments that burrow under an epistemic ground in crisis: the writing of violence at the epistemological limits of literature and subalternity.⁴¹

To the extent that, following Benedito Nunes, Lins's text endeavors to "subject" the experience of entropic life to the "discipline of a poetic order," it is my contention that his narrative system presents us with, as in the baroque, a de-disciplined object (203). The object of representation and of social redemption is thus twice named and silenced: the story is cast, refracted, and suspended as a narrative modality of writing that calls attention to itself in its very finitude; that is, as an accumulative series of interlocking ornaments that serve as framing, refractory objects that call attention to the narrative's constructedness, and which also serve as the essential narrative components of the story: characters, narrators, and objects are also ornaments on the retable tableau that structures the narrative. An inversion of Eden at the moment of Joana Carolina's burial, these ornaments warp into *metonymical*

figures of writing, a poetic garden that points up to a *critical function*: the overarching tableau frame that repositions, layers, and interrupts the story's objects and narrative structure. Joana Carolina's apotheosis, figure of subaltern redemption, is ambiguously framed in silence and encircled by the nameless poor in the backlands, as though by an army of awaiting angels, flora and creatures. Ornamental signs constituting an *alternative scripture*, this inversion of Eden culminates in the *becoming retable* and *politically problematic* of the narrative field; that is, far from positing the subaltern "other" as the object of transculturation and poetic discipline as so many did in the 1960s, Lins's ornaments make this mediation critical as they constantly mediate the text's depictions of violence and subalternity: the subaltern is cast not so much as an object of ideology but as a figuration of accumulation and condensation, tension and textuality, principle for a new poetic and political word.

Notes

¹"Radical in the face of his or her past, the new Latin American writer sets out to revise it from this evidence: the lack of a language," stated Carlos Fuentes in *La nueva narrativa latinoamericana* (1969) (Fuentes 30). Fuentes thus inscribes a continent wide problematic and identity discourse that privileged the new "boom" novel as harbinger of a revolutionary and "authentic" language and consciousness (30). All translations from the Spanish and Portuguese are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

² During the 1960s, the "novela de la tierra" was primarily considered through a stagist optics and was considered stylistically obsolete. In this view, the novel form had to "develop" a new language, "more universal" in style, while the nation state teleologically advanced into a more "universal" form from a state of economic backwardness and dependency. According to Fuentes, "la novela tradicional aparece como una forma estática dentro de una sociedad estática"(14).

³ With respect to the problem of the international market, a comprehensive reading of the activities and functions of the boom novelist can be consulted in Angel Rama's critical anthology, *Más allá del boom: literatura y mercado* (1984). Literature's achieved "authenticity" and autonomy was often juxtaposed and contrasted with the "falsity" of the language of consumer culture.

⁴ See in particular David Viñas's article, "Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana." *Más allá del boom: literatura y mercado*. Ed. Angel Rama. Buenos Aires: Folios Ediciones, 1984. 51-110. Of course, for Viñas, the professionalization of the writer that subtended the Boom often served as a lure to lull the writer away from the political and the preoccupation with the subaltern: "Que si resultaba legítima al trabajar con texturas y entramados minuciosos, iba desvaneciendo cualquier posibilidad de síntesis y de comprensión global" (24).

⁵ While the literary was seen as the site for constructing a more viable language and vehicle for taking and inventing positions in the present, the problem of subalternity was usually theorized through a national popular lens. In this way, the subaltern is postulated in terms of economic class, and often conflated with the term "masses." To be sure, discourses on the "regional other" of the interior also often utilized the national frame as its conceptual horizon. The reference to the onset of the Cold War "nightmare," and the "nightmare" of World War II are taken from Ferreira Gullar in his autobiographical essay, "Poesia: uma luz sobre o chão," *Sobre arte, Sobre poesia (uma luz do chão)*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 2006. 147-155. For an insightful critique of the national

popular as organizing frame of subalternity, see Alberto Moreiras's reading of José María Arguedas's novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, "The End of Magical Realism: José María Arguedas's Passionate Signifier," in *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 184-207.

⁶ "That literature in our day is fascinated by the being of language," writes Foucault in 1966, "is neither the sign of an imminent end nor proof of a radicalization: it is a phenomenon whose necessity has its roots in a vast configuration in which the whole structure of our thought and of our knowledge is traced" (Foucault 383). See Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 1970. Trans. Random House. New York: Vintage, 1994.

⁷ See Beatriz Sarlo, "Estudio Preliminar" in *La batalla de las ideas (1943-1973)*, Biblioteca de Pensamiento VII. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2001, 15-155. While Sarlo's study concerns Argentina, her discursive mapping of the function of intellectual and political discourse may be applied to Brazil, and to the general structure of feeling of the 1960s in Latin America. The historical examining of the writer's function in society, according to Sarlo, became progressively a discourse of transformation and political vanguard: "la cuestión pasaba por dos nudos: construir un intelectual que se convirtiera en sujeto material, corporal, de lo político, por una parte; evitar la oscilación de clase de los intelectuales para que, como bloque, se ubicaran definitivamente junto al proletariado" (142-143). See also, Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil: Debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2003.

⁸ See Brett Levinson, "The Ends of Literature as a Neoliberal Act," in *The Ends of Literature: The Latin American "Boom" in the Neoliberal Marketplace*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 10-30.

⁹ See Lins's English translator, Adria Frizzi's introduction, "Osman Lins: An Introduction," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 15:3 (Fall 1995): 155-160. "Surprisingly, little or nothing has been written about Lins in relation to other authors or movements outside Brazilian letters. Absent, for the most part, are references to the large and diverse number of Latin American writers often grouped under the umbrella of *literature of the boom* [...] This problem of exclusion is common to most Brazilian authors, whose work is seldom included in the context of Latin American literature" (156). For a recent counterpoint, see Graciela Cariello, *Jorge Luis Borges y Osman Lins: Poética de la lectura* (2007).

¹⁰ Lins, Osman. Letter to Maryvonne Lapouge, 11 August 1969. Acervo de Osman Lins. Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro. My special thanks to Letícia Lins, Ermelinda Ferreira, Sandra Nitrini, Adria Frizzi, and to Leonardo Cunha for their invaluable assistance in my research.

¹¹ For a conversation on what I am calling the ethnographic gaze as applied to Latin American literature and subalternity, see Angel Rama and his analysis of "la nueva visión del mito" and the transculturating "cosmovisión" that many Boom novels aspired to achieve: "El mito (Asturias), el arquetipo (Cortázar), aparecieron como categorías válidas para interpretar los rasgos de América Latina, en una mezcla *sui generis* con esquemas sociológicos, pero aún la muy franca y decidida apelación a las creencias populares supervivientes en las comunidades indígenas o Africanas de América que esos autores hicieron, no escondía la procedencia y la fundamentación intelectual del sistema interpretativo que se aplicaba" (Rama, *Transculturación* 51-52).

¹² Regarding the French *nouveau roman*'s impact and questions of influence, comparison, and divergence with Lins's ornamental writing style, see Sandra Nitrini's lucid study, *Poéticas em confronto: Nove, Novena e o Novo Romance*. São Paulo: HUCITEC, 1987. For Nitrini, while both the *nouveau roman* and Lins's narrative poetics adopt a fragmentary, "de-psychologized" [*despsicologizados*] and "literalized" [*literalizados*] presentation of its protagonists as objects of *writing* and as a response to the reifying processes of global capital, they fundamentally differ in their adoption of distinct narrative points of view (267-70). Irrespective of influence, Alain Robbe-Grillet's model of the novelist as "creator" versus "transcriber," and his concepts of time and description in the new novel seem to parallel those deployed in Lins's "Retábulo," insofar as Lins's narrative modality is primarily in the present indicative which highlights the performativity of writing [*ce présent que s'invente sans cesse, comme au fil de l'écriture*], and insofar as his narrative objects as ornaments incessantly mirror back the doubling, modifying movement of writing, creation proper [*Tout l'intérêt des pages descriptives — c'est-à-dire la place de l'homme dans ces pages — n'est donc plus dans la chose décrite, mais dans le mouvement même de la description*] (Robbe-Grillet 168; 161).

¹³ According to Adria Frizzi, "Lins's poetics as conveyed in *Nine, Novena* constitutes the foundation of all his subsequent work and accounts for the way formal innovations serve his complex project: to return us to the mythic through the discourses of culture and the human arts" (157).

¹⁴ The notion of *heterotopia* that I read in Lins's ornament, understood as a radical procedure of textual de-ontologization that "stop[s] words in their tracks" and "contest[s] the very possibility of grammar at its source," is taken from Michel Foucault's reading of Borges's "La enciclopedia china" (Foucault xv-xxiv). In this way, I differ from Frizzi's dialectical understanding of narrative fragmentation in Lins. If for Frizzi, "the fragmentation of discourse reflects the chaos of the world and the geometric organization the cosmic order that can be achieved by art," my understanding of fragmentation and heterotopia hinges on the ways Lins's text traces and suspends its mimetic and referential dimensions with regard to the subaltern epistemological divide.

¹⁵ While critics have amply charted the metaliterary dimension of Osman Lins's ornamental narratives, there has been little or no discussion on the ways his narratives negotiate the epistemological divide. For a reading of the metaliterary, understood as a perennial tension between the narration of history and the becoming literary of discourse in Lins, see Nitrini, 71-200.

¹⁶ Criticism on Lins rightfully point out the universal, mythic, and "cosmological" perspectives and features in Lins's writing style. Lins actively promoted this vision in interviews and essays: "Se há alguma coisa de que é necessário o leitor entrar consciente diante de um texto meu é de que eu não estou aspirando a dar uma visão apenas do homem brasileiro. Estou ligado ao meu país, ligado aos meus irmãos de infortúnio, mas o que procuro dar nos meus textos não é uma visão exclusiva do homem brasileiro, ou do Brasil, mas do cosmos" (Lins, *Evangelho* 218). Few, however, have discussed his national popular politics, and the pains he took to promote literature, both nationally and abroad, in his interviews, letter correspondences, essays, television scripts, and newspaper articles. In similar fashion, Lins was actively promoted by the Brazilian cultural industry as a national figure who had achieved international success in magazine and newspaper supplements such as *Veja*, *Opinião*, and *O Estado de São Paulo*, as well as TV Globo. For example, in 1976, we read in the Brazilian magazine, *Gente*: "Aos cinquenta y dois anos, depois de trinta vivendo para a literatura, o pernambucano Osman Lins entra de sócio no clube mais fechado do Brasil: o dos escritores que vivem da literatura. Entrevistas com ele passam a ser constantes, e sempre transcorrem naturalmente, quase em tom bate-

papo" (*Evangelho* 201). For a discussion on Lins's publications abroad, see Julieta de Godoy Ladeira, "Osman Lins: Crossing Frontiers," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 15:3 (Fall 1995): 186-195.

¹⁷ "The poor nation," writes Lins, "submits to cultural contraband" (*Guerra* 110). However internationally minded and "cosmological," like many intellectuals in the 1960s, Lins's politics was contextualized by discourses of cultural and economic underdevelopment: "são os povos cultural economicamente desenvolvidos que detêm as oportunidades maiores" (*Guerra* 111).

¹⁸ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 373-387.

¹⁹ Wladimir Kryszynski has shown the importance of the "metatextual operation," or what I call metaliterary, in the later novels of Osman Lins such as *Avalovara* and *A rainha dos carcereiros da Grécia*. See, "Métatexte, Métafiction et Mutation des Formes Romanesques," *Semiótica da Literatura. Cadernos PUC* (1987): 27-44. See also, Graciela Carillo, "La nueva novela y *Avalovara* de Osman Lins." Segundo premio concurso de ensayo "Euclides da Cunha" del Centro de Estudios Brasileños de Buenos Aires. Acervo de Osman Lins. Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro. 1-11. Regarding the metaliterary as related to *Nove, novena*, see Sandra Nitrini and Ana Luiza Andrade.

²⁰ Lins championed this view in his interviews and essayistic output. Critics, in kind, have oft read his opus from this stagist optics. For example, see Ana Luiza Andrade's *Osman Lins: Crítica e Criação*. Editora Hucitec: Sao Paulo, 1987.

²¹ With respect to the importance of theoretical self-reflexivity in addressing the subaltern problematic, Ileana Rodríguez writes: "Another goal [of Latin American subaltern studies] is to recognize that in history and culture of "societies' Others" we can find, paradoxically, new ways of approaching some of the riddles created by the incapacity of bourgeois culture *to think about its own conditions of discursive production*" (Emphasis added, "Reading Subalterns" 9). I am postulating that the metaliterary and the mapping of subalternity in Lins's ornamental texts, as a vanguard gesture, not only calls attention to the literary artifact in an act of literary narcissism, but on the contrary, implicates the reader into a self-reflexive position to mediate the subaltern as a problem and not as an object. For further reflection on the scope of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, see John Beverley, "Writing in Reverse: On the Project of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group," 623-641. In the essay, Beverley speaks at length about the productive divergence of theoretical approaches in the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, and the group itself functioning "as a forum of discussions around a common concern" ("Writing" 624).

²² I am deploying José Rabasa's term to identify this overlooked problem in accounts of the Boom and Latin American literary production of the 1960s. See, José Rabasa, "Elsewheres: Radical Relativism and the Frontiers of Empire." *Qui Parle* 16:1 (Summer 2006): 71-94. For a detailed account of Rabasa's concept and how it relates to Lins's project and literature, see chapter three of this study.

²³ According to Candace Slater, the ornamental partitioning of Lins's text "recall[s] such sequences as the signs of the zodiac and the months of the year" and "the narrative, while not strictly chronological, records the protagonist Joana Carolina's passage from childhood through marriage and childbearing to old age and death" such that "the story is thus united through her" (Slater 290).

²⁴ The concept of "violence" is not being invoked here in a merely descriptive sense. Of violence Lins wrote: "Se vocês leram com determinada atenção, vamos dizer, o *Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina*, vão ver que se trata de um texto repassado de violência [...] vão ver que a luta da figura central, Joana Carolina, já não é contra um determinado indivíduo, é contra o mundo. É contra a terra onde ela vive, é contra o seu país" (*Evangelho* 220). Accordingly, following Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the term will be deployed in this chapter to designate the more explicit "everyday violence" of the political economy of the Brazilian North East that is staged in "Retábulo" with its "many traditional and semifeudal structures, including its legacy of local political bosses (*coroneis*) spawned by an agrarian *latifundista* class of powerful plantation estate masters and their many dependents" (220); the term will also refer, following José Rabasa, to the "scriptural economy" associated with *symbolic violence*: "writing entails power structures: writing as the memory of subordination, as the record of theft, as the erasure of culture, as the process of territorialization" (Rabasa, *Writing* 14).

²⁵ Ana Luiza Andrade shows that the tableaux in "Retábulo" serve as symbolic temporal indices for mediating the past and modernity: "os *tableaux* colocam-se no limiar entre a recordação do passado agrícola e arcaico da vida nordestina do engenho colonial, e a percepção de um olhar presente, urbano e moderno. Desdobrado este limiar, os espaços sócias divididos entre o erudito e o popular se interrompem para dar lugar ao espaço democrático de "massa" (*Reciclando* 96). The traditional "auratic" tableaux of the Church, accordingly, become refunctionalized: the multitude of the poor and the barren backlands of the Brazilian North East are its subject matter.

²⁶ Special thanks to Letícia Lins for granting me permission to photograph this document.

²⁷ According to Ana Luiza Andrade's Benjaminian reading of Lins's ornament: "há um deliberado e constante retorno às artes plásticas [porque] [...] Osman Lins busca uma refuncionalização dos meios da produção entre artes plásticas e indústrias a fim de problematizar as relações entre arte e mercadoria" (*Reciclando* "Osman Lins" 81).

²⁸ The two cited sources refer to Lins's original, "Décimo Primeiro Mistério," in "Retábulo," and to Adria Frizzi's English translation, "Eleventh Mystery," in *Nine, Novena*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995, 156-161. Henceforward, the second pagination within parenthesis will refer to Frizzi's translation and the first will refer to Lins's original.

²⁹ The translation is mine.

³⁰ Translation is mine.

³¹ See Jacques Rancière, "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?," Trans. Radmila Djordjevic. *Qui Parle* 14:2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 1-14. Rancière's central hypothesis regarding Deleuze's concept of art, notably in his book on Francis Bacon and his thesis in *What is Philosophy?* where Deleuze establishes that the work of art constitutes an ensemble of sensations and perceptions, is that art is a mode of being that promotes a sensory experience that exceeds the discursive schemes of normative, political and legal representation that structure experience. "Aesthetics is born as a mode of thought when the work of art is subsumed under the category of a greater, heterogeneous form of the sensible. [...] Aesthetics is the mode of thought that submits the consideration of works of art to the idea of this heterogeneous power, the power of the spirit as a flame that equally illuminates and burns everything"

(Deleuzian 10). The concept and experience of the aesthetic as a "mode of thought," in Rancière, is opposed to the discourses of science and the legalistic and political administration of society.

³² See Candace Slater, "A Play of Voices: The Theater of Osman Lins." *Hispanic Review* 49: 3 (Summer, 1981): 285-295. See also, Maria Balthasar Soares, "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina: o palco na palavra," *Osman Lins: o sopro na argila*. Ed. Hugo Almeida. São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2004. 169-177.

³³ Another way of looking at the "Mystery" structure in "Retábulo," of course, is through the lens of Joana Carolina's miracles. According to Ana Luiza Andrade, "Joana Carolina's transcendent acts are poetically framed by allusions to the signs of the zodiac, since her spiritual life is an active element of a transformative cosmos as she performs down-to-earth miracles to overcome adversity" (Nine 206).

³⁴ Regarding the ornamental narrative indicators, Álvaro Manuel Machado has claimed that they suggest "nostalgia for a primordial language"(32).

³⁵ Just as Joana Carolina is never the narrator of the story, she is one of the only characters in "Retábulo" who possesses no symbol indicator. She is, in this way, a deterritorialized signifier: an object of contemplation, reverence, and interpretation whose sense is accumulative and never finalized.

³⁶ While Frizzi's translation is superb, in my view, the final sentence of the quote should not include the conjunction "because." The "nobody" narrators speak more from a proliferating, rhythmical, and descriptive register than one of explanation of cause and function.

³⁷ See Peter G. Christensen, "Eric Fromm's Escape from Freedom: A Reference Point for Osman Lins' *Nove, Novena*," *Chasqui - Revista de literatura latinoamericana* 23:2 (Nov. 1994), 30-38.

³⁸ Lins's letter to his French translator, Maryvonne Lapouge, dated 4 May 1969, is revealing regarding the final scene. Lins writes: "Há, ali, nomes e prenomes brasileiros que são também nomes de animais, de flores, de frutas ou de árvores frutíferas, e também nomes como Veiga (planície cultivada e fértil), como prado, todos ligados a natureza, como o que procuro evocar nessa morte, nesse enterro, os nomes da criaturas que povoam o mundo de Joana Carolina e também o mundo natural. Seria uma pena que isso se perdesse na tradução. Assim, sugiro mais uma vez que faça uma peregrinação através da lista telefônica de Paris. Os nomes que escolher, não terão que corresponder exatamente as que estão no texto. PODEM SER OUTROS, desde que sejam ao mesmo tempo nome de gente e de coisas naturais [...] Gostaria apenas que o número de nomes fosse MAIS O MENOS o mesmo, de modo que a enumeração tivesse qualquer desses momentos finais de sinfonias, quando todos os instrumentos são convocados. [...] Tudo isto concorre para dar, a essa parte final, um tom orquestral, que cessa na palavra Campos, depois do que vem as últimas linhas, que já não falam de multidões, mas do silêncio, da solidão de Joana." Osman Lins, "Letter to Maryvonne Lapouge," 4 May 1969, Acervo de Osman Lins. Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro.

³⁹ See Maria Balthasar Soares, "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina: o palco na palavra," *Osman Lins: o sopro na argila*. Ed. Hugo Almeida. São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2004. 174-175.

⁴⁰ It will be recalled that Cabral's poem, "Psicologia da Composição" (1947) articulated the idea of inverting the mimetic and Biblical Garden of Eden (a garden of giving names to things) into a

metapoetic desert, “inverted orchard” of self-reflexive writing: “Cultivar o deserto/como um pomar às avessas:/o tempo não mais/destila: evapora;/onde foi maçã/resta uma fome;/onde foi palavra/(potros ou touros/contidos) resta a severa/forma do vazio (Cabral 100, 11-20); [Cultivate the desert/like an orchard backwards:/time no longer distills: it evaporates;/where there was an apple/now there is left a hunger;/where there was word/(ponies or bulls/contained) now what is left/is the severe form of emptiness.] Lins highly admired Cabral’s work, and included an epigraph from Cabral’s “O Engenheiro” to preface *Nove, Novena*. No doubt, Lins shared Cabral’s concern with metaliterature: “Ver, por exemplo, a poesia de João Cabral de Melo Neto [...] seu tema por excelência é a própria poesia. Também a minha ficção tem-se ocupado intensamente do romance, da ficção” (Evangelho 240).

⁴¹ See Jacques Rancière, “Aesthetics as Politics,” in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2009), 19-44. The politics of the aesthetic, and for that matter, of the literary, in Rancière, concerns art’s “communitarian function” or what he calls its “relational” character (“Aesthetics” 22). In a nutshell, everything hinges on the modes in which art forms redistribute and reconfigure the shared commons of the sensible and the political from the hegemonic. Like Lins’s aesthetic of the ornament, art forms for Rancière fundamentally mediate and “suspend” “the ordinary forms of sensory experience,” including how one perceives the poor and the voiceless from a position of privilege, typically framed by ideological state apparatuses and hegemonic forms of power (23).

CHAPTER THREE

Literature and Finitude: On the Neo-Baroque in Osman Lins and Latin American Studies Today

In the context of the collapse of the nation state and regionalist paradigm, Osman Lins's writing project marks a paradoxical, yet theoretically affirmative contribution to the field of Latin American Studies today. Re-plotting Lins's position from his numerous essays, letters, and interviews in the 1960s and 70s, in the previous chapter we witnessed the construction of a national-popular paradigm for the literary with a will to "universalization," prevalent during the Boom, that endows the figure of the Latin American intellectual-novelist with a privileged positionality vis-à-vis the problematic constellation of underdevelopment, the euphoria of the revolutionary planning state, and the "invasion" of the cultural industry. Like Cabral and the novelists of the Boom, Lins desired to construct a literature of reintegration with the polis—that much is quite clear.

And yet, one important rejoinder that the Latin American Subaltern Studies group has clearly placed on the table, in spite of the divergence of positions that have recently resulted from its breakup, is the contemporary crisis of the literary, and the questioning of the regionalist and transculturating paradigms that undercut it historically as an institution and apparatus tied to the state.¹ A revision of Lins's contributions and theoretical relevance cannot sidestep that critique, given the national frame and the prizing of literature that inform his essays and interviews.

Recent discussions on the legacy and critical force of the Latin American Neo-Baroque by such thinkers as Alberto Moreiras, John Beverley, and Mabel Moraña, theorized as an avant-garde textual practice adopted by many of the Boom novelists and more famously exemplified in the writings of José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, and Haroldo de Campos, provide insight with respect to our endeavor to rethink Lins's aesthetic of ornaments as a technique that negotiates the violence that epistemologically undercuts subalternity.² Insofar as we consider the mechanisms of representation that *underwrite* and *limit* Lins's negotiation of the subaltern, it is my contention that we may begin to reconstruct a politically dynamic interface that de-ontologizes the nationalist-transculturating horizon that contextualizes his essays, and which counter-maps the subaltern as a productive theoretical problematic.

To begin to position Lins's oeuvre within the paradigm of the Latin American Neo-Baroque, I want to invoke Alejo Carpentier's concept of "lo real maravilloso" and Severo Sarduy's "elementos para una semiología del barroco latinoamericano." I then turn to Alberto Moreiras's interpretation of the Neo-Baroque as a textual practice of immanence and critique, and José Rabasa's understanding of subalternist *elsewheres*, in order to negotiate Lins's aesthetic of ornaments as a vanguard practice, Neo-Baroque for sure, that marks an inscription and powerful interrogation of the impasse of literature and the politics of representation in the 1960s.

1. Carpentier's Baroque: The Aesthetic Object of Transculturation

Regarding Latin Americanism today, understood as the set of engaged representations and interventions on the Latin American "object of enunciation," Alberto Moreiras has pointed out the critical force of "internal subversion" of "epistemic homogenization" (*The Exhaustion* 32-33). Key for Moreiras is Latin Americanism's "critique of its own representational strategies regarding the Latin American epistemic object" (33). This self-reflexive critical gesture, auto critique of the

representational drive, is what I have been plotting in the writings of Cabral and Lins. More to the point, in this chapter I am concerned with how the Latin American “baroque” surfaces as a discourse of transculturation, and how it becomes “internally subverted” and redefined by a practice of radical textuality. To this end, I am interested in first mapping how transculturation becomes legitimized as a dissident, avant-garde and “baroque” practice for constructing properly Latin American “objects of enunciation” for novelists in mid-twentieth century Latin America.

Alejo Carpentier famously derived his “real-maravilloso” literary paradigm for Latin American writing from his visit to Haiti in 1943. It was there, so Carpentier informs us in his classic prologue to the novel, *El reino de este mundo* (1949), that he discovered a more authentic concept of “lo maravilloso” than the one that had been postulated in European literary culture.³ What the European writers had missed entirely, argues Carpentier, was that “lo maravilloso” is grounded in an experience of “reality” and not in literary culture or the fathomless depths of the unconscious.

As is well known, Carpentier's concept of “the marvelous-real” is derived from his anti-Eurocentrism and what he posits as the extraordinary character of Latin American “history”: “lo-real maravilloso se encuentra en cada paso en las vidas de los hombres que inscribieron fechas en la historia del Continente” (4); “todo resulta maravilloso en una historia imposible de situar en Europa” (8). Accordingly, Carpentier’s problem is to derive an aesthetic for the Latin American novel, in particular his novel on the Haitian Revolution, from this initial postulation of Latin American history.

Carpentier’ aesthetic for the novel, rooted as it is in official historiography, hinges on the ethnographic recognition and integration of “other” historical popular and indigenous subaltern cultures in Latin America that he characterizes as “marvelous” [*pisaba yo una tierra donde millares de hombres ansiosos de libertad creyeron en los poderes licantrópicos de Mackanda*] (4). This novelistic transculturation of the “other,” whether with respect to the historical revolting multitudes in the Haitian Revolution that Carpentier novelizes or in the popular folk traditions that he observes in the “Prologue” such as Cuban *santería*, is not a matter of simply allowing the subaltern “to speak” in the novel:

lo maravilloso comienza a serlo de manera inequívoca cuando surge de una alteración de la realidad (el milagro), de una revelación privilegiada de la realidad, de una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad, de una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad, percibidas con particular intensidad en virtud de una exaltación del espíritu que lo conduce a un “estado límite.” (3)

Like Victor Shklovsky’s concept of literary *ostrananie*, proper to the Russian avant-garde’s tactic of displacing perception, provoking psychic shock, and spatial and temporal defamiliarization, Carpentier's formulation of “lo real-maravilloso” is a literary procedure, grounded in ethnography and historiography, that incorporates the “other” in order to deterritorialize the commonplaces of Eurocentric perception and book culture for avant-garde novelists in Latin America at mid-century.

While Carpentier’s arguments are known well enough in the field as “foundational” for *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana* of a literary style whose basis is the “archival fiction” in Latin America (González Echevarría), I want to re-direct this discussion by tracking in his theory of “lo real-maravilloso” the ways in which mid-century literary discourse in Latin America was directly tied to the epistemological problematic of alterity and subalternity. In shifting the focus of the literary to the subaltern problematic, it is my hope that we will pry Carpentier’s discourse loose from an essentialist, vertical vision of Latin American writing that is desensitized to the subaltern frame.⁴

“Faith” in Latin American cultural singularity is the hinge that lends support to Carpentier’s legitimizing discourse for the literary: “la sensación de lo maravilloso presupone una fe”(3). It can be said that the logic of “sensation,” of the kind that is proper to Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the art object as a dynamized ensemble of interlocking elements that provoke new perceptions, becomes wedded here to Carpentier’s ethnographic latch-word: “faith” in Latin American cultural singularity.¹ In this view, Carpentier’s discourse postulates Latin American identity as a subject of ontological, cultural, and aesthetic “*mestizaje*”: an ensemble of historico-political figures, such as Mackandal, Simón de Bolívar, and Henri Christophe, which are encircled and informed by subaltern rituals, myth, dance, religiosity, and oral culture—a “marvelous” subject that provokes sensation and “illumination” where European categories become inoperative:

Para empezar, *la sensación de lo maravilloso presupone una fe*. Los que no creen en santos no pueden curarse con milagros de santos [...] Pisaba yo una tierra donde millares de hombres ansiosos de libertad *creyeron en los poderes licantrópicos de Mackandal*, a punto de que *esa fe colectiva produjera un milagro* el día de su ejecución. [...] Había respirado la atmósfera creado por Henri Christophe [...] A cada paso hallaba lo real-maravilloso [...] esa presencia y vigencia de lo “real-maravilloso” no era privilegio de Haití, sino patrimonio de América entera, donde todavía no se había terminado de establecer, por ejemplo, *un recuento de cosmogonías* [...] así, como en Europa occidental el folklore danzario, por ejemplo, ha perdido todo carácter mágico o invocatorio, rara es la danza colectiva, en América que no encierre *un hondo sentido ritual* [...] en América existió un Mackandal dotado de [...] poderes *por la fe de sus contemporáneos*, y que alentó, con esa magia, una de las sublevaciones más dramáticas y extrañas de la historia [...] De Mackandal el americano, en cambio, *ha quedado toda una mitología, acompañada de himnos mágicos, conservados por todo un pueblo, que aún se cantan en las ceremonias del vodú*. (Emphasis added 3-7)

This is a radical inversion and displacement of Domingo Fausto Sarmiento’s founding discourse of triumphant European civilization that progressively subsumes and bulldozes over the singularity of Latin American autochthonous “barbarie.” It is also a rewriting of Sarmiento’s inaugural concept for a properly Latin American literature. Whereas for Sarmiento the nineteenth century Latin American literary enterprise was imagined through the optics of “conflict” and synthetic glimmer [*destello*] — that is, American reality subsumed, painted, written, explained, and overtaken by European categories into folkloric objects of art—, for Carpentier it is the logic of sensation, tied to official historiography and ethnographic recognition of Latin American subaltern cultures that re-grounds Latin American “barbarie” as subject of discourse in the mid-century Latin American writing project (Sarmiento 75).

Second, it could be said that Carpentier’s discourse of “faith” in Latin American cultural alterity not only displaces the Eurocentric frame by authorizing the viability and “marvelous” character of religiosity and ritual in the cultural practices of Latin American subaltern cultures, but becomes an enabling discourse for novelistic transculturation. Carpentier’s discourse of faith is, after all, bound to an aesthetic of cultural identity, and grounded in his desire to construct a new novel impossible to write in Europe. Poetic “faith” is precisely what enables an epistemological suspension of alterity that grants the novelists license to integrate and inscribe this alterity as a peripheral object, exoticized for sure, that constellates around the canonical historical figures of Latin American “history” understood in the singular.

On 22 May 1975, in a conference entitled, “Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso,” and given at the Ateneo in Caracas, Carpentier conflates his vision of the Latin American “lo real-maravilloso” with the notion

of the Latin American baroque. If the tone in the “Prologue” to *El reino de este mundo* was one of discovery and literary manifesto, Carpentier’s talk on the baroque in Venezuela strikes a triumphant note. In the conference, Carpentier crowns the Boom as a site of an epistemic and literary culmination for which the new novelists had “forged an apt language to express our realities” (Carpentier, “Lo barroco” 135). As in the Prologue of 1949, Carpentier’s argument is based on an ontologization of Latin America: “¿Y por qué es América Latina la tierra de elección del barroco? Porque toda simbiosis, todo mestizaje, engendra un barroquismo” (126); “lo real maravilloso...que yo definiendo es el que encontramos en estado bruto latente, omnipresente en todo lo latinoamericano” (130).

My intention here is to trace Carpentier’s definition of the Latin American Baroque as an ideology rooted in Occidentalism in spite of its willed opposition to Eurocentrism. In this view, Carpentier’s definition of the Latin American baroque, as an aesthetic practice whose end is the “description,” “revelation,” and integration of Latin American alterity, repeats the gesture of writing over the subaltern to claim it on the side of the intellectual writer and state. The “other,” in this perspective, always already becomes “symbiosis”: “Y es la búsqueda del vocabulario para traducir aquello” (131); “Y si es nuestro deber es el de revelar este mundo, debemos mostrar, interpretar las cosas nuestras [...] La descripción es ineludible, y la descripción de un mundo barroco ha de ser necesariamente barroco” (133).

Following John Beverley’s understanding of the baroque as a paradoxical “cultural signifier,” the Latin American baroque, in Carpentier, is born in willful opposition to empire (Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism) that feeds on and is submissive to the mechanisms of appropriation inherent in empire’s rhetoric (Beverley, “Literary Baroque” 64).⁵ My purpose here has been to provide a portrait of Carpentier’s literary discourse on identity and subalternity, and to rethink the theoretical envelopes he used from mid-century through the 1970s to posit a writing procedure, dubbed “baroque,” for transculturating subalternity into novels and into the “official” history of the Latin American state. I hope that it is clear that I view this as a discourse that we must get over, tracking its logic, charting its foundation and limits, if we are to rethink the crisis of the literary and the epistemological impasse of subalternity. And yet, is it correct to conclude with Beverley that an assessment of the literary baroque in Latin America necessarily entails an “overvaluation of literature,” founded on a “vertical model” of authority and representation (65; 17-18)? Must the baroque always result in the violence of transculturation?

2. *Neo-Baroque: The Partial Loss of the Object*

Severo Sarduy’s place as an innovator in the canon is tacit. Perhaps understudied are the rich theoretical underpinnings in his writings on the Latin American neo-baroque and the immediate dissonance his semiological postulations create with respect to some of the Boom’s spokesmen’s more triumphant assertions on the power of literature. Most notably in his collection of essays, *Barroco* (1974), written in exile and while a student of Roland Barthes in Paris, Sarduy provides an illuminating understanding of this notoriously difficult to define concept. Far from positing an ontologization of Latin American identity through the descriptive and transculturating gaze of the novelist, Sarduy’s view of *lo barroco latinoamericano* shifts the focus of this “literary,” cultural and identitarian debate firstly to the realm of semiology and textual exegesis. In plotting the semiological features of the Boom text, Sarduy goes on to implicitly challenge the ideological set of positions that Carpentier’s theory of the Latin American baroque erected for the intellectual writer in triumphant fashion.

The baroque, for Sarduy, was forever destined to creating ambiguity and semantic dispersion. His point, however, when applied to the Boom is not expository, nor is it merely textual. His attempt, on the contrary, is to articulate an alternative theoretical approach to what he deems to be the Latin American object of representation. His approach to this “object,” like that of the Boom, is cultural and grounded by the subaltern and literary divide. For Sarduy, the Boom novel constitutes a neo-baroque system of writing and “diestra conducción del pensamiento”(167) that curiously fails to represent “its object” (181-182). Far from triumphantly translating the subaltern other (Carpentier), or from “readjusting” the literary to allow the subaltern “to speak” (Rama) in more universal terms for the first time, the Latin American neo-baroque, for Sarduy, represents a “pulverized” mode of knowledge [*reflejo necesariamente pulverizado de un saber*], necessarily frustrated, that names an object that can only ever be “partial,” “residual,” and “fallen”(182-183).

This view of the Boom as an epistemic is not uncommon. However, postulating the Boom novel as a semiotic system of “pulverized” knowledge that can only represent “partial objects” drastically tips the interpretative scales regarding the representation of subalternity and the “other.”

I will explore the “partial object” of representation that Sarduy theorizes in two complimentary ways: the Boom’s “fallen,” “partial object” of representation will be understood not so much as a literary “failure” to represent collective Latin American identity but as an epistemological opening to the “subaltern;” on the other hand, in tracking the ways in which the Boom plots its own limits as a neo-baroque semiotic apparatus, the relative and debated “power” of the literary to represent the other will not only be put in check, but will provide us with a novel ground for reconsidering the theoretical scope of the literary in the 1960s with respect to the subaltern frame.

Writing against Eugenio d’Ors claim that baroque is what mirrors a return to uncontained nature in its primeval state, the baroque for Sarduy stands for the “apotheosis of artifice” and an utter dismantling of “primeval nature”: “El festín barroco nos parece, al contrario...la apoteosis del artificio, la ironía e irrisión de la naturaleza...la *artificialización*” (168). Sarduy discovers various modalities of textual “artificialización” such as parody and intertextuality in Boom novels, and thereby considers the Boom novel to be “neo-baroque.” Sarduy’s point in redefining the Boom as semiotically baroque is to delimit the consequences of this gesture from an epistemological standpoint and from the standpoint of Latin American collective identity.

For Sarduy, the *artifice* character of Boom writing is its elementary semiotic attribute, and does not reflect merely an act of gratuitous intellectual play. Neither does the “failure” [*fracaso*] to represent the object, or cultural signified in more straightforward or mimetic terms stand for an alienated position or political reactionism on the part of the Boom novelist. Far from pigeonholing the Boom novel into a national-popular appropriating apparatus of “longing” that captures, translates, and speaks for the “natural,” “authentic” regional other, the artifice character of Boom novels ultimately fractures the horizon of articulation that connects Boom writing with its objects of representation in an epistemological sense.

“With respect to the traditional [semiotic] mechanisms of the Baroque,” writes Sarduy, “these recent Latin American works have conserved, and at times, greatedened the distance between the two terms of the sign, and this is what constitutes the essential feature of Baroque language” (170). The greatening of the distance between signifier and signified in contemporary Latin American works hinges, for Sarduy, on the ways in which Boom texts articulate a system of signs that permit a doubling [*doblaje*] of the text’s primary representation (176). In a nutshell, the novel’s storyline points, in various ways,

to a text or archive that the novel is rewriting: “En la medida en que permite una lectura en filigrana, en que esconde, subyacente al texto—a la obra arquitectónica, plástica, etc.—otro texto—otra obra—que éste revela, descubre, deja descifrar, el barroco latinoamericano reciente participa del concepto de parodia”(175).

Far from claiming that the Boom rediscovered and powerfully rewrote the Latin American Archive, or its “storehouse of master stories” through recourse to mythic discourse as Roberto González Echevarría has argued (*Myth* 3), Sarduy argues that the Boom novel participates in a complex, semiotic system of parodic rewritings whereby the distance between the signifier and signified is greatedened.⁶ These parodic rewritings underline “in filigree” the plot sequence, and reveal the palimpsest-quality of the novel’s structure. More to the point, Sarduy places his finger over the fact that the Boom novel’s language is built through “a mechanism of signification that ends up representing itself, revealing its own grammar and the gestation and generation of its own word universe”(176).

The Boom’s baroque system of signification, for Sarduy, ultimately achieves a mirroring meta-literary quality that far from constituting a failure of representation, intercepts, deconstructs, and de-ontologizes the literary as an appropriating apparatus:

Al contrario, el barroco actual, el neobarroco, refleja estructuralmente la inarmonía, la ruptura de la homogeneidad, el logos en tanto que absoluto, carencia que constituye nuestro fundamento epistémico. Neobarroco del desequilibrio, reflejo estructural de un deseo que no puede alcanzar su objeto, deseo para el cual el logos no ha organizado más que una pantalla que esconde la carencia. La mirada ya no es solamente infinito: como hemos visto, en tanto que un objeto parcial se ha convertido en objeto perdido. ...Neobarroco: reflejo necesariamente pulverizado de un saber que sabe que ya no está “apaciblemente” cerrado sobre sí mismo. Arte del destronamiento y la discusión. (183)

I want to emphasize that for Sarduy this de-ontologization of the literary as a desire of appropriation is far from a weakness. The syntactically “incorrect” function of the neo-baroque phrase, for Sarduy, is to transform the social and theoretical *place of the literary* into a critical one that deconstructs hierarchical order:

Barroco que en su acción de bascular, en su caída, en su lenguaje *pinturero*, a veces estridente, abigarrado y caótico, metaforiza la impugnación de la entidad logocéntrica que hasta entonces lo y nos estructuraba desde su lejanía y su autoridad; barroco que recusa toda instauración, que metaforiza al orden discutido, al dios juzgado, a la ley transgredida. Barroco de la Revolución. (184)

The baroque system of signification that underwrites and multiplies the Boom novel’s plot sequence and semantic field allegorizes [*metaforiza*] a decentering, desessentializing approach to subalternity and the regional other. The parodic gesture, the act of writing another text, or of calling attention to the very novel that one is reading in filigree, intercepts the will to authority and to speak directly for the subaltern. “Disharmony,” writes Sarduy, is what characterizes “our foundation”(183). What Sarduy means is that there is no coherent, central, and essential Latin American identity, and that the nation-form is debunked as the essential category to organize thought, politics, the subaltern, and the literary.

With Sarduy's semiotic snapshot of the Boom as Neo-Baroque in 1974, we witness the end of the national popular horizon that had informed and enveloped the archive of critical pronouncements, interviews, and definitions of the Boom as a discursive formation.⁷ The Boom, however, for Sarduy proved to be revolutionary to the extent that it traced its limits as *artifice* and *palimpsest*. In so doing, the Boom's "fracaso" to represent the object, is its paradoxical strength. As a partial object, as a fallen, incorrect, and chaotic object, the "other" in Sarduy became not the object to integrate into the state or literary apparatus, but a freer object of signification. The object of representation becomes an artificially textual semiotic object, de-ontologized signifier. Following Jacques Derrida, I am highlighting the "becoming readable" of the Boom text for Sarduy (Derrida 68). Whereas for Derrida, the "becoming readable" of the literary text inscribes the text's iterability and concomitant loss of ontological "singularity," for Sarduy, the "becoming readable" "in filigree" of the Boom text is a double encoding or parodic metatextualization that marks and remarks literature's radical finitude as text (Derrida 68). Literature's end, making literature literature's limit, is what enables the text to step outside its circumscribed "autonomy" as a discipline [*ya no está "apaciblemente" cerrado sobre sí mismo*] (183).

While my conclusion extends Sarduy's deconstructive readings of the Boom to the debates over the literary and subalternity today, and may not be exactly what the Boom writers had in mind in writing their palimpsest and metaliterary novels in the 1960s, my contention is that we need to go beyond authorial intention, and begin to think of how the literary text constitutes a theoretical act in its own right.

There is no doubt: the majority of the Boom novelists spoke and acted publicly from a national popular horizon. Many thought in similar fashion to Carpentier, and effectively attempted to galvanize the literary politically by allowing the subaltern "to speak." It is my contention, however, that when texts constitute themselves as meta-texts as they simultaneously chart the subaltern problematic as we have seen with force in the works of Cabral and Lins, the appropriating apparatus of the literary and the national popular is suspended. In spite of their pronouncements and beliefs, and in spite of their confidence as transculturators, the self-reflexive and expanding textual horizons that were built in their texts, like Osman Lins's ornaments, transformed the semantic fields into mirroring, multiplying rhizomes, into baroque folds and semantic lines of flight. Such texts short-circuit what Sarduy bemoaned as the logic of "functionality" and capital, proliferating a new mode of "eroticism" with the other: one of play, becoming, an ensemble of elements that are never unitary and stagnant: "en el erotismo la artificialidad, lo cultural, se manifiesta en el juego con el objeto perdido, juego cuya finalidad está en sí mismo y cuyo propósito no es la conducción de un mensaje [...] sino su desperdicio en función del placer" (182).

As in Barthes, his mentor, Sarduy refers to a pleasure of the text that ultimately has political and epistemological consequences.⁸ And yet different from Barthes, when Sarduy invokes "nuestro fundamento," the ways in which the literary partakes in the construction of the notion of a Latin American "our America," he certainly refers, among other ideas, to an underlying wound, the "partial loss" of the subaltern other. Indeed, the preoccupation with the representation of the "other" was what made Latin American literature, so Angel Rama, Carlos Fuentes and many others claimed in the 1960s, a worthwhile endeavor (Rama, *Transculturación* 20). In the neo-baroque palimpsest, in the metaliterary dimension that we may read "in filigree," as we have shown in Cabral and Lins, form as related to content becomes problematic. Lins called this gesture preserving the tension between expression and the signified: "a vibrante e interminável oscilação entre o texto e mundo;" "uma tensão

jamais estável entre a expressão e o significado" [the vibrant and interminable oscillation between text and world; the never stable tension between expression and the signified] (Lins, *Guerra*, 61; 162).

3. *The Neo-Baroque Gaze*

Regarding the Latin American neo-baroque as a form of theoretical practice in its relation to the literary, Alberto Moreiras has written: "Literary power, in the neobaroque gaze, is the awareness of the finitude of literary power" (On Snakes 214-215). Moreiras conceptualizes this finitude, or limits of neo-baroque thinking which includes the literary, through the frame of semantic "de-communication" and "exodus" (202). Indeed, this strange aporia, which posits neo-baroque perception and sense-making activity as grounded in the flight of sense [*passo*] and as a moment of conceptual upheaval, serves as Moreiras's starting problematic for his reassessment of the debate over the baroque in contemporary Latin American Studies. As a guiding thread, Moreiras asks the question: how can one think the neo-baroque politically given the fact that the neo-baroque gaze, in its excess of signification, undoes communication?

Of course, Moreiras is not advocating a cultural nihilism or relativism. He is, on the contrary, attempting to articulate a theoretical practice grounded in exteriority as opposed to the frames of appropriation and description that typically perform, according to José Rabasa, a symbolic violence to the particular and to the subaltern other. I want this to be clear. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the semiotic modalities of description and translation impose the subsumption of the particular under a colonizing rhetoric, especially when we are concerned with the subaltern problematic. We customarily think of this procedure as transforming the "empirical" particular into a universal category as in the Hegelian dialectic. This is a form of symbolic violence to the particular as it absolutely privileges the speaker or writer over the described and spoken. Transculturation performs this symbolic violence insofar as it postulates the literary as an epistemological apparatus that endeavors to translate and speak for the other who remains outside, even barred, from the hegemony of the state and the interpellations of literature.

The neo-baroque offers a flipside to this hermeneutic procedure, for Moreiras, that operates under "not just any name" (203). But to explain the neo-baroque as a theoretical practice that reveals itself in its radical finitude and in its exteriority to disciplining apparatuses, Moreiras engages in a discussion with John Beverley and a host of Hispanists who have understood the Hispanic baroque as something like a "cultural unconscious" and "principal of modernity" tied to the nation-form, identitarian politics and empire (203). While Moreiras builds his arguments in large part from Beverley's canonical, "On the Literary Spanish Baroque" (1993), especially Beverley's claim that baroque art pertains to power (aristocracy) even as it traces the limits of that power through its aesthetic mode of representation, he differs from Beverley with respect to his understanding of baroque textuality and its theoretical implications. The paradox of baroque art—its speaking from power even as it traces power's limits—becomes for Moreiras "the very contradiction at the heart of baroque practice [which] turns the baroque field into a field of immanence" (203). In a word, the literary baroque's self-reflexive tracing of its very own limits as an apparatus of power de-ontologizes the literary and power: "The baroque subject [...] marks both its self-inscribing possibilities and its possibilities for de-inscription or ex-surrection" (203). By de-ontologization of the literary and power, I understand a de-essentializing gesture whereby the horizons that inform and contextualize the literary and power are burst asunder and radically reconfigured. De-ontologization frees up the hermeneutic circle turning it into what Deleuze and Guattari would call a semantic deterritorialization. Instead of the unitary structure that

subsumes the particular, the “immanent” neo-baroque plane of vision and sense-making would become hybrid ensembles without a unitary frame.

Moreiras finds the neo-baroque productive in this sense: as a theoretical and not descriptive practice, it undermines what he considers the overarching hermeneutic principle that informs Hispanist and Latin American Studies. This principle is the concept of regional identity understood against the horizon of the nation-state: “The Baroque has been overwhelmingly understood that way: as a field of identitarian expression concerning the peculiar Hispanic experience of modernity” (205). This critique to the field at large is not new. It has been posited with force by the Latin American Subaltern Studies group. It goes without saying that an ever-increasing number of postcolonial and poststructural approaches to Latin America have also waged war against any sort of essentialist identity politics. And yet Moreiras’s point is well taken, as it carefully explores and debunks the theoretical and epistemic consequences of identity politics informed by a regionalist national paradigm.

In an interesting aside, Moreiras engages with postcolonial criticism and points to what he deems are its limits:

So postcolonialist critique cannot open the way to a re-appropriation of the object: the destruction of a general critical subject implies the dissolution of the specific critical object. We were able to recognize the constitutive fissure between theoretical discourse and the field of reflection, but we were unable to sustain the first intuition and we moved towards a new denegation: we buried our head in the illusory sand of a new object of re-appropriation. Epistemic deconstitution is erased as such in the contemporary (postcolonialist) repetition of the essentially appropriative—and thus essentially colonizing and colonialist—gesture of modern university discourse. (206)

Moreiras’s point hearkens as far back as the “Founding Statement” by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group in 1995. In the “Founding Statement” we find that the subaltern must be read from the perspective of the present, meaning the collapse of the nation-state and the advent of global capital, and not from the frame of a mere academic critique of previous colonial regimes: “The insistence of thinking the subaltern from the standpoint of postmodernity does not mean that we do not intend to pursue the traces of previous cultural hegemonies in the formation of the subaltern [...] We can find the subaltern only in the seams of the previously articulated sociocultural and administrative practices and epistemologies, in the cloning of cultural mentalities”(144). The critique of the postcolonial frame, as re-appropriating gesture, is well put insofar as “university discourse” can use the rubric of postcoloniality to claim that coloniality of power is no longer and that postcolonial studies configure merely an academic discipline of historiography and critique that uses Occidental reason to negotiate the colonized “other.” José Rabasa’s take on the matter refines Moreiras’s point:

Hence, postcolonialism, understood as a new condition of thought, cannot be the end of the colonial period, nor should the questions postcolonial scholars raise be limited to the specific experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [...] this genealogy has two detrimental consequences for the study of earlier periods in the Americas. At best, Enlightenment forms of producing otherness—for example, the opposition between peoples with and without history, or between peoples in a state of nature and those living under a state—assume a transhistorical applicability that erases historical specificity. At worst, postcolonial theorists reduce the colonial enterprise to crude modes of raping the land—for example, Portuguese

trading posts and Spanish conquest—with no coherent civilizing mission worth mentioning.
(Rabasa, *Writing Violence* 17)

As we return now to the notion of neo-baroque practice and its relationship to the literary, we see that for Moreiras the neo-baroque functions as a mechanism of thought that debunks the regionalist, identitarian paradigm, and for that matter, the postcolonial pitfalls that Rabasa spelled out so clearly. The regionalist paradigm is an ideology of literature, according to Moreiras, whose three-fold hermeneutic operates on the axis of “identity, mimesis, and difference”(206). We do not need to rehash in depth Moreiras’s argument: the regionalist intellectual locates a principle of regional identity (the subaltern) and “represents”(mimesis) this subject through cultural practice. Once this is done, the regional intellectual goes on to affirm a collective cultural difference with respect to empire and global capital. The next and final step is to move beyond collective identity to claiming cultural difference in sub-groups, where “identity is now difference, and it is no longer major and national, but minor and fragmented: translation is self-translation, and subjectivity is now transcultural and hybrid” (207). At an epistemological level, claims for cultural difference and specificity if not self-reflexively critiqued, for Moreiras, end up repeating the representational, mimetic, and appropriating gesture of the national paradigm: “the point of closure of this ideological formation, is now the essence without essence of the local in resistance, that is, the merely representational against other representations, where representation represents nothing but the representational struggle itself”(207).

For Moreiras, this will to cultural difference qua representational struggle is representative of cultural studies tout court under global capital, and is indicative of a new hegemonic discursive formation in Latin American Studies today. The problem that Moreiras finds in cultural studies is the critical position that prizes the local, the hybrid and the different as an “essence without essence of the local”(207). In this regard, insofar as these claims to difference are championed without an auto-critique of their tools of analysis, the local or different or hybrid remain abstract, and function as conceptually blanketing and appropriating horizons, much like the national popular regional frame. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Moreiras on his polemical argument concerning the so-called limits and ideology of Latin American cultural studies, his point is well taken from a theoretical perspective concerning the literary apparatus. What lies beyond the horizon of cultural difference and discourses of hybridity in the abstract? Where can we go to think, indeed, a more radical hybridity that does not postulate or ground itself via a conceptual, subsuming centerpiece? Is such a mode of deterritorialized thinking and perceiving viable or possible given our entrenchment in what José Rabasa has called, following Derrida, the “Greco-Abrahamic tradition,” meaning Eurocentric Occidentalism (Rabasa, “Elsewheres” 73-74)?

For Moreiras, the neo-baroque experience is the simultaneous awareness of the limits of power and its entanglement in power. An unceasing self-reflexive practice, the neo-baroque in the context of Moreiras operates “in the name of de-appropriation, in the affirmative exodus out of university discourse [...] The Neobaroque is one of the forms in which reflection asserts itself anti-ideologically, as a principle of de-regionalization”(208). How can one think literature anti-ideologically given that literature is bound to a historical formation of a lettered class? How can Latin American literature be read as anything other than the articulation and affirmation of cultural and regional difference?

For Moreiras, literary power is the awareness of its finitude as literary power (214-215). However much the literary may be historically enwrapped in structures of hegemony as Beverly has convincingly shown, Moreiras is interested in discovering an alternative modality of framing the literary that does not reduce it to any regionalist, nationalist, or identitarian paradigms. Can literature

do other things than produce appropriating visions and ideological positions? For Moreiras, the answer is yes, especially so in the context of the neo-baroque as an aesthetic practice. The literary in the neo-baroque *produces an excess of signification*, where words express in the subject more than their semantic sense, an excess of sense that cannot be delimited through concepts. Moreiras uses the example of enjoyment or pleasure of the text that we pinpointed in Sarduy's conceptualization of the neo-baroque, as "power within language superior to language itself" (215). The experience of the text that one undergoes produces, then, an interface or relationship between the nameless and the named. If art is more than its concept, as Theodor Adorno famously theorized,⁹ that which is baroque disallows "the more than" or excess of signification and sensory stimuli pertaining to the phenomenological experience of art to be named or spoken for: "we will have to imagine that such an intellectual practice would go beyond the enjoyment of words towards the site where words break off their relation with enjoyment and open to a surplus of enjoyment, to a *plus de jouissance* which is always other than enjoyment" (217). The neo-baroque, in this view, produces a vision and experience of exteriority and de-communication that can productively serve theoretical discourse and the problematic of subalternity:

Insofar as that power is the object itself of theory, of the theoretical gaze, the Neobaroque is a theoretical practice, as the Baroque was. I understand a theoretical practice as the absolute resistance to every process of reification or commodification of forms, whether aesthetic forms, value forms, or conceptual forms. (216)

This is a remarkable revision and appeal to the literary in a time in which it has been seriously questioned in academic circles. My view on the matter is that, of course, the literary may do more, and can produce more sense and sensory experience than simply appropriate and speak for cultural identities. More to the point, I find Moreiras's claim about literary power as the making aware of its very finitude a useful finding with respect to the subaltern problematic. Though Moreiras does not explore the metaliterary and the parodic that Sarduy plotted and which I have been theorizing throughout this study as the textual modality and radical practice by which the literary suspends representation and interpellates the reader as a mobilized critic, Moreiras's point about the disclosure of discursive and epistemological limits is a powerful one that vitalizes and lends support to my position on the metaliterary as it relates to its objects and the semantic field.

And yet, however useful I find Moreiras's formulations on dirty atopics and the neo-baroque gaze, his discourse has its own road bumps that we should briefly address. The issue that I would like to consider is his invocation of the word "thought" and "task of thinking." While I concur with Moreiras on the need to move out of the exhaustion of difference, I have reservations about claiming "thinking" solely on the side of the theorist-philosopher:

The task of thinking starts in a critique of transculturation. Where can we establish the possibility of a critique of transculturation? In a double articulation that I have called subalternist in the past and that I do not hesitate to call neobaroque as well. [...] We must create a horizon of possibility for a critical perspective that will remain irreducible to the factual study of the processes of cultural transformation. The notion of the double articulation enables us to keep the horizon open to the horizon itself, that is, it permits the affirmation of a beyond of transformational facticity that does not reify it into a specific prescription or a specific dogma. (224)

Indeed, keeping our perception, understanding and thinking procedures within a horizon that constantly opens itself back onto the very horizon from which one is interpreting is an immensely important insight. That much is clear. The metaliterary as I understand it does as much by demarcating and cognitively mapping the limits of the literary as modality of representation. It is also very useful to affirm a “beyond of transformational facticity,” for any Eurocentric philosophical approach to the particular, via subsumption, produces an inevitable symbolic violence to the particular.¹⁰ Perhaps my issue with Moreiras is a matter of wording. But the issue stands: to call “thinking” and interpretation on the side of the theoretician-philosopher would perform a symbolic violence insofar as the subaltern’s life world and thinking procedures could end up effaced by Moreiras’s formulation. His theory is open to that perspective doubtless, and provides us with insight. Yet in thinking subalternity and the literary I feel I must call attention to the constant danger of Greco-Abrahamic thought procedures that contextualize my own discourse.

4. *Relative Universality and Literary Lines of Flight*

In thinking through the difficulty of understanding and postulating simultaneously colonial epistemics and those of pre-colonial and subaltern life-worlds, José Rabasa’s recent account of epistemological “elsewheres” proves enlightening, and provides a “two-sided” track for going beyond the privileging of Eurocentric modalities of thought:

The concept of *elsewheres* seeks to convey a radical alterity between languages, in this case between what is usually referred to as Standard European Languages and Mesoamerican Languages, Nahuatl in particular.

Writing *elsewheres* would consist of drawing the limits of what I will call, following Jacques Derrida, Greco-Abrahamic forms of life. These limits would be called the frontier of empire, in the sense that these are areas in the process of colonization but also areas comprising life forms that remain inaccessible. It is my contention that fol 46r of *Codex Telleriano-Remnesis* manifests these limits in a particularly dramatic fashion. These inaccessible forms of life should not, however, be conceptualized as endangered cultures in need of protection, but rather as political, aesthetic, logical and loving articulations of independent worlds. These worlds, furthermore, bear the ability to articulate variations of Europe and modernity. The concept of *elsewheres* would add another twist to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “provincializing Europe,” Paul Gilroy’s “contending or (convivial) cosmopolitanisms,” and James Clifford’s “discrepant cosmopolitanisms,” inasmuch as we are no longer exclusively speaking of alternatives to modernity conceived outside of the geographic or the cultural confines of Europe, but of European-derived discourses co-existing with the articulations of worlds in iconic scripts and non-standard European languages. Our *tlacuilo*’s capacity to dwell in a plurality of worlds would enable her to partake of Gilroy’s, Clifford’s, and Chakrabarty’s formulations without abdicating a world in which the alternative projects of modernity would become objects of study and reflection. This would enable us to theorize the need for a space — an elsewhere — in which Greco-Abrahamic forms and linguistic traditions are conceptualized by categories that resist translation to European languages and elude the imperialist impulse of the Greco-Abrahamic conceptual apparatuses seeking to reduce the totality of the world to its own concepts, expropriating terms and categories from non-Western traditions. (Rabasa, “Elsewheres” 73-74).

Rabasa takes the (fol. 46r) of *Codex Telleriano-Remnesis* (ca. 1563) as his theoretical hinge and site for cognitively diagramming his concept of *elsewheres*. The *tlacuilo*, “the one who writes in painting,”

was told by the Spanish missionaries to produce a depiction not only of pre-Columbian Mexican history but also to provide a representation of the Spanish Conquest with a “pictorial vocabulary depicting the colonial order and her subjection to it” (72). The Spaniards, of course, were interested in registering the indigenous forms of writing that would at once provide a mapping of the pre-Columbian world and “a window into the mind of the *tlacuilo*” (73). Although the project of translating the *tlacuilo*’s codex was eventually abandoned, according to Rabasa, the *tlacuilo* provided a powerful “return of the gaze” (72). In reading the *tlacuilo*’s return of the gaze as representative of a problematic for the Spanish colonial order, Rabasa constructs his concept of *elsewheres*: “The *tlacuilo* threw off the epistemological certainty of the missionaries who, after asking her to tell them the story of how she and her people had been conquered, realized that they were being observed from a place that they could never fully inhabit and expropriate”(74).

The *tlacuilo*’s return of the gaze, for Rabasa, must have radically unsettled the Spaniard’s conceptual apparatuses, and most certainly provided the example of an alternative language and gaze that were inaccessible to the Spanish language. Indeed, an epistemological, subaltern “elsewhere” like the one provided by the *tlacuilo* makes relative the Greco-Abrahamic interpretative horizon as absolute source of knowledge. It also traces the limits of the Greco-Abrahamic frame by debunking its universalistic pretensions.

“What difference does it make,” Rabasa writes, “to speak in terms of *elsewheres*?” Like Moreiras and Beverley, Rabasa is concerned with exposing the limits of colonizing forms of knowledge. But different from Moreiras’s privileging of “thinking” as “neobaroque” and “dirty atotics” and Beverley’s privileging of the inscription of subaltern voices through *testimonio*, for Rabasa the concept of *elsewheres* provides a frame for simultaneously registering and dwelling within the life-worlds and thinking apparatuses of the non-modern and modern, of the subaltern and the colonial:

Within this generalized state of struggle, we must insist on the capacity to dwell in both the modern and the non-modern without incurring contradiction, despite the inherently jealous nature of modernity. This co-existence would entail a porosity between the modern and the non-modern in which life-forms belonging to these worlds would travel from one location to the other, providing elements for self-critique. But because of the colonial past and imperial vocation of modernity, the non-modern self-critique would not be subjected to a desire for recognition by the moderns, but rather unfold itself in an ongoing process of autonomization from the legacies of coloniality. (75)

The concept of epistemological *elsewheres* enables Rabasa to usher in his concept of radical relativism. Far from making a pitch for nihilism or skepticism, Rabasa latches on to the notion of radical relativism for it provides a horizon of multiple, plural perception. The problem of extracting universality from the particular becomes, in this mobile horizon, a matter of affirming a relative universality to a specific life-world. This is doubtless a comparative view that Rabasa hopes will mobilize understandings of the colonial order and what is inaccessible to its conceptual apparatuses. It is also a position of radical affirmation: it asserts “the singularity of a plurality of worlds that cannot be subsumed under the end of philosophy” (78).

Rabasa’s concept of *elsewheres* dislodges the anthropological conceptualization of the subaltern as “the other”: “one travels elsewhere but one constructs otherness —i.e., the Other is not an empirically given merely existing out there” (79-80). His mobile horizon also frustrates the classical conception of hegemony. Far from postulating power in terms of a dominant imperial center from which the

“other” is subalternized and conceived of as crudely “out there,” Rabasa underscores the need for rethinking power in the plural: ‘Our task is to invent forms of thought that avoid the determinations of the past not only by elaborating cartographies of power, but also by constituting ourselves as desiring *elsewheres*’ (83). This radical revision of constitutive desire and subjectivity as an ensemble of perceptual horizons constructing novel concepts out of our encounters with the nameless and the rigid grid of imperial power unfastens, indeed, our Greco-Abrahamic categories of unity, structure, and totality.

Rabasa’s concept of *elsewheres* enables us to rethink the literature and subaltern divide in the 1960s, and more specifically, the case of aesthetic ornaments in the context of Osman Lins. Rabasa’s contention, like that of Moreiras, is that only in mapping the limits of imperial discourses will one succeed in moving beyond them, and thereby succeed in articulating a plural, more mobile frame for interpreting subaltern and modern life-worlds. But the critical force in this proposition for Rabasa is obtained through going to and plotting, to the best of our abilities, the conceptual singularities of other worlds that the Greco-Abrahamic conceptual apparatuses cannot fathom. Although we are irremediably contextualized by our Western language and concepts, we are enjoined to affirm the “singular universality” of the life-worlds, cultures and knowledge forms of the subaltern. Universality in this way, a colonizing gesture of appropriation and expropriation in the context of the subaltern, is barred from constituting itself as imperial reason or what Deleuze and Guattari would call royal science: “The task of radical relativism would consist of mapping the frontiers of Empire while not building bridges that would further subsume other worlds” (86). This is an important point, and takes me back to the critical dimension of the meta-literary and its relationship to the representation of subalternity.

In Cabral and Lins, we have witnessed how the literary mapped the problematic of subalternity in complex ways. On the one hand both Severino and Joana Carolina represent the plight of the subaltern, and are framed as problematic subjects of an uneven and violent nation-state. While one could certainly claim that both Cabral and Lins’s gestures constitute Brazilian modalities of literary transculturation or anthropophagia insofar as their texts incorporate subaltern voices and plot their stories and life-worlds within the horizon of the nation-state, I have shown how the meta-literary dimension of their texts intercepts, indeed powerfully so, the illusion of mimesis. In this way, our customary understanding of literature as a libidinal act, or the embodiment of a universalizing desire to incorporate and translate the subaltern, is put under erasure. On the contrary, with Rabasa we could say that the meta-literary constructs an *elsewhere* to the game of speaking for the subaltern. Indeed, the metaliterary inscribes the limits of literary power as literature, as an apparatus of writing, and as inherently finite. This gesture at once suspends the illusion of the representation of the subaltern object as transculturated, and makes of the subaltern, understood in this way as entirely a trope, a hermeneutical horizon of uncertainty and theoretical mobility. Put differently, the meta-literary burns the building of bridges to imperial reason by making duplicitous the semantic field and calling our attention to the radical finitude of Greco-Abrahamic pretensions of universality. With Sarduy we could add: the meta-literary in its application to the texts of Cabral and Lins, inscribes the literary as a semiotic medium whereby in marking its finitude and designating itself self-reflexively as an apparatus of writing that is “fallen,” the subaltern object of representation is freed up in that partial loss of literary power.

With Moreiras, I emphasize this radical finitude as a form of literary power. And following Sarduy, I latch on to the partial loss of the object of literary representation as a semiotic opening for rethinking and reengaging the literary as a critical vehicle for negotiating subalternity. Finally, like Rabasa’s

example of the *tlacuilo's* writing back to the Spanish Conquest, the return of the gaze, the metaliterary and subalternist dimensions of Lins and Cabral's texts perform and erect a hermeneutical horizon of mobility that allows us to critically dwell in literature's finitude, and "from reading and writing spaces that teach us how to see these colonial forms from a consciousness under siege" (78). By this I do not mean to speculate that Cabral and Lins viewed the literary as a colonizing device. It is rather my contention that the metaliterary constitutes a deterritorialization of the literary appropriating mechanism, and a consequent line of flight to a semiotic *elsewhere* that their texts foreground as writing alterity and subalternity.

5. *Writing Violence: Literary Finitude and Subalternity*

"To multiply the dimensions of the literary work," wrote Osman Lins in his widely distributed tract on the social function of the writer in 1969, was to establish a means of "connecting it more profoundly with reality" (*Guerra* 219). Lins's aesthetic of ornaments, inspired in Brazilian and European baroque art forms,¹¹ effectively articulated such a multi-dimensional semantic field that he hoped would allow the reader to "see reality more globally" (Lins, *Evangelho* 214). This "reality," of course, concerned Brazil in the context of the military dictatorship, and the problem of violence as it related to subaltern subjects in the Brazilian North East.

Towards the end of the 1960s, across the continent, literature begins to develop the idea of articulating a mode of counter-violence to the violence of the state and neocolonialism. If "stylization...activates the institutional memory," as Julio Ramos has argued concerning fin-de-siècle Latin American literature, the subject of a vanguard literary style in the late 1960s became a fiercely contested discursive site for writers aligned with the left (180). For Lins, the construction of an innovative, personal style that responded to the political but which also met the demands of the market was a matter of performing a juggling act: on the one hand, as a professionalized writer who promoted and considered himself a servant to the craft of literature, Lins felt compelled to construct a literature that "re-integrated the word" with a public sphere he deemed fallen and passive, "underdeveloped" intellectually due to the invasion of the North American cultural industry. The social task of the writer, in the context of Lins, was to engage the reader with a text of ornaments that revealed its very limits as text: "o romancista atual, contemporâneo, não quer mais iludir o leitor, ele segue uma linha que se aproxima da linha brechtiana, ele propõe ao leitor não um simulacro da vida, mas um texto, um texto narrativo, que se propõe como texto e propõe os personagens como personagens e não como figuras de carne e osso" [the actual, contemporary novelist, does not desire to elude the reader: he follows a line that is approximate to Brecht; he proposes not a simulacrum of life, but a text, a narrative text, that proposes itself as text and its characters as characters and not figures of flesh and blood] (*Evangelho* 225). Similar to Alberto Moreiras's concept of the neo-baroque gaze that perceives literary power as the manner by which the text reveals its finitude as text, the question of power as associated to Lins's text can be productively thought of as a neo-baroque gesture. If the object was to make a text that revealed its limits as craft, and no longer a vehicle of mimetic illusion, for Lins, this text was also importantly conceived as "um texto como detonador de percepções" [the text as a detonator of perceptions] (*Evangelho* 217).

The analogy of the text as a psychic laboratory and violent detonator of sensory perception hearkens us back to the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s.¹² In the case of Brazil, Mário de Andrade theorized the poetic act as a defamiliarizing "psychic realism" concerned with sensory perception in modernity and the unconscious (292-294). And yet this avant-garde analogy in the 1960s should not be reduced to the poetic or textual field.¹³ Neither should it be viewed as confined to the effervescent,

iconoclastic terms of the avant-garde manifesto. Negotiating writing violence in the 1960s, as a matter of material politics and symbolic representation, effectively is the other side of the problem that Lins addressed on countless occasions, especially in interviews, in his letter correspondence and in his essays. But then what exactly constitutes writing violence?

Following José Rabasa, I understand writing violence in two mutually interrelating modes: first, writing violence concerns representing such atrocities as exploitation of labor, political murder and ambush, and other forms of obvious “material terror” that contextualize the story and subaltern life-world of Joana Carolina in Pernambuco (Rabasa, *Writing* 22). Second, writing violence also concerns the power and force of writing as such, whereby writing serves as a codifying, appropriating apparatus that not only names and defines its objects of representation, but expropriates the specificity and life-world of the referent, such as the subaltern “other” that Lins’s text foregrounds. In the second more thorny conception of representational violence, we should also recall that writing violence entails codifying legal and conceptual apparatuses that serve such ends as racism, facile stereotyping, and reductive, essentialist views of human perception and sense-making activity. Writing violence, in other words, is related to symbolic forms of violence.

While writing violence in the material, explicit sense is markedly tacit in “O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina,” as Lins often liked to say, the ways in which “O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina” negotiates symbolic violence through an aesthetic of ornaments demand a heightened attention to literary form. Following Deleuze and Guattari, I am referring to the ways in which the literary ornament in Lins is capable of simultaneously plotting and counter-addressing any reifying, essentialist apparatus of “royal science” that either subjugates, “overcodes” or congeals the specificity of a group or subject’s “objective being” (*Anti-Oedipus* 27). And by “objective being,” Deleuze and Guattari’s decentering of Marx’s classical definition of “living labor” and similar to Rabasa’s notion of *elsewheres*, I understand a mode of existential, psychic, aesthetic and productive dwelling, “irreducible to the State” that is posited as non-subjugated by the conceptual apparatuses of domination and capture proper to “idealistic categories” and empire (*Thousand Plateaus* 360). Like Lins’s preferred image of the novelist as a master craftsman, Deleuze and Guattari describe the artist as a “master of objects” (*Anti-Oedipus* 32). According to this view, the artist distributes objects in dissonant modalities that serve “to short-circuit social-production and to interfere with the reproductive function of technical machines by introducing elements of dysfunction” (*Anti-Oedipus* 31-32). Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari’s vision of dissonant art constitutes a mode of writing (mapping) violence that works to dismantle symbolic violence from the standpoint that the normative conceptual apparatuses that structure and regulate social production are also powerful forms of symbolic violence.

With respect to the problem of addressing subalternity through literary style in Brazil during the 1960s, Deleuze and Guattari’s point is well taken, and allows us to reconsider Lins’s belief that the reader needed to be prodded into a more vital relationship with the text. The notion of constructing the *dynamic, concrete* and *vital structure* in poetry and the visual arts was a major tendency in Brazil during the 1960s as Mari Carmen Ramírez has shown (193).¹⁴ Lins’s insistence that his literature of ornaments was not difficult but *direct* [*vai mostrando tudo ao leitor*] informs this general structure of feeling during the 1960s (*Evangelho* 149). To the extent that for Lins, the Brazilian reading public was seen as fallen and passive due to the “invasion” of the cultural industry, engaging the reader became a central focus, because even *os leitores ilustrados* too often lacked the capacity to “ler as coisas em profundidade” (*Evangelho* 221).

We have shown how the ornament, in Lins, served to supplement the narrative field and the story of Joana Carolina's life with an array of poetic, religious, symbolic, cosmological, and astrological frames. These narrative points of view such as the sign of infinity, ∞ , for the subaltern chorus and the cross, †, to represent the priest designate a cast of rotating narrators, and serve as duplicitous signifiers that deterritorialize and reframe the entire economy of textual objects that make up the narrative.¹⁵ These ornament-narrators also serve to call attention to the compositional fabric of the story in so far as they are narrator-symbols that project multiple connotations, and because of the fact that the entire narrative sequence is told in the present tense whereby the performative question of *writing* and the *process of signification* are reflected.

Just as João Cabral in his famous study of the paintings of Joan Miró, where the Brazilian poet likened perspective in pre-Renaissance, decorative painting to the two-dimensional sort that was cultivated through Joan Miró's paintings, Lins was fascinated by the concept of aperspectivism and medieval art forms.¹⁶ With respect to Lins's fascination with perspective, it is useful to reconsider his programmatic voyage to Europe in 1961. In an important interview with Wladyr Nader, Astolfo Araújo, Hamilton Trevisan and Gilberto Mansur for the literary review, *Escrita*, in 1976, Lins provides a remarkable portrait of this "aesthetic voyage."¹⁷ Over the course of the interview, Lins highlights his scheduled trips to concerts, museums, and excursions to Cathedrals. Of all the experiences, including his interviews with the leading figures of the French *nouveau roman* such as Robbe Grillet and Michel Butor, Lins emphasizes the importance of observing medieval stained glass:

Eu diria que a principal experiência desta minha temporada, que me marcou e marcará o resto da minha vida, foi o contato com os vitrais e com a arte românica, a arte medieval em geral. No que se refere aos vitrais, eu tomei uma lição fundamental: pude examinar detidamente a degenerescência dessa arte. Enquanto o vitral se resignava às suas limitações de vitral, ao chumbo e ao vidro colorido, ele esplendia com toda a sua força. Mas aos poucos os vitralistas começaram a achar que aquilo era insuficiente e começaram a pintar o vidro, começaram a levar para a arte do vitral a arte da pintura. A partir daí o vitral degenera. Isto me levou a uma crença da qual estou firmemente convencido: de que as coisas fulguram, vamos dizer, nas suas limitações. As limitações não são necessariamente uma limitação no sentido corrente, mas uma força. Quer dizer que o vitral era forte enquanto estava limitado, e aceitava sua limitação. Além do mais, o vitral, sendo uma arte extremamente sintética, e até rústica, era uma arte altamente expressiva. Levou-me também à convicção de que não é necessário uma literatura na linha proustiana. Engraçado que o Proust aproximava muito a arte dele à das catedrais, porque era uma arte miniatural, muito minuciosa, enquanto que o vitral é uma arte sintética, extremamente direta. Então na minha literatura venho realmente buscando realizar uma obra que seja direta. [...] A outra coisa que nesse meu contato com a arte medieval é o caráter aperspectívico dessa arte. [...] enquanto o Renascimento havia levado a uma visão perspectívica do mundo, naturalmente centrado no olho carnal, humano, a Idade Média levava a uma visão aperspectívica, devido ao fato exatamente de ser uma época não antropocêntrica mas teocêntrica, de modo que os artistas, como reflexo da visão geral do homem medieval, tendiam a ver as coisas como se eles não estivessem fixados num determinado lugar. Isso levava a uma visão do mundo muito mais rica, não limitava a visão das coisas à condição carnal. (*Evangelho* 212-214)

[I would say that the principal experience of my European voyage—the one that marked me and would mark me for the rest of my life—was my contact with stained-glass windows and Roman art, medieval art in general. With respect to stained-glass windows, I learned a

fundamental lesson: I was able to carefully examine the degeneration of this art form. Insofar as the stained-glass resigned itself to its [compositional] limits, to lead and colored glass, it shined in all its force as an art form. But soon after the glassmakers started to find that insufficient, and they began to paint the stained-glass; they brought to the art of stained-glassmaking the art of painting. From that moment the stained-glass degenerates. This brought me to a belief of which I am firmly convinced: that things shine, let's say, in their limitations. Limitations are not necessarily a limitation in the common usage of the term, but a force. I mean to say that the stained-glass was impacting insofar as it was limited, insofar as it accepted its limitation. Additionally, the stained-glass, being an art form that is extremely synthetic, even rustic, proved to be a highly expressive art. It brought me to the conviction that a literature in the line of Proust is not necessary. It's funny that Proust thought of his art as closely related to the art in cathedrals, because his art was an art of the miniature, very minute, while stained-glassmaking is a synthetic art, extremely direct. Thus in my literature I really am looking for a work that is direct [...] The other thing about my contact with medieval art is the aperspectival character of this art [...] if the Renaissance had brought with it a perspectival vision of the world, naturally centered in the human eye, the Middle Ages brought the aperspectival vision, due to the fact that it was a theocentric age as opposed to the anthropocentric; so artists, as a reflex to the general vision of the medieval man, tended to see things as though they were not fixed in a determinate place. This made the vision of the world much richer: it did not limit the vision of things to the human condition].

This interview statement seems essential. Lins's aesthetic voyage to Europe has been interpreted as a turning point in his conception of narrative, which until the voyage, was characterized as realist. While this interpretation remains valid, the interview statement permits us to connect the problem of aesthetic perspective to the problem of writing violence. Doubtless, Lins's insight regarding the observation of perspective in the Cathedral's stained-glass concerned the limiting of perspective. The relationship that is established between the depiction in the glass and the perceiving subject becomes more dynamic and multiple [*muito mais rica*] inasmuch as perspective in the stained glass becomes unfixed, freeing the perceptual field from a central focal point. This experience of a synthetic or multiple perspective [*sintética*], more than an articulation of Lins's fascination with medieval European art forms, registers for Lins the way unfixed perspective can frustrate mimetic figuration. Put differently, the unfixed, synthetic perspective produces a sphere of perceptual and cognitive mobility for the spectator.

This snapshot of Lins's illumination regarding unfixed perspective enables us to better conceive the complexity of Lins's preoccupation with narrative perspective and the problem of counter-mapping violence through literature. For inasmuch as narrative perspective, in Lins, provided a frame for writing violence in the Brazilian North Eastern backlands in the explicit sense of naming, by unfixing narrative perspective through an array of ornaments, narrative perspective became a dynamic field of perception that de-ontologized the unitary descriptive frame. In this regard, writing violence from an aesthetic of ornaments charts and responds to violence in two specific senses—the material and the symbolic. On the one hand, Lins's narrative charts the material violence that subaltern subjects suffer at the hands of land barons and a corrupt state. In this more explicit regard, the ornament supplements and enriches narrative perspective through a series of shifting signifiers that suggest various modalities and angles for understanding exploitation: through the trope of redemption (Joana Carolina as exploited subaltern who is recast as a saint represented on the ornament tableau painting), for example, or through the trope of a subaltern multitude that awaits the coming of a new heaven

(revolution) in the backlands that will overthrow the landowners (the subaltern narrator-chorus represented by the ornament sign of infinity).

On the other hand, writing against symbolic violence through an aesthetic of ornaments concerns displacing the unitary, epistemological perspective of naming with a multiplicity of perspectives that underscores the constructed quality of the text. In this way, Lins's ornament charts violence through narrative form, and simultaneously deconstructs the conceptual apparatus of capture and codification underlying symbolic violence and the language of "royal science." Accordingly, the ornament discloses and deflects the force and violence of writing proper.

Against the grain of Lins's self-proclaimed motive to lead the reader from a situation of chaos to cosmological order through the ornamental word, Lins's oft repeated three stage autobiographical, evolutionary model (*procura, transição, plenitude*), I am making the counterclaim that the ornament inscribes the text's radical finitude in a double horizon: subalternity and the metaliterary.¹⁸ It is not chaos, and it is not cosmos, but the finitude of literature and epistemological limits that are ultimately relayed across the ornament's field. Doubtless, critics are correct in asserting that there is geometrical symmetry, and numberless references to the cosmos, the zodiac, and to writing and art forms in the narration of Joana Carolina's life and passage to death. But these signs of positivity, closure, and semantic sedimentation, including any "redeeming" representation of subalternity are interrupted, overlapped, suspended, and recoiled by the undoing of representation in two directions: forwards in terms of the text that constantly suspends, partitions, and redirects its representation as multiple, accumulative, and artificial, and backwards in terms of the inscription of subalternity as a *mark* of infinity, as the epistemic fissure and divide against which a counter politics could organize itself, as the nameless multitude that remains unredeemed in the hollow, artificial shell of the signifier ∞ . Joana Carolina's apotheosis, at the text's close, is just this blending in with the infinite nameless, in the mass burial site, a profanized and poetic image—more interrogative than affirmative.

Yet we would be mistaken to think of Osman Lins as advocating a devaluation of literature's voice in political and epistemological matters such as representing subalternity. This much is clear: Lins believed, as did Angel Rama, that writing represented human culture's highest form of self-expression. In a letter to Sandra Nitri, dated 25 March 1975, Lins explains how in "Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" the themes of hunting, fishing, agriculture, fiction, and weaving are depicted in sequence in the tableaux in order to allegorize the march of "civilização": "o homem partindo de um estagio primitivo e chegando (no quadro da narrativa) a sua conquista suprema, a escrita,"¹⁹ [civilization: man advancing from a primitive stage and arriving (in the narrative frame) to his supreme conquest, writing]. And it is not a speculation to say that the highest form of writing, for Lins, was literature. In this sense, Idelber Avelar's thesis concerning the Latin American Boom's aesthetic compensation for politics is applicable to Osman Lins.

And yet Avelar's thesis concerning the thematization of writing only partially hits the mark when applied to Lins and the Boom's deeper textual characters. The meta-textual dimension that I have been highlighting and conceptualizing in Osman Lins, following Sarduy, "in filigree," charts the field of narrative representation in reverse as a structure and apparatus of *ornamental writing*. In so doing, it inverts, counter-focalizes, and duplicates the chain of narrative objects, or characters and events, who become signs for this doubling writing modality. The problem of writing violence is counter-written in this way. The force of writing and contesting symbolic violence by revealing writing's finitude takes on a more powerful dimension when its signifying chains duplicate, intercept and overarch the interpretation and representation of the other limit of its horizon—subalternity. In so

doing and in spite of Lins's nationalist and literary ideologies, his aesthetic of ornaments in "Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" articulates the deterritorialization of writing violence and an ethnographic gaze that posits no ideological, conceptual or identitarian positivity or cultural identity, no ultimate universalization of the regional subaltern, but rather diagrams through its winding and interlocking array of artifices the suspension of all and any writing positivity so as to reveal the possibility of thinking through the horizons and conditions of writing's elsewhere: an infinity of nameless nobodies, the poor in the Brazilian backlands, whose redemption, delayed, never narrated, but promised in choral song,²⁰ also configures a *writing grid*, that should be deciphered, across the death of the martyr subaltern saint, as an interrogation and inscription of the impasse of the literary in Latin America during the 1960s.

Notes

¹ See Eduardo Mendieta, "Latin American Subaltern Studies Revisited: Is There Life After the Demise of the Group?," *Dispositio – American Journal of Cultural Histories and Theories* 25:52 (2005), 5-42. The *Dispositio* issue is dedicated to revisiting the projects and theoretical concerns of the Latin American Subaltern Group.

² See Mabel Moraña, "Baroque/Neobaroque/Ultrabaroque: Disruptive Readings of Modernity," *Ideologies of Hispanism*. Ed. Mabel Moraña. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. 241-281. See also, Lois Parkinson Zamora, "New World Baroque, Neobaroque, Brut Barroco: Latin American Postcolonialisms," 124:1 *PMLA* (January 2009): 127-142.

³ "In the literary domain," writes André Breton in the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, "the marvelous alone is capable of enriching works from an inferior genre such as the novel, and in general fashion, all that which participates in anecdotes" (Breton 24). It could be said that Carpentier radically takes up and inverts André Breton's notion of the "le merveilleux" as an avant-garde technique that is productive for surrealism. This is so, Carpentier explains, because Breton's "le merveilleux" is confined and framed by European culture. Even if the surrealist project is tied to perceiving "the real functioning of thought" [*le fonctionnement réel de la pensée*] (37), as against the hollow schematics of "the reign of logic" (18), Breton's position, grounded in the poet who turns to Freud, does not, nor cannot, fathom the Latin American "lo real-maravilloso" and its inextricable connection with subaltern cultures.

⁴ "Latin American history is narrated in the language of myth," writes Roberto González Echevarría, "because it is always conceived of as the history of the other, a history fraught with incest, taboo, and the founding act of naming. Latin American history must be like myth to comply with this conception [...] History, on the other hand, is critical, temporal, and dwells in a special place: Melquíades's room in the Buendía house, which I have chosen to call the Archive"(21). The problem with González Echevarría's important account, of course, is that the two "dialectical" registers that he deploys to organize "Latin American history" and "Latin American literature" —"the language of myth" and "the language of the law"— constitute an interpretative horizon that essentializes the subaltern "other" under the name of the Latin American nation state (18-21). It is for this reason that, in González Echevarría's view, the critical force of *la nueva narrativa latinoamericana* is the

dismantling of the colonial archive. The story of the “other,” hinge for González Echevarría’s concept of Latin American writing, *can be made into a new myth*, a new narrative — Comala, Macondo — that is more democratic, more self-reflexively textual: “The novel razes all previous constructs to create itself anew in the image of another text, a text which, as I suggest is endowed with the specific power to bear the truth at a given moment in history [...] That case, in the narratives being discussed here, is about Latin America itself, as a cultural entity, as a context or archive from which to narrate” (39). However self-reflexive this discursive context, or archive, by barring the subaltern frame, the argument merely repeats the transculturating gesture: anti-Eurocentric, postcolonial, but in empire’s rhetorical clothes. See also, José Rabasa, “The Comparative Frame in Subaltern Studies,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8:4 (2005): 365-380. “But the issue here,” writes Rabasa, “is whether history reads in the singular. Inevitably we will compare singular vis-à-vis multiple historical horizons” (373).

⁵ See also John Beverley, “Baroque Historicism, Then and Now,” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos: La Constitución del Barroco Hispánico. Problemas y Acercamientos* 33:1 (Otoño 2008): 65-75.

⁶ While González-Echevarría certainly recognizes the Boom’s recourse to the metaliterary throughout his study, his argument hinges on the Boom’s establishment and “return” to archival foundations and “master stories” through recourse to an overarching mythic discourse, as opposed to the semiotic suspension and “partial loss” of the object of representation that Sarduy theorizes. See *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 142-186. “In the archival fictions, the Archive is shown to be a form of mythic discourse, not removed from the literary but part of it. This swerve is, in turn, directed against the authority of the metadiscourse, by showing that the literary is not an independent category outside language, but language itself in its most vulnerable and self-revealing manifestation. Narrative invalidates the stance of the metadiscourse, showing that is always part of the mythic” (153).

⁷ No doubt, Sarduy was a pathbreaking theoretician for Latin American Studies. For a similar claim with respect to the novel form, see Alberto Moreiras’s reading of José María Arguedas’s novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, “The End of Magical Realism: José María Arguedas’s Passionate Signifier,” in *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 184-207.

⁸ “Whence, perhaps, a means of evaluating the works of our modernity,” writes Barthes, “their value would proceed from their duplicity. By which it must be understood that they always have two edges [...] what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss” (Barthes 7). In Barthes’s book on the pleasure and bliss of the text, the writing of Sarduy, of course, is referenced several times as an example of “bliss” [*jouissance*].

⁹ See Adorno’s essay, “Commitment,” *Notes to Literature*. Vol. II. Trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. 76-94. “Although no word that enters into a work of literature divests itself fully of the meanings it possesses in communicative speech, still, in no work, not even the traditional novel, does this meaning remain untransformed; it is not the same meaning the word had outside the work” (77).

¹⁰ See José Rabasa, “Elsewheres: Radical Relativism and the Frontiers of Empire.” *Qui Parle* 16:1 (Summer 2006): 71-94. See also, Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity” (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures,” *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*. Eds. John Beverley, José Oviedo,

Michael Aronna. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 65-76. Of course, Hegelian *Aufhebung* or sublation, inscribes a violence to the particular insofar as the particular object represented to the thinking subject becomes "the property of pure self-consciousness," or ultimately an object of the Absolute Spirit (Hegel, *Phenomenology* 19).

¹¹ "Above all," writes Ana Luiza Andrade, "*Nine, Novena's* novelty transposes the artistic traditions of the late medieval and baroque periods to Lins's modern style of combining ornament and geometry, which not only coincides with his time/space and political conceptions but is also contemporary with a society of mass culture, insofar as the readership is taken into account in the writing process" (Nine 205).

¹² For a detailed analysis of the relationship of Lins's work to an avant-garde aesthetic and the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer, see Adelaide Calhman, "Literatura e arquitetura: 'O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina' e a Catedral de Brasília," *Osman Lins: o sopro na argila*, São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2004, 201-223.

¹³ "One can make the strong case, effectively," writes Lins, "that the [avant-garde] revolution of the Brazilian Modernistas took place at the level of the text and not at that of the book. Not between literature and the public" (*Evangelho* 58). See Adria Frizzi's lucid introduction to *Nine, Novena*. Frizzi recalls that Lins's aesthetic of ornaments was a reaction to the fragmentary character of modern art: "The absence of ornamentation is a symptom of the fractioning of modern man, who has lost touch with the modern universe and is no longer capable of conceiving of the world in a global way" (12). Of his own vanguardism, Lins wrote: "quando eu procuro deixar claro que não sou um vanguardista pragmático, quando saliento a importância da tradição, na verdade estou procurando ir além do que ora se apresenta como vanguarda" (*Evangelho* 242).

¹⁴ See Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Vital Structures: The Constructive Nexus in South America," *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*. Eds. Mari Carmen Ramírez & Héctor Olea. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 191-201.

¹⁵ This seems to be a key metaphor in Ana Luiza Andrade's reading of Lins's work as a formal innovator from archaic forms, and as an engaged writer with such media as the television and the polemical periodical piece. See Ana Luiza Andrade, "Reciclando o engenho: Osman Lins e as constelações de um gesto épico," *Osman Lins: o sopro na argila*, São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2004, 69-111.

¹⁶ See João Cabral de Melo Neto, "Joan Miró," *Obra completa*, Ed. Marly de Oliveira. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar, 2006. 691-720.

¹⁷ The concept of the Latin American "aesthetic voyage" is from David Viñas's *De Sarmiento a Cortázar: Literatura argentina y realidad política*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1971, 184-189. Whereas for Viñas the Latin American "viaje estético" is a problematical trope that underwrites Argentine literary production in the context of "neocolonialismo," Lins viewed this trip as fundamental to altering his writing style.

¹⁸ The evolutionary scheme of "procura" [search], "transição" [transition], and "plenitude" [plenitude] refers to Lins's personal statements about the development of his writing style: "*Nove, Novena*

inaugura uma fase de maturidade, talvez de plenitude, em minha vida de escritor" (*Evangelho* 141). See also, Ana Luiza Andrade, *Osman Lins: crítica e criação*, São Paulo: Editora Hucitec, 1987; and Regina Igel, *Osman Lins: uma biografia literária*, São Paulo: T.A. Queiroz, 1988.

¹⁹ Osman Lins. "To Sandra Nitrini." 25 March 1975. Acervo de Osman Lins. Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro.

²⁰ I am alluding to the subaltern "nameless" [*nós, os ninguém da cidade*] narrators of "Mistério Final," in "O Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina," who are suggestively designated by the ornamental sign of infinity, "∞" (113). For a detailed analysis, see chapter 2 of this study. I would like to recall that the subaltern narrators blend at text's close into what is described as a "generous garden" [*pomar generoso*] (116). This "generous garden," excessive signifier, is a massive burial site and a "garden," like Eden, of proliferating names that inscribes those of the downtrodden and exploited. The "generous garden," constitutes an ambiguous opening up of the subaltern chorus, that bespeaks of the letters of the alphabet and connotes flora and fauna. Following the overarching "retable" tableau structure that frames the narrative, these names also configure the baroque backdrop of creatures and poor who encircle and frame, like angels, the apotheosis "panel" scene of Joana Carolina's death. As ornaments, they are inscribed as a grid of polysemic writing *elements* connoting the redemption of the poor and cyclical, cosmic, and, above all, *poetic* rebirth.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Letter's Limit: Writing Violence and Margins in David Viñas and Jean-Paul Sartre

In *What is Literature?* (1947), Jean-Paul Sartre ascribed a revolutionary function to the French post-war literary generation: "Literature is, in essence, the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution" (139). Literature's problematic was defined as a matter of violence, understood broadly as the historical divorce between intellectuals and the proletarian masses. Regarding literature's relationship to the past and its revolutionary function in the present, the committed writer's task was to utilize the novel as a means to "restore to the event its brutal freshness" (185). Literature for Sartre, in this way, constituted itself as a horizon of perception and free communication with the reader, and disclosed the modifiable character of historical time.

In Argentina, Beatriz Sarlo has argued that Sartre's tract served as an "ideological password" for the post-war generation of writers, who were writing in a context sutured by discourses of national popular revolution, decolonization and economic underdevelopment (*La batalla* 128).¹

In this chapter, I reexamine Sarlo's claim against David Viñas's proposal for a *literature of limits* in *De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (1970). I show that writing for Viñas constitutes a politically situated act that functions as a form of resistance. If the matter of violence contextualizes Viñas and Sartre, I argue that the critical force and originality in Viñas's proposal resides in the ways in which the literary negotiates its very limits in the novel form. In order to shed light on what these limits entail in the literary text, I provide a reading of Viñas's existentialist inspired novel, *Un dios cotidiano* (1957).

1. *A Literature of Limits*

"It suffices to place oneself *in another language*," writes David Viñas, "in order to perceive the relativity and limits of bourgeois language" (Emphasis added, *De Sarmiento* 133). Accordingly, for Viñas literature's problematic is conceived as *a horizon of perception and language*, rooted in an ethics of choice and contextualized by a materialist conception of history and class struggle. Yet with respect to a politics of aesthetics, it would be theoretically insufficient for us to subsume and reduce Viñas's project to a proletarian, stagist optics, more commonly associated with "social realism" or a literature of thesis.

Viñas builds his concept of a literature of limits [*con fronteras*] from a constellation of "concrete," historically derived factors and against the social realist paradigm: the specificity of literary autonomy and its *intense labor on semantic textures* provides literature with a privileged capacity to "resonate" and negotiate the complex networks of signs, institutions, and state apparatuses that configure the public sphere. No doubt, as we have seen in the works of Cabral and Lins, this public sphere was characterized as "burgués," and conceived as in decline given the advent of the cultural industry, and the structure of feeling of *neocolonialismo*; however, in Viñas, the rise of the popular multitude under Peronismo created an urgent problem, a sort of *virtual* public sphere for which the committed writer was responsible.²

Literature is thus contextualized by the market and its inexorable system of divisions. A structuring principle that regulates the commerce of intellectual labor, the market in Viñas also serves as the regulating principle of social contradictions, of the historical mystification of intellectual activity and its alienation from the community, and as a lure for the writer. The writer in this view, Viñas asserts,

is tempted to engage in a practice of abstention, where the seduction of the published book and the concomitant ideology of authority that subtends the notion of the isolated “individual,” “exceptional” and “talented” writer, ratifies literary culture as divorced from the community; literature becomes, in short, a site of “the sacred” and the book serves as a “sanctuary” of perceptions, essentialist and alienated from the start, that are underwritten by social contradictions, the entrenched divisionism, hierarchies, and violence of capital. Viñas’s concept of the literary “sacred” articulates therefore a challenge to literary market culture *tout court*.

According to Viñas, “la estética es, en última instancia, teoría política” (133). Far from following a party line or proffering a paternalist position, literary form produces *a vision of a textured reality, an interface* with the market sphere and its ideological apparatuses, and is capable of intercepting and making problematical for the reader whatever essentialism and mystification that underwrites the ideologies of the market. “Por dentro,” writes Viñas, meaning from a tactic of composition, one is able to construct a *concrete political literature*, one that is not based on recipes or a mechanistic application of Marxian categories (134).

Without formulas, the concrete political, in Viñas, is conceived as a war of signs confined and conditioned by the forces, texts and apparatuses historically unleashed by the market. Importantly this includes literature. In order to become concrete, in order to become political in an engaged sense, literature, Viñas argues, needs to *self-reflexively and politically negotiate its limits*, starting with the juridical limits of the nation-form as the organizational perceptible horizon for the majority of the national community. The literary inscription and probing of the limits of the nation form—as a juridical, semantic, and perceptual horizon that includes its institutions, its cultural specificities, exclusions, violence, political divisions, its languages, and its literature—serve as a means of debunking the literary sanctuary, historically informed by Eurocentrism and the cultural capital of the world republic of letters, the culture encircling “el libro burgués.”

Literature is a horizon of perception that constructs a highly textured, focused, and ultimately, *political vision of society, and of itself as a constructed literary act*. Against the transculturating paradigm, and against writers such as Julio Cortázar and the Latin American novel of the Boom, Viñas’s literature of limits is *a literature of violence that inscribes a multiple, textually layered, and problematical becoming of political perception from the horizon of the nation-form as its organizational principle*.³ It is violent and it is political, in other words, insofar as the literary, in Viñas, endeavors through its textual fabric to problematize any abstract universals, including Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism, historically situated in Argentina, that have served to divide, alienate, and efface the specificity of the historical peoples that have inhabited Argentina, including the indigenous, the subaltern, women, the Jewish, and the popular multitudes in their life-worlds and collective struggles to the discipline of the market and its apologists: “Planteo que muy poco tiene que ver con la tradicional “literatura social”: literatura política será la que se adhiera a lo político, la que ponga el cuerpo inscribiéndose en una forma política concreta;” [de allí que] “no queda otra alternativa que la violencia. *Y la violencia no como principio, sino como necesidad frente a la violencia inherente al régimen burgués*” (134; 137).

Les Temps Modernes and Contorno: Phenomenology and Politics in Argentina

In addition to the structuring juridical limits of the nation, the letter’s limits in Viñas concerns, as with Cabral and Lins, a powerful tactic of metaliterary construction. And this principle, overlooked by critics, applies in dynamic fashion to Viñas’s novels, film scripts and theoretical writings.

Throughout this study, I have theorized the notion of the self-reflective text *as a critical and political force*, as an aesthetic modality of suspension that jars the reader into a critical position. A counter-mapping of literary representation, as Viñas stated “from within,” the metaliterary, when strategically deployed as we have seen concerning the problematic of subalternity in the texts of Cabral and Lins, constitutes a willed aesthetic interface that problematizes the politics of “speaking for” or transculturating the marginalized subaltern “other.” Different from Cabral’s hybrid, dramatic poem “for voices” whose literary self-reflexivity served to “explode the spectacle of the letter,” and Osman Lins’s aesthetic of ornaments that insisted on its accumulating, performative compositional fabric, in Viñas the metaliterary is deployed throughout *as a principle of refraction* concerning the Argentine literary tradition, Eurocentrism, the politics of literature, and the phenomenological, self-conscious perspective that Viñas insistently inscribes in his texts.

Critics such as Beatriz Sarlo and William Katra have correctly pinpointed the “towering influence” of Sartre on David Viñas and the literary generation of *Contorno* that came of age during the first Peronist government.⁴ And yet there has been no theoretical appraisal of the strategic reworking, inversion, and dynamic application of the Sartrean categories in Viñas’s novels. I am referring to the phenomenological gaze, Sartre’s pursuit of a concrete public, his derivation of an ethical imperative from the aesthetic as an appeal to the reader’s freedom and creativity, and to the famous existentialist categories of radical finitude, responsibility, commitment, the reader’s freedom, and prose as a network of signs that serves to disclose a vision of a historically situated social public. Viñas admired, read, and created through the Sartrean categories for sure. And yet, his relationship to Sartre’s oeuvre was never unproblematic given the structure of feeling of *neocolonialismo* and dependency that Viñas forcefully negotiated in his writings.

Writing in exile in August 1981, and against the backdrop of an entrenched and violent military dictatorship, Viñas and César Fernández Moreno edited a special volume of Sartre’s famous review, *Les Temps Modernes*, entitled “*Argentine: entre populisme et militarisme*. In the article, “*Les Temps Modernes et Nous*,” Viñas acknowledges Sartre’s impacting influence on an entire generation of Argentine writers that came of age in the 1950s, and especially those that Viñas largely led from the pages of his legendary journal, *Contorno* (1953-1958). Indeed, the journal issue is dedicated to the members that made the *Contorno* journal, and to those it influenced.

“Who had not been more or less influenced among that generation of writers,” writes Viñas, “who desired to have a critical attitude during that time—taking into account all the nuances—by Sartre? Above all in my country and in Latin America”(Viñas, “*Les Temps Modernes*” 51). Sartre, indeed, is taken as a critical point of departure and ethical attitude, “without any devotion” (51):

Entre autres raisons parce que, ni dans la vie ni dans l’oeuvre de l’auteur des *Chemins de la liberté*, rien ne motivait une attitude ecclésiastique. Plutôt tout le contraire : si quelque chose courait le risque ou présentait des symptômes de formalisation conventionnelle, Sartre était le premier à le remettre en cause. Et à se remettre en cause. Ce que nous devinions dans ses attitudes, était précisément la reconnaissance (et la critique opiniâtre et permanente) des zones où tout écrivain participe de manière ambiguë au Pouvoir. (51)

[Among other reasons because, neither in the life nor in the works of the author of *The Roads to Freedom*, nothing motivated an ecclesiastic attitude. Rather, on the contrary: if anything ran the risk or presented symptoms of conventional formalization, Sartre was the first to question and critique it. And to critique himself. What we divined in his attitudes was

precisely the recognition (and a positioned and permanent critique) of the zones where all writers participate in ambiguous fashion with respect to Power.]

Viñas points out that Sartre's influence on his generation could be erroneously perceived as an inscription of recurring European influence and Eurocentrism on Argentine writers since the beginnings of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Against this view, Viñas ushers in Sartre as a champion of anti-Eurocentrism, and that his generation, on the other side of the Atlantic, had made critical anti-Eurocentrism "a kind of profession" (51).

Viñas's project directly concerns the problematic of cultural imperialism. Throughout the pages of *Contorno*, *De Sarmiento a Cortázar*, and in his novels, we perceive cultural imperialism infecting Argentina on all levels as a sort of cultural complex and *limit on perception and political agency*. Indeed, a major narrative trope to Viñas critical project is what Viñas perceives as a longstanding Argentine literary tradition of "sanctifying" Paris, the European writer, and Europe as beacons of civilization. According to Viñas, Argentine elites and intellectuals have historically traveled to and claimed Europe as their own; in turn, they have imported an ideological, abstract, Europeanized and "bourgeois" worldview of Argentina, to be held, applied and preserved by the few, a foundational principle of neocolonialism. The Eurocentric, in Viñas, serves as a principle of epistemic violence and legitimation of physical and material violence—a limit and violent frame—to the particular, the nomadic, the minority, the popular, the feminine, and the subaltern in Argentina.

In addition to the critique of Eurocentrism, a fundamental narrative trope that Viñas microscopically extracts from his reading of the Argentine literary tradition is "la visión del mundo inherente a [los] intelectuales" and "los modos de ser concretos" of Argentine intellectuals who have defended and preserved the model of the bourgeois writer since the nineteenth century (De Sarmiento 10). The totally situated and historical mode of being of writers, and their continuously evolving *vision of society*, clearly introduce finite perception, politics, the historical, and a plane of critical immanence to the reading of Argentine literature and politics. Indeed, in one of Viñas's first critical articles, entitled "Leopoldo Lugones: Mecanismo, Contorno y Destino" (1953), where Viñas critiques the writings of Lugones and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, he utilizes a critical terminology that incorporates phenomenology and ethical responsibility as frames to simultaneously mediate a writer's poetic and political point of view:

No me parece lícito establecer en Lugones una división entre escritor y el hombre de acción[.] (...) [Y con respecto a la visión crítica de la realidad argentina de Martínez Estrada:] es que, además de la simple descripción de los fenómenos, se ha practicado una previa reducción fenomenológica (...) al acentuar el carácter individual de los objetos históricos en la práctica de esta especial eidética, ha entendido el incesante fluir histórico como trascendencia a la vez que como sobrevivencia (3;13).

Accordingly, the notions Sartre in Buenos Aires, phenomenology, the insistence on the concrete, humankind's radical finitude, and an understanding of perception and creation as acts that are never partial, always situated, and therefore ethically responsible—inform Viñas's postulation of problems that contextualize the *Contorno* journal and the advent of the popular multitude in Argentine society as a political force under Peronism in the 1950s and 60s:

Ce que nous avons dénoncé, dès le début, du fait que tous les dualismes nous semblait suspects, ce sont les différents variantes — traditionnellement cristallisés — de la dialectique

maître/esclave. Le principe dynamique de notre travail fut l'étude du problème : maîtres éternels/serviteurs perpétuels, militaires tout-puissants/civils impuissants, oligarchies influents/peuple dépouillé, homme patron/femme passive. Et aussi la mise en question de la relation professeur érudit/élèves ignorants, *auteur autoritaire/lecteur soumis*, *acteur parlant/spectateur muet*, intellect métropolitain/sexe colonisé, Paris ciel éternel/Buenos Aires enfer définitif, « civilisation » européenne/ « barbarie » latino-américaine, fous *out*/sensés *in*, appropriation de la lune par les USA/dépossession des galeries des mines boliviennes...
(Emphasis added 52)

[What we denounced, from the very beginning, by means of the fact that all dualisms seemed to us suspect, were the different variations —traditionally crystallized— of the master/slave dialectic. The dynamic principle of our work was the examination of the problem: eternal masters/ perpetual servants; all powerful military men/ impotent citizens; influential oligarchies/the people robbed; the man owner/the passive woman. And also the putting in question of the relationship between the erudite professor/ignorant students; *the authoritarian author/the subjected reader*, *the speaking actor/the mute spectator*, the metropolitan intellect/the colonized sex; the eternal heaven of Paris/ Buenos Aires as a definitive hell; European “civilization”/Latin American “barbarism”; crazies *out*/the sensible *in*; the appropriation of the moon by the USA/the dispossession of galleries from the Bolivian mines....]

The system of binaries inscribes a sequence of limits that, for Viñas, contextualizes Argentine society, history and politics as a problem of perception and authoritarian and epistemological manipulations. To cut across these epistemological and political dualisms, to invert and displace the “master’s” authority, required the construction of a mobile critical frame that could perceive beyond Eurocentric reason and authoritarianism. Far from Eurocentric, yet inhabiting Sartre’s categories and insistence on radical freedom and finitude, it is my contention that the phenomenological gaze and the metaliterary converge and constitute the compositional foundation of Viñas’s literary project. To the extent that Viñas emphasizes the phenomenological gaze in his novel, and appeals to the reader’s freedom through the inscription of the metaliterary in *Un dios cotidiano*, I would like to return to Sartre’s *What is Literature?* in order to reassess the importance that Sartre ascribes to the phenomenological gaze in literature, to the reflective and ethical dimensions of the aesthetic of committed literature, and to the radical finitude of the reader as a principle of freedom and principle for constructing the virtual, revolutionary public.

2. Sartre’s Concepts of Literature, Commitment and Self-reflection

Writing, according to Sartre, is an affair of perception and concrete construction. Indeed, language, by its very nature, is “a prolongation of the senses” (Sartre 35) Writing is always already partial for it works with an “empire of signs” that discloses a vision of human reality that is inexorably conditioned by the division of labor, political violence, ideological mystification, and the division of literature that is either spiritualist or committed to the concrete existential situatedness of humans in society (28). To commit literature in a radical sense is to construct perceptions through prose that map this problematic public sphere that conditions the writer, and to also zero in on the perceptive process of the reader as a an indeterminate subjective center who is “free” in her perceiving finitude.

To read is a synthetic, free act of sensorial perception and creation. Committed literature must not damage this freedom; its composition must not work with theses or “anterior data” that would frustrate, explain, or compromise the reader’s freedom. The notion is to provoke indignation and political enthusiasm, while at once allowing the reader to *collaborate and actively perceive* (54). Writing is thus a gift and a system of exigencies, for inasmuch as the reader *feels her freedom as she faces the text*, her “empirical personality,” conditioned as it is by historical and political violence and manipulation, is uprooted: the reader is awakened and beckoned to act, to interpret, *to see and feel her finitude as violently conditioned*. Sartre dubs this appeal to the reader as “the advancement of the reflective” (77).

When a writer composes, she expresses herself completely, existentially and historically. Consequently, writers possess a definite social function, which changes historically depending on the composition of their public and to a corresponding “myth of literature” (132). The public is split, and literature becomes abstract, alienated, a product of “bad” consciousness [*mauvaise foi*] if it fails to address its public, if it fails to consider the public’s historical situation and power to perceive and act. This is the ethical dimension inscribed in literature: the committed writer writes for even those who cannot read and for those who stand outside her situation, insofar as she considers everyone an absolute subjective center and conditioned by the forces and violence of history. The writer of bad faith writes to preserve her “literary alienation,” as she sticks to universals that serve to whitewash history as abstract privilege and preservation, and to a retrospective and idealistic style that blinds and bulldozes over the specificity of the perceptual life-worlds of marginal subjects (138).

Accordingly, the committed writer must break through the mythic halo encircling the literary as an institution, and convert the text into a sphere of self-reflection and perception that discloses a historical world and humankind’s radical finitude. In this way, the split public, the divorce between intellectuals and the popular, marginal and proletarian classes, for example, becomes resolved as a composed, textual, aesthetic *virtual public*— an engaged Kantian kingdom of absolute ends. That is, the text projects its vision *to the potential attention of all peoples*, inasmuch as it projects itself as a sphere of perception that addresses the historical situation binding everyone to the structures of capital and violence, and appeals to any reader’s potential capacity to change the situation, and to her active, dynamic, transformative perceptual horizon as a given, as an ethical exigency, as a gift: as a world to be “changed,” not seen (192).

Akin to Viñas’s situational optics that traces the “modos de ser concretos” of writers, their models of writing, and their vision of the public sphere, Sartre’s theory of literature provides a genealogy of French literary production, denounces such writers as Gustav Flaubert for fleeing politics, and speaks of how the political climate of fascism and the German Occupation committed him to pushing forward in his literature the “historical character” of human perception. “The holiday was over,” he writes, and consequently he endeavored to construct in his novels something like “the interior monologue of occupied France” (177; 189). To give an account of his age, Sartre speaks of constructing a literature of extreme situations, a literature of historical and existential crisis:

Since we were *situated*, the only novels we could dream of were novels of *situation*, without internal narrators or all-knowing witnesses [...] we had to people our books with minds that were half-lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which would have a privileged point of view either upon the event or upon itself. We had to present creatures whose reality would be the tangled and contradictory tissue of each one’s evaluations of all the other creatures[.] [...]

Finally, we had to leave doubts, expectations, and the unachieved throughout our works, leaving it up to the reader to conjecture for himself by giving him the feeling, without giving him or letting him guess our feeling, that his view of the plot and the characters was merely one among many others. [...]

The novels of our elders related the event as taking place in the past. [...] we were convinced that no art could really be ours if it did not restore to the event its brutal freshness, its ambiguity[.] (184-185)

It could be said that Sartre's literature of extreme situations, like the kind he constructed in his trilogy of novels that take place during and the years preceding World War II and the demise of the Third Republic, *Les chemins de la liberté*, parallels to a certain degree Viñas's sustained historical, political and perceptual exploration of Argentine history as contextualized by the advent of Peronism and the rise of the masses in Argentine politics.

Extreme political events encircle and condition Viñas's characters. Like Sartre's Mathieu Delarue, Viñas's protagonists are often mediocre, existentially torn, and try to strike a non-committal balance between warring political factions. The narrative of Padre Ferré, the protagonist-narrator of *Un dios cotidiano*, is structured by his flight from politics, and takes place against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War in a Catholic school for boys. And yet, in their moral and political ambiguities and wallowing self-inventions, Viñas's protagonists are polarized by authoritarian, political, and military figures, as well as by dynamic intellectuals who take sides and are able to perceive their adversaries. I hasten to add that many of these intellectuals are women who reject the values of the middle class and all forms of social stereotyping; Viñas additionally explores the representation of popular classes and revolt, the plight of Jews in Argentina, as well as subalternity and marginality as challenging epistemic frames.

Both Viñas and Sartre's projects turn to the working and popular classes as potential, *virtual publics*. "We are not yet familiar with his language," writes Sartre; accordingly, literature needed to turn to the new media such as the radio and film. Viñas wrote three important film scripts in the 1950s and 60s, *El jefe* (1958), *El candidato* (1959), and *Dar la cara* (1962). He also championed the exploration of Argentine popular registers, the use of *el voseo*, and Argentine novelist, Roberto Arlt's incorporation of lunfardo and popular newsstand, *literatura de folletín*. Consequently, it is my contention that Viñas's concept and aesthetic of *contorno*, far from merely marking the juridical limits of the Argentine state and a nationalist viewpoint, projects such an imaginary, concrete *aesthetic community*. And yet in *Un dios cotidiano*, this imagined community comes into focus through a troubled and mediated field of perception: through the self-inventing eyes of the apolitical yet perennially polarized protagonist-narrator, Padre Ferré, and through the refraction of the metaliterary field; that is, far from projecting the national public and its historical "situation" as rounded, whole and teleological, the novel forges a reflecting image of history that is fragmentary and mediated.

Sartre insisted that writers are committed, above all, to mediation. This is so because he conceived his model of the committed literary work as a field of free perception, essentially reflective of "man in the world" in his existential and historical finitude. The double function of engagement was to uproot the reader from her "empirical personality," catapulting her into an ideal yet dynamic aesthetic interface, in order to provoke historical, political and existential self-consciousness—the advancement of the reflective and a historical point of view (218).

Sartre envisioned the French middle class, a large segment of his readership in 1947, as lacking a historical sense (167). Accordingly, the advancement of the reflective hinged on injecting the literary with a *pedagogical function*. History through Sartre's novel of commitment becomes the inscription of multiple and cross-woven sites of individual characters in self-reflection; in Sartre's concrete example, "the interior monologue of occupied France" in *The Reprieve*⁵ (1947). This reading of "man situated in history,"—in the heads of myriad, half-lucid characters across the social strata that are violently thrown into history by circumstances out of their control—placed the reader, in Sartre's view, "at the peak of his freedom" (218).

"We are in a universe of violence," writes Sartre, because we dwell in a world of propaganda and oppression that blind us to our powers to perceive and to consequently act in order to change it. Reading constitutes a counter-violence, a going beyond of description and passive perception. And yet Sartre speaks of a double danger and ethical paradox of the literary: on ceasing to read one falls back into alienation and propaganda. To resolve this impasse, the aesthetic had to inscribe tension and ambiguity in the perception and mapping of the historical event compositionally, and from the vantage of Sartre's "half-lucid" protagonists (184-185).

Of course Sartre was aware of the dangers of reading, of how the act in itself can result in mystifications no matter what the author's intentions. His "unfindable public," after all, needed not only a new language and media, but revolution (237). While literary sensation and the perception of a totality of aesthetic elements indeed lifted the reader out of a sphere of irrevocable violence—the aesthetic suspension of the reader in a free, self-reflective act—Sartre needed the hard stuff of "history" to make a literature of mediated positions. And yet by preserving the concept of mediation as the central postulation of commitment,—inscribed in the fabric of composition where finitude, the collective commons, and uncertainty are affirmed—self-reflexivity, the awareness of our radical finitude, our collective conditions, and our ethical power were preserved as its ideal ends.

It could be said that Viñas takes Sartre's ethical paradox inhering in commitment to another level of aesthetic mediation. Similar to Cabral and Lins, Viñas deploys the metaliterary to mediate and refract his narrative and cinematic portrayals of Argentine history. In so doing, in underscoring the textuality of the text, its radical finitude over any subsuming dictatorial image, the metaliterary places the reader into a compositional standpoint, into a position of strategy and technique of reading. To the extent that in Viñas's perspective society and Argentine history are informed by violence and founded on violation, and insofar as his project investigates how literature has historically served as a medium where politics and perception become framed as problematical, if not epistemologically violent where the other is "penetrated" by the gaze of the lettered, the metaliterary jars the reader out of the field of fictive representation and its penetrations, interpellating her into a position to better read the fabric of political contradictions, the layers of symbolic and material violence, and literature as a textual and perceptive field that is interwoven in the historical and capable of being counter-composed (Viñas, *De Sarmiento* 136).

A Double Contorno: From Manifesto to Ellipsis

Winner of the prestigious "Premio Kraft" for the best Argentine novel in 1957, *Un dios cotidiano* is an avant-garde "political" novel that has received scant critical attention. With the exception of Oscar Masotta's Sartrean-inspired interpretation of the novel in 1958, critics have overwhelmingly interpreted Viñas's novelistic production, including *Un dios cotidiano*, through a Marxian optics. According to this view, Viñas's aesthetic production is subsumed through an ideology of form whose

task is to simply denounce social injustices.⁶ In reading the politics of Viñas's literary production schematically through the Marxian categories, critics too quickly overlook Viñas's intense labor on texture, his intertextual play with Argentine literary and political history, and a more radical perspective of the literary understood as a modality of invention and intervention, a dynamic and contestatory aesthetic interface regarding the normative subjection of life to the apparatuses of power.

From a different perspective, Oscar Masotta's existentialist and autobiographical reading of the novel interprets the text's formal projection as a *literary manifesto of committed literature*—Masotta begins by informing the reader that Viñas has personally confessed to him his intentions—and problematizes Viñas's understanding of committed literature as falling short of a truer Sartrean aesthetic⁷:

Tal vez podría afirmarse que *Un Dios cotidiano* es un manifiesto, no ya de lo que el autor propone como arte novelístico, sino de los requisitos indispensables que debe poder cumplir una novela para decirse comprometida. El tema del compromiso es uno de los que más ha preocupado a Viñas, y hasta hace muy poco [...] entendía que comprometerse no era sino escribir con violencia, esto es, no guardar nada, destapar todas las cloacas[.]

[...]

Hay que lamentar cómo ha sido oscurecido entre nosotros lo que se debe entender por literatura comprometida. [...] Contra Viñas habría que recordar que “un escritor está comprometido cuando se esfuerza por embarcar la conciencia más lucida y completa, es decir, [...] hace pasar el compromiso *de la espontaneidad a lo reflexionado*” (*¿Qué es la literatura?*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1950, pág. 96). (123; 143).

Masotta argues that *Un dios cotidiano* articulates a political critique and moral perspective—a testimonial “thesis”—that is limited to denouncing the ideological apparatuses of the Catholic Church. This is so, Masotta affirms, insofar as the protagonist's actions and the novel's representation of history become reduced to the claustrophobic confines of the novel's setting, El Colegio de la Cruz: “Para que el compromiso que según Viñas supone la “asunción” de lo cotidiano adquiera verdadero carácter de tal, habría sido necesario que así como nos ha entregado la experiencia de la verdad de la vida moral es la ambigüedad y de que cada uno de nosotros es uno distinto radicalmente a los demás, así como ha expulsado a los dioses de la discusión moral, habría sido necesario que los expulsara también de ese lugar, lo cotidiano, que arbitrariamente les ha asignado” (141-42).

However much I differ from Masotta's final interpretation, his article provides us with a prism of useful concepts that point us far beyond his blatant Sartreanism and desire to challenge and refine Viñas's aesthetic of commitment. I refer to what Masotta suggests as *Un dios cotidiano*'s “will to polarization with the Argentine literary tradition” and the strange, allusive, “echoing” character of the literary and historical figures that constitute the novel's “atmosphere” (141-42).

The elliptical semantic chains that Masotta evokes constitute what I have been calling Viñas's *metaliterary gesture*. The metaliterary, in Viñas, inscribes a double perceptive frame, an aesthetic dimension to a second degree that calls attention to the textual makeup of the novel and its strategic, literary and political characters. Consequently, in Viñas's *double perceptual contorno*, the literary not only advances the reflections of the first-person narrator, Padre Ferré; the literary becomes a sphere of inventiveness and interception of received ideas, where words not only represent the social sphere but *become reflected as signs having strategic functions*. Versus a criticism of application of Marxian categories, versus a literature of thesis, through Viñas's utilization of the metaliterary, the reader is

beckoned to become self-conscious of the political, inventive and strategic functioning of words and their relation to Argentine history, both literary and political. Accordingly, in what follows, my aim is to track Viñas's textual strategies that impose this double perceptive horizon and vision of a politics that, while committed to exposing the violence of the Church and anti-Semitism, for example, provides a *perceptive constructivism*: an aesthetic horizon that thrusts the reader into a critical position to perceive the text as a fabric of signs against the oppressive weight of stereotypes, clichés, ideologies, and metaphysical abstractions that weigh on the novel's characters.

The Flight from Politics, the Political Field and the Syntax of Perception

Un dios cotidiano tells the story of an intense year in the life of its protagonist-narrator and aspiring priest, Carlos Ferré. In order to advance to Theological Seminary, Ferré must teach for a year at a Catholic School for boys, El Colegio de la Cruz, during the late 1930s in an unidentified province of Argentina.

From a compositional standpoint, the novel inscribes through the figure of Ferré a complex network of perceptions. From the initial scene where Ferré recalls perceiving a group of students being punished as they march like soldiers in monotonous circles in the "calesita," Ferré's gaze will go on to microscopically register the system of discipline, the violence that takes place in order to preserve it, and the politics of surveillance and control at the Colegio. And yet Ferré's eyes are curiously focused: his intention is to create his own "meaning," to create his personal "salvation" and heterodox "God," in order to dynamically "entregar[s]e a los otros" (36). His gaze, in other words, is properly inventive, complex, and committed to altering or profaning the standard assumptions of the Catholic liturgical order and its dogma. "Iba a inventar mi propio mundo," Ferré relates on arriving to the Colegio, "de eso se trataba. Y no para que me tolerasen porque era un convertido. El Convertido. Yo no iba a prestarme a eso" (21).

This existential and ethical problematic is informed paradoxically by Ferré's flight from politics. Marked by italics and serving as stream-of-conscious flashback sequences that intercept Ferré's narration, Ferré's head rattles with the political sayings of his father that he has rejected as too schematic. Ferré suffers from the trauma of the authoritarian father figure, and has left his home and the University to join the clergy. And yet as a figure of mediation, and filter for the reader of a political and literary field that the novel is committed to engaging, Ferré has learned from his Father's kitchen the rhetoric, artifice and syntax of politics: "Yo había aprendido de ellos a valorar el juego. Mi padre, sobre todo, era un jugador. Pero había una diferencia. Él mismo decía: —*Yo gano. Nosotros ganamos*" (79).

Political perception, in Ferré, comes into focus through the figure of *jefes*. When Ferré meets the School's Director, he immediately interprets the Director's *mode* of expression, including the very movements of his body, as akin to his father's political colleagues. Ironically, Ferré's flight from politics in the Catholic School begins in a dead end: Ferré must face up from the start with a politicized and authoritarian Director. Ferré is dubbed an outsider and liberal by the Director in their first exchange where they joke about Ferré being a communist spy, "un Rojo," and supporter of the Second Spanish Republic. I hasten to emphasize Ferré's attention to details and signs, to the textual fabric and "juego" of political syntax:

Entonces levantó la cabeza:
—Algo de liberal?

—Hijo.

Sus manos se encontraron sonoramente en el aire y se estrujaron. Yo ya presentía lo que iba a ocurrir. No se iba a escandalizar y mucho menos a asustarse. Eso hubiera sido torpe. Pero el tono, *su* tono iba a cambiar. [...] A partir de ese descubrimiento yo pasaba a ser medias espía y a medias un ejemplo que había que mostrar, un converso que había aprendido la Verdad. Y nada más que eso. (20).

[...]

—¿Los Rojos? —su cuerpo monumental temblaba con una sonrisa a partir de sus labios entreabiertos.

—Los más Rojos, padre.

Y la broma se prolongaba un rato por encima de las hojas garabateadas con mis antecedentes: mi año de nacimiento, 1911, que estaría escrito por ahí; también ese segundo nombre increíble de me madre, Palmira; la profesión de mi padre, abogado y de la Universidad de Córdoba; quizás también mi monografía sobre el libro de Sertillanges Saint Thomas d' Aquin. Fueron llegando esas preguntas con un orden casi inalterable y repetido en todos los casos, pero siempre sonrientes, y con algo de disculpa, pero que me apremiaban, porque el no tenía por qué enterarse de eso [...] que qué pensaba con una discreción muy especial que consiste en no asomarse sobre lo que el otro escribe, pero demostrándole todas las ganas que se tienen para saberlo[.] (Emphasis added 22).

Ferré certainly reads with an attuned eye to conventional behavior and the force of impressions, paying mind to the rigidity of labels and the power of signs. Words and labels serve a strategic function. They inscribe a zone of immediate intelligibility: semiotic territories of stereotypical sense that serve to violate the complexity of people, objects, and “intermediate” meanings that Ferré endeavors to preserve and construct for himself such as his repeated version of a personal God and heterodox viewpoint. Indeed, Ferré prides himself on maintaining “80 centimeters of distance” in his vantage that allows him to freely perceive: “Yo era el único de todos los de allí dentro que no estaba sometido a un sistema, a un curso fijo. El resto, sí. Yo era el único que estaba suelto, al margen de cualquier engranaje, y había contemplado desde afuera a los demás, zambullidos en su faena” (175).

However heterodox, however constructive Ferré’s will to perceive and create new sense for his life, his perception becomes polarized and dependent on the gaze of others. Everyone, including the students, knows everything about everyone in the Colegio. And the all-surveying Director—who allows violence and anti-Semitism at the Colegio as long as it does not turn into a “spectacle”—often barges into Ferré’s classroom without notice to update the class on General Franco’s campaign to “liberate” Spain. Ferré’s principle of action, already ambivalent in its flight from the political, comes to constitute therefore an ethical problem at the School where symbolic and physical violence, fascist politics, and surveillance are normative.

A marginal and existentialist protagonist committed to inventing his life meaningfully, Ferré’s gaze constitutes a *principle of problematic mediation and self-reflection*, a window from which a field of experience and its political, historical and semantic textures open up for the reader. Even so, Ferré often acts too late, turns his eyes away from the violence of others, betrays and denounces his best friend and confidant at the school, and even ends up beating one of his students. It could be said that his love affair with sight, his concern with the semiotic surface of things, and obsession with *controlling* his inventive, free-floating personal vision handicap his ethical principles and his capacity to make connections and take decisions. What is tragic about Ferré, in this novel of “compromiso,” is therefore not his inability to commit to politics and definitive action in the context of an extreme

situation like Sartre's Mathieu Delarue in *The Roads to Freedom* trilogy. And it certainly has nothing to do with Ferré's failure to leave the school to join a political party. It is rather his inability *to read the totality of the novel's objects* and signs and actions in their more profound, interlocking relationships, what Viñas famously called the *contorno* in his criticism. Accordingly, Ferré's actions and perceptions become contaminated by the novel's polarizing authoritarian figures and by the violence that takes place at the school: Ferré replicates, in the end, all that which he has repudiated. His ethical ambiguity, the tardiness of his responses, and his final falling into violence and the desire to control others attest to this groundless floating ethical position that he has assigned himself.

Ferré's tragedy is ultimately a problem of reading beyond surface details through layers and relationships, a perceptive field outside his inventive yet polarized gaze. Referring to the Mendel incident, a Jewish boy brought to the Colegio to be converted, and who ends up being beaten and sexually humiliated by the boys in Ferré's class, Ferré confesses: "Pero estaba seguro de una cosa: lo de Mendel había sido una torpeza por algún detalle y no por la totalidad. *Eso era importante*. Pero empecemos por el principio: me repugnaba el mundo de mi padre" (Emphasis added 78). From the corrective affirmation and interpellating syntax—*Eso era importante; empecemos por el principio*—it could be said that Ferré here reveals that he is *writing* his confession, that he has erred in retrospect. As a mediator of totalitarian politics and violent actions in the microcosm of the Colegio, Ferré's function is elliptical: he perceives a complex field of objects that he desires to control but does not read them historically or politically.

Etchings and Echoes: Politics, History and Literature

It would thus be theoretically insufficient for us to read the novel's political function—as did Masotta—solely in terms of Ferré's existential plight. Far from a novel of "thesis," *Un dios cotidiano* inscribes in Ferré a principle of complex perception as a result of his flight from his father's authoritarian political world that Ferré finds false and conventional. And yet the problem of Ferré's self-invention is inexorably wedded to political *mediation* and to fascism, no matter how hard Ferré seeks refuge and independence in the monastic life.

It could be said that *Un dios* compositionally builds an alternative horizon of perception, an outside frame to the existential monad of Ferré's gaze. I am referring to what Masotta called the strange, allusive historical echoes that constitute the novel's "atmosphere." References to real historical figures, literary works and Argentine politicians inundate the novel's pages and Ferré's gaze. Curiously, when Ferré comes into contact with this system of historical and literary objects, the very moment when the historical invades the fictive, he fails to interpret, comment or read. Ferré's obsession with self-invention, his desire to be free from politics, ultimately confines his mediations to the self.

Just as Ferré's perception of the historical and literary objects in *Un dios* proves to be elliptical as he fails to read them, it is my contention that this system of objects serves to mediate the novel's textual fabric. The literary and historical objects configure, in other words, an aesthetic interface that not only serves to suspend mimesis as a metaliterary and political suspension of the story, but which forcefully interpellates the reader. Not a novel of thesis, *Un dios's* historical and literary library, its system of interpellations that point to a textual outside and to history, call the reader's attention to the novel's textual fabric, to Viñas's strategy of composition and its relation to politics and history. It might be said that Viñas's preoccupation with what critics have schematically called a *materialist aesthetic*, his drive to commit literature to politics, is actually more concerned with semantic texture, with *making the very word in the novel a site of materialization*,⁸ the making concrete of words and

signs as tactical tools, as opposed to abstract schemata and stereotypes that serve as forms of symbolic violence to the particular that Ferré and Viñas's critical project make a point of denouncing.

The mediation of Ferré's story by the system of historical and literary objects begins with the novel's epigraph, a quote by an American poet, Robinson Jeffers, and to the collection of books Ferré brings to the Colegio—which notably includes a book of poetry by Jeffers and Jorge Luis Borges's *El tamaño de mi esperanza*. What happens compositionally when the poet from the novel's epigraph appears in Ferré's book collection? To the extent that a classic function of epigraphs is to formally introduce a semantic key or theme, the fact that Ferré is reading Jeffers's poetry beckons us to think of the novel's textual fabric, to an outside of its narrative frame, and to its play, in filigree, with literary works. Just as Viñas's critical project negotiates with force an impressive array of writers from the Argentine literary tradition, one must pay heed and read Viñas's literary production, like Borges, in terms of libraries and intertextual play.

The fact that Ferré is reading the young Borges's *El tamaño de mi esperanza* is enlightening in this regard. *El tamaño*, written in 1926 and against the avant-garde context of the *Martin Fierro* review that Borges, Oliverio Girondo and Ricardo Güiraldes spearheaded, is a book that Borges took out of his collected works, probably due to its plethora of linguistic *criollismos* and its nationalist inflexions. Additionally, it is well known that Viñas's *Contorno* review made it a point to challenge and denounce Borges's universalism and criollismo, the legacy of the *Martinfierristas*,⁹ and the *Sur* review's project of importing and championing European literature in Argentina, of which Borges was also an active contributor from the 1930s through the 50s.

In Viñas's literary project, as in Borges, books and bibliographies circulate and suggest in characters like Ferré a worldview, a principle of subjectivity. And the fact that Ferré's bibliographical itinerary begins with the nationalist Borges, a polemical figure for the writers of *Contorno* who were interested in de-sanctifying the role of the writer and challenging the Eurocentric,¹⁰ must perforce raise the reader's eyebrows, especially during the 1950s when Borges was becoming famous internationally for his collections of stories, *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949), and for his outspoken outrage and aversion to Peronism. I hasten to add that, like the historical figures that Ferré encounters throughout the novel but fails to interpret, Ferré says nothing about his Borges book. It is there as a suggestion and ellipsis, invading the fiction, and constitutes a demand on the reader to consult the library and to consider the novel's textual makeup.

In consulting the first essay in Borges's *El tamaño*, entitled "El tamaño de mi esperanza," we find Borges addressing his *criollo* audience about the problem of literary invention in Argentina—"A los criollos les quiero hablar" and "mi argumento de hoy es la patria"(11). Borges's essay goes on to map the more famous contributors of Argentine literary tradition and its historical protagonists who have shown "una lindísima voluntad de criollismo" —Sarmiento, José Hernández, Lucio V. Mansilla, Macedonio Fernández, don Manuel Rosas, etc. (12). In spite of this will, Borges postulates that the Argentine tradition lacks a great mystic and metaphysician, a thinker capable of capturing through the inventive word the spirit of Buenos Aires:

Ya Buenos Aires, más que una ciudad, es un país y hay que encontrarle la poesía y la música y la pintura y la religión y la metafísica que con su grandeza avienen. Ese es el tamaño de mi esperanza, que a todos nos invita a ser dioses y a trabajar su encarnación. (14)

Borges's manifesto and charting of the Argentine tradition articulates the vision of *the poet as god* who sings to the Argentine lettered class, the *criollos* that Borges's syntax interpellates. This vision of the superior lineage and "sanctified" writer who addresses the elite is the antithesis of Viñas's critical project, the notion of examining and constructing a collective *contorno*, a critical program that denounces precisely this model and worldview of the writer as alienated from the public sphere.

It could be said that the novel's title, Ferré's obsession with founding his personal, quotidian God, articulates a parodic homage to Borges's essay and to the project of the "sanctified" exceptional man of letters it postulates. Ferré desires after all to attain a superior perspective in his 80 centimeters of distance and in his heterodox beliefs, as his counterpart and confidant, Padre Porter accuses, "[usted se parece] demasiado a Dios" and "es demasiado evidente su superioridad: usted se cierne sobre nosotros" (101-102).

In addition to informing Ferré's poetic subjectivity and obsession with being beyond the social fray, as a metaliterary gesture, the Borgesian text that Ferré is reading calls attention to the Argentine literary tradition and a literary function that Viñas's novel, like his criticism, actively engages. As the first of many national texts that appear in *Un dios cotidiano*, the metaliterary in Viñas constitutes a limit and mediation of Ferré's perception and story, pointing to what I have called the novel's second *perceptive frame*. Through the Jeffers epigraph, Ferré's library, and multiple references to literary works and important historical figures that serve a parodic or intertextual function, the novel points to its palimpsestic, constructed quality—to its material, semiotic coordinates. According to this system of mediations, in pointing out the text's strategic and palimpsestic construction, the metaliterary in Viñas de-ontologizes the object of representation: an explicit homage and inversion of the Borgesian model of the writer in 1926 as a god and privileged bard of the nation.

Additionally, in *El tamaño de mi esperanza's* final essay, entitled, "Profesión de fe literaria" we find another reference to literature as fulfilling a quasi-religious function: "Este es mi postulado: toda literatura es autobiográfica, finalmente. Todo es poético en cuanto nos confiesa un destino" and "toda poesía es plena confesión de un yo, de un carácter, de una aventura humana" (128). I have pointed out that Ferré's narration reads like a confession, as though he were writing his autobiography. What's more: Viñas's literary criticism cross-reads a writer's biography and political writings with her/his literary texts in order to examine the writer's gaze in its historical context, and Viñas in his youth attended a Catholic School for boys in Buenos Aires. The Borgesian text thus serves as a *site of textual concentration*, and point of Viñas's autobiographical self-insertion into the text.

Reading Violence on the Wall: The Parricidal and the Parodic

In addition to the circulation of literary texts that litter the pages of *Un dios cotidiano*, Ferré comes into contact with a sequence of objects, etchings, graffiti in bathroom stalls, texts that are written on chalkboards, and photographs that serve as references to Argentine historical figures. In spite of Ferré's flight from politics and the limited confines of the Colegio, they constitute the novel's political field. The Director's map of Spain with his blue "banderitas" that demarcate the march of General Franco's campaign also figures into this system of historical objects. As with the Borges and Jeffers texts, Ferré hardly comments on these objects: they serve as a limit and mediation to his perceptive horizon which he fails to read. Put differently, the system of historical narrative objects in *Un dios* intercept and frame Ferré's existential project and expose the reader to a semantically charged field of synechdoches that beg interpretation. Their function, like the literary text, is elliptical; in charting the

wider historical context that the novel engages, they express the half-said where the historical invades the fictive.

Ferré finds pleasure in his sight and in his *recorridas* through the Colegio's premises:

Era algo fascinante, uno se metía donde se le antojaba y siempre se descubrían nuevos lugares. Y yo tenía la llave maestra a todas las puertas. "Donde se me da la gana", pensaba. [...] Todos los recovecos, todos los rincones, todos los repliegues del Colegio. [...] Podía andar todo el día a solas mezclando el olor de los establos y una foto de Yrigoyen y la parte de atrás del teatro.

[...]

Continué dando vueltas por todo el Colegio hasta el anochecer. Abusé de esta ventaja que tenía. Yo era el único de todos los de allí adentro que no estaba sometido a un sistema, a un curso fijo. El resto, sí. Yo era el único que estaba suelto, al margen de cualquier engranaje[.] [...] Era un especie de espectáculo: ellos sumergidos y yo flotando. (168; 175).

Just as Ferré's promenades on campus expose him to historical figures such as the photo of two-time Argentine President, Hipólito Yrigoyen, the first democratically elected President who was ousted by a military coup in 1930, Ferré also discovers a photo of Spanish Republican General José Miaja in the kitchen. The photo of Yrigoyen, like a specter, clearly points to the historical context that the novel is depicting: Argentina's "Década Infame" of military dictatorship (1930-1943). In the case of the Miaja photo, an antipode to the Director's map and demonstrating a counter-politics from below, Ferré has the cook take it down but hardly offers an interpretation as though he were merely a floating eye, detached from "cualquier engranaje."

A more graphic sequence concerns Ferré finding anti-Semitic graffiti in the bathroom stalls:

Entré al baño de los chicos porque me correspondía recorrida. En uno de los mármoles de los mingitorios habían escrito "Mendel Judío"; en otro había un dibujo obsceno y una descripción donde decía "Así es Mendel". (68).

The grotesque depiction of the Jewish boy foreshadows one of the novel's most violent scenes: the boys undress and humiliate Mendel in a locked classroom and even write on his body: "A Mendel le habían quitado la ropa y se lo pasaban de grupo en grupo completamente desnudo. El pugnaba por cubrirse. [...] Alguien había hundido un papel en un tintero y le untaba el cuerpo. O le escribía algo" (72). The scene prompts Ferré to yell at them; but we must recall Ferré's confession: "lo de Mendel había sido una torpeza por algún detalle, una palabra a tiempo, o una orden o una mirada precisa. Por algún detalle y no por la totalidad" (78). Ferré does not read "the totality" of objects in context, which refers to the wider situation at the Colegio—to its system of signs, discipline, repression, and violence where the boys, for example, are often beaten and humiliated—and to the historical context that informs the novel: the fascist and anti-Semitic historical undercurrent not only in Europe but in the Argentina of the 1930s.

Ferré's contact with historical objects, literary texts and etchings inscribes a historical *contorno*, a second aesthetic dimension that mediates Ferré's gaze. Ferré hardly reads these figures in their relationships, as scattered fragments and piecemeal graffiti they form no narrative thread. Everything happens as though Ferré could not connect the points into a coherent perspective. The non-interpretation of the historical object constitutes a blur in Ferré's perspective and point of impasse for

the reader; pointing up to a textual outside, she/he is interpellated from the realm of the fiction to consult the library in order to make sense of this literary and political field.

Ferré's encounter with Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's bust in the Colegio's *sala de mapas* perhaps reveals Viñas's deployment of metaliterature most poignantly as a political strategy of composition. Ferré discovers his student Giroso confined in the Sala de Mapas for punishment. As he gazes with Giroso at the room's surroundings, Ferré discovers a series of statues: Nero, Julius Cesar, Mark Anthony, Cicero, and several Argentine Presidents such as Bartolomé Mitre and Sarmiento. The two play a game of repeating after one another: when Ferré says Cicero, Giroso echoes him:

Quedaban pocos yesos, eran los últimos. En ese lugar se veía mejor; la luz caía desde una claraboya. Los mapas arrollados y los bustos adquirirían un tono amarillento, más vivo.

Parecían de bronce lustrado.

—Sarmiento.

—Sarmiento.

Pero en el pie del busto había algo escrito. Eran unas letras hechas con tiza.

—¿Quién escribió esto?

—¿Quién escribió esto? —Giroso intentaba continuar con su juego.

—¡No, no! Basta de bromas —grité—. ¿Quién puso esto aquí?

—¿Qué, Padre?

—Esto—y bajé el busto de la estantería.

—¿Qué, Padre?—él había puesto su mejor cara de tonto.

¿Porter zanahoria?—leí—. ¿Eh? (172)

Hidden writings, clandestine photographs, etchings in bathroom stalls, in Viñas, point to the novel's half-said and second plane of mediation: the constitution of elliptical semantic chains that point to a historical constellation and to the Argentine library that Viñas is consciously engaging. As a metaliterary gesture, the chalk markings on Sarmiento's bust reference the autobiographical "Advertencia al Lector" that inaugurates Sarmiento's canonical *Facundo* (1845).

In the "Advertencia," Sarmiento informs the reader that at the end of 1840 he crossed the Cordillera to Chile because of the tyranny of President don Manuel Rosas. On departing from his native province of San Juan, he writes a curious French quotation in charcoal on the rocks of the baños de Zonda:

Al pasar por los baños de Zonda, bajo las armas de la Patria que en días más alegres había pintado en una sala, escribí con carbón estas palabras:

On ne tue point les idées.

El Gobierno, a quien se comunicó el hecho, mandó una comisión encargada de descifrar el jeroglífico, que decía contener desahogos innobles, insultos y amenazas. Oída la traducción, "¡Y bien!" dijeron, "¿qué significa esto?" (Sarmiento 35-36).

The carbon etching—*On ne tue point les idées*—also serves as the first terms of *Facundo*'s famous epigraph sequence, which includes Sarmiento's striking Spanish translation: "a los ombres se degüella: a las ideas no." Critics such as Ricardo Piglia have pointed out that the quote is falsely attributed to Fortoul and is a deliberate misquotation of Diderot. Like Giroso's transgressive chalk inscription under

the bust of Sarmiento, “*Porter zanahoria*,” it could be said that Sarmiento’s radical translation of “tue”[to kill] for “degüello” articulates a national inflexion—Sarmiento’s desire to denounce Rosas’s tyrannical regime that employs the popular *degüello* of cattle as a technique of terror to maintain his authoritarian regime: “Porque él ha hecho del crimen, del asesinato, de la castración, del degüello un sistema de Gobierno” (Sarmiento 366).

However Eurocentric Sarmiento’s viewpoints, he recognized the political and literary importance of negotiating the characters of Argentine popular life such as gauchos and Rosas’s system of discipline and terror. It could be said that Viñas’s parody of Sarmiento’s “Advertencia al Lector” in *Facundo*, constitutes a suggestive mediation of Sarmiento’s founding gesture for Argentine literature: a homage and de-sanctification of the founding father and his project of inevitable Eurocentric civilization. More to the point, far from articulating mere non-sense, the parodic inversion of *Facundo*’s epigraph sequence with “*Porter zanahoria*” serves to highlight the constructedness of Viñas’s novel. Put differently, this spectacular metaliterary scene exposes the textual fabric of the novel and interpellates the reader to perceive Viñas’s code of construction that discloses a plural, highly mediated network of signs and historical texts, a politics of aesthetics, that takes us far beyond any thesis or ideological authorial imposition. Among the many ideas at stake in this parody, for example, are the problem of the “sanctified” founding father as monument, and Sarmiento’s *literary* and hybrid transgression of Eurocentrism and eye to the national *contorno*, to the need to negotiate popular forms of life. Even as the inscription “*Porter zanahoria*” functions as a blur to Ferré’s field of vision, the parodic jars the reader out of the field of the fictive and Ferré’s self-absorption and into a critical standpoint.

Un cross a la mandíbula: palimpsest and Padre Porter

It is clear that *Un dios cotidiano*’s insistence on challenging and displacing fathers and foundational figures—Ferré’s father, the Colegio’s Director, and some of the more illustrious members of the Argentine literary canon such as Sarmiento and Borges—points up to what Emir Rodríguez Monegal coined as the parricidal gesture that subtends David Viñas’s critical and novelistic project that began in the pages of the *Contorno* review.¹¹ However apt Monegal’s formulation that Viñas and the members of *Contorno* review acknowledged, his reading of Viñas’s novels as generational creations that go “somewhat” beyond the “schematic” and “panfletaria” falls far short of addressing Viñas’s intense labor on semantic textures as a politics of aesthetics (21).

According to this view, we have witnessed how Viñas’s recourse to a layered modality of writing—to metaliterature, to etchings, and a system of fragmentary historical objects—function as a limit to Ferré’s perception and personal project: as an outside *contorno of mediation that Ferré fails to read critically*. In other words, in addition to Ferré’s coveted perspectivism, self-invention and quest for a quotidian God, the problem of reading constitutes a trope and problem in *Un dios*.

Critics have correctly pointed out that Ferré’s confidant and friend, Padre Porter, functions as something like a doppelganger and negative image for Ferré. From their common rejection of the status-quo and schematic modes of thinking, to their disdain for authoritarians and their probing existential searches to make their life as teachers in the Colegio meaningful, Ferré and Porter constitute complimentary yet contradicting perspectives. If Ferré’s ultimate project is self-invention so as to escape politics and the discipline of any modality of orthodoxy to better serve others, Porter’s quest as the music instructor in the monastery is ill-defined. In other words, Porter’s perspective constitutes a challenge to Ferré’s project, a violently critical gaze that “punches” through Ferré’s “80 centimeters of distance” and floating perspectivism. Porter virulently pokes fun at all the priests,

disdaining them all except Ferré. Spontaneous, likened to a boxer, and anarchical, Porter is above all a critical reader that is capable of reading through charades and surfaces people and objects situated in their contexts; never stable, Porter claims no set position, and constantly challenges Ferré's positions and actions and rips apart the ideological and institutional structures to which people cling in order to make sense of their life. Through their *conspiracy dialogues* that are often philosophical and based on Porter's readings of situations, like the metaliterary horizon underwriting *Un dios*, Porter constitutes a limit and mediation of Ferré's project.

I hasten to emphasize the act of reading that introduces and binds these counterparts; their initial conversation on Ferré's books, likened to a boxing match, will go on to underwrite their conspiratorial relationship: "Había algo en eso que lo prefería," Ferré reflects, "a una cosa convencional."

Así como Porter me había facilitado la entrada al comedor con sus ganas de hablar de mis libros, de evidenciarse y de pugnar por parecer distinto al resto, con su violencia nos ponía a todos en pie de igualdad. Cualquiera podía padecer sus ataques. No había concesiones, se podía dar y se podía recibir. (40)

The analogy of reading and discussing as boxing informs Porter's characterization and violent mode of articulation, "Porter discutiera igual que un boxeador" (42); "Él me puso las dos manos sobre los hombros; yo pensé: era un boxeador que se apoyaba para no caer" (194). The image of boxing also frames the political rhetoric of Ferré's father: the imagistic refrain, "*Un cross al plexo*," echoes throughout *Un dios* and haunts Ferré's mind when relating to others. Finally, the boxing trope colors the day to day violence of the Colegio and ultimately foreshadows Ferré's falling into violence and the beating of his student Bruno.

I have highlighted the palimpsestic character of the novel through the example of Borges's *El tamaño de mi esperanza* and Sarmiento's *Facundo*. From a compositional standpoint, the metaliterary, in Viñas, layers and invades the field of the fictive and interpellates the reader as a critic of the novel's textual fabric and its relation to a political field that the novel's protagonist fails to read. To the extent that words associated with boxing, violence, and annihilating the adversary, like the insistent refrain "*un cross al plexo*" flood the novel's pages, the reader is beckoned once more to consult the Argentine literary tradition that Viñas knows so well.

In Roberto Arlt's prologue to his novel *Los lanzallamas* (1931), Arlt offers a suggestive meditation on writing and its relation to political economy, his conception of literary style, and his vision of the future Argentine tradition:

El futuro es nuestro, por prepotencia de trabajo. Crearemos nuestra literatura, no conversando continuamente de literatura, sino escribiendo en orgullosa soledad libros que encierran la violencia de un «cross» a la mandíbula. Sí, un libro tras otro, y «que los eunucos bufen». (9)

It might be said that the abundance of images and analogies referring to boxing and violence, coupled by the obsessive refrain, "*un cross al plexo*" in *Un dios cotidiano*, articulates an homage of sorts to Roberto Arlt's vision of a future, Argentine literary tradition.

The Arlt-Viñas¹² connection is well documented by critics. Indeed, the *Contorno* review, known for its parricidal war with the Argentine literary "fathers," dedicated its second issue to Arlt and championed his project for a variety of reasons: "mentalidad fronteriza," Arlt's use of the *voseo* and

lunfardo, his denouncing of the system, his existentially problematical characters that charted and traversed the marginal sectors of Buenos Aires, and his recourse to the popular *folletín*, his literary journalism, and his autobiographical confessions in an historical juncture that the Contorno writers deemed informed by literary criollismo, pointed to Arlt as a fundamentally “sincere” writer who captured modern Argentine reality as lived in the city (Viñas, “Roberto Arlt-periodista” 10).

Viñas and his brother Ismael wrote the majority of essays in that fundamental second issue of *Contorno* in 1954, many under the guise of pseudonyms, and his critical approach exemplifies a bibliographical mastery of the entirety of Arlt’s production.¹³ Of note, of course, is Viñas’s use of several Sartrean categories such as the “situation” of Arlt’s characters, his focus on perception, and Sartre’s notion of “responsibility.” At a deeper level, Viñas examines Arlt’s writing from an historical, existential and compositional standpoint. “Desde el punto de vista de la creación,” writes Viñas, “Arlt pertenece a una estirpe particular de creadores: infunde en sus personajes su propio sentimiento, su opinión frente al mundo, declara en ellos su ánimo, sus sueños y sus problemas, y cargados de tal modo, experimenta con sus vidas, lanzándolos a vivir las consecuencias absolutas de ese punto de partida” (Viñas, “Roberto Arlt: una autobiografía” 9).

Ricardo Piglia has shown the importance of literary works and libraries in Arlt’s first novel, *El juguete rabioso* (1926). Akin to Don Quijote, Piglia describes how protagonist Silvio Astier’s viewpoint, experience and “apprenticeship” are organized in terms of literary texts: “Astier actúa los efectos acumulados de una lectura: su experiencia es la repetición de un texto que a cada momento es necesario tener presente” (Piglia 59). Piglia demonstrates how readings and citations in Arlt’s novel lead to crime [*delación*] and “sacrilegious” transgressions of the bourgeois myth of literature and writing. System of rewritings, based on the model of the *folletín* and a system of citations, Silvio Astier’s story articulates an uneven and alienated relationship to the culture of the book. Because Silvio depends on citations and exists in an uneven economical relationship to bourgeois culture, Piglia argues, Silvio betrays popular hero and friend, el Rengo, like Judas Iscariot that Silvio evokes. Accordingly, the strange crime ultimately leads the reader to “the genesis of Arlt’s literature:” to Silvio’s confessions of his readings that led to the crime, the system of citations that have mapped his apprenticeship and dependent relation to culture, to the very work we read, to our access to “literature”: “Se comprende, ahora el desvío de Astier: citar es tomar posesión de un texto, esta apropiación por fin legal, se ha fundado en el delito: al delatar, Astier no hace otra cosa que “literatura”(67).

When Ferré betrays Porter to the Colegio’s Director near the novel’s close, it could be said that the echo of Arlt’s literary transgression is not too far off. Indeed, like Silvio’s reading of Rocambole and the New Testament, what legitimizes and sets into motion Ferré’s betrayal of his fellow conspirator is an argument over a book by Hugo Wast, *Flor de durazno*:

Sólo cuando estuve en el pasillo se me ocurrió pensar en eso: que fuera para aplacarlo por lo del libro de Wast. *Que el Director pensase que yo buscaba rehabilitarme.* “Una denuncia para quedar bien”, me dije. Eso me provocaba vértigo. (205).

Wast’s novel is what the boys were forced to listen to in the cafeteria. Detesting this novel, Ferré orders Klaps to stop reading and tells the students that he will choose another text, perhaps Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. Prior to betraying Porter, Ferré is forced to face up to the Director about his decision to change the Wast book. In spite of Ferré’s protests, the Director orders that they resume reading Wast.

Ferré's betrayal of his friend, like Silvio's, is based on the reading of a text. And insofar as Viñas's *Un dios cotidiano* is a novel of experience based on readings and a system of literary texts, it parallels in large part Arlt's famous system of citations and homage to Rocambole and Don Quijote. And yet different from Arlt's explicit deployment of citations and intertexts in order to advance the narrative of Silvio's crime and take the reader back full circle to the genesis of Arlt's writing, Viñas's project and rewriting of Arlt is ultimately palimpsestic—"un cross al plexo" to the reader—texts that are embedded allusively in the narration through thematic parallels such as betrayal, boxing, profanation and violence.

Porter's characterization mirrors to a large extent how Viñas portrayed Arlt in the pages of *Contorno*. Anarchical, militant, fundamentally sincere and capable of reading objects in relationships, his last image, depicted on a photograph that he sends to Ferré, further complicates his character and hearkens the reader once again to the archives of Argentine history:

El sobre no tenía nombre del remitente. Abrí: era una fotografía de Porter. Estaba vestido con un traje que le quedaba chico, en medio de una plaza. Detrás aparecía una estatua de Alem. En esa plaza había mucho sol. [...] A su lado estaba una mujer. *Elsa* había escrito encima con una letra firme. *ELSA*, eran cuatro letras mayúsculas. El papel estaba hundido. Cada letra era una incisión. *Elsa*. [...] Era una plaza tranquila, blanca, en declive hacia el río, los barcos al fondo, las palomas. El brazo quebrado de Alem era lo único rígido. [...] La estatua de Alem era negra, su brazo violento, esas barbas endurecidas, oscuras. [...] *Aquí estoy* —me había escrito—. *Encontré lo que buscaba*. Me dio pena. Tuve ganas de llorar. (233-234).

Anarchical, revolutionary, "[Porter] parecía un obrero sublevado," Ferré relates (98). A conspirator idealist interested in speaking to the students in a more direct way, beyond Ferré's tactic of "winning" and keeping distance, in the violent language of the street, Porter's character parallels the lionized and romantic leader of the Argentine Revolution of 1890, Leonardo Alem (98). It could be said that Porter's approach of speaking directly, profanely to the students leads to his name being inscribed by Girosi under Sarmiento's bust, "*Porter zanahoria*." As a deterritorialized figure of profanation and violence, Porter's story points beyond the confines of the monastery, to the streets, to Arlt's literature, and to Alem's revolution for popular representation.¹⁴ A limit and mediation of Ferré's gaze, we see clearly how Viñas's aesthetic *contorno*, his politics of aesthetics, far outstrips any positive position, scheme or thesis. Porter is a palimpsest and principle of violence that concentrates a number of texts from the Argentine library. Even as Ferré remains inexorably trapped within the confines of the Colegio, and his perception and project ultimately fall into violence and betrayal, his gaze becomes increasingly mediated by an historical and literary *contorno* that invades and informs his story, interpellating the reader to read relationships and texts from the past—something Ferré cannot do.

3. *A Double Allegorical Horizon*

Bruno is the novel's most developed and defiant of Ferré's students. Seemingly illiterate, leader of the boys, sports champion, and condescending of authority, Bruno lets it be known that he will leave the school whenever he feels like it. *A de-disciplined object of mediation*, Bruno constitutes another fissure for Ferré's gaze and his desire to control his students: "llegaba a clase sudado y no sabía. No sabía nunca. Y no había forma de hablar con él; bromeaba, hacía que no comprendía alguna palabra que yo usaba y siempre se me escamoteaba" (206).

The Bruno episode, what Ferré refers to as “lo de Bruno,” takes place at the novel’s denouement, and condenses the problem of plot, of the allegorical constellation of stories that *Un dios cotidiano* tells.

“Lo de Bruno” is compositionally organized around two events: Ferré’s beating of Bruno and his subsequent falling from a tree and death when spring arrives and the students are allowed to go to the countryside to play. Mortally wounded on returning to the Colegio, Ferré keeps to Bruno’s side all the while holding his hand. The ensuing scene is ambiguous. Seemingly repentant for the “sin” of beating Bruno, Ferré is also irked by the fact that he must keep vigil alone and that his students remain free, unsupervised, and “suelos” from his gaze (246). Before dying, Bruno weakly rouses enough strength to make an incoherent gesture with his hands, drawing Ferré close:

—¿Qué pasa?—repetí.

—Con usted no, Padre —dijo con energía. Estaba encogido; después se recostó sobre la almohada y se sacudió como si todo el cuerpo quisiera retorcerse sobre sí mismo” (247).

As Ferré leaves Bruno’s side, he begins to calculate his next moves, calling attention, like a refrain, to the novel’s existential dimension: “había que hacer una serie de cosas, moverse, pensar en lo que iba a contestar el otro, replicar, contar qué había pasado. Era un día más, había que enfrentarlo. Había que hacerlo. *Para salvarse*” (247). Whatever emotion or remorse for Bruno is displaced by Ferré’s calculations, his desire for control. The novel concludes, accordingly, when he overhears the boisterous ruckus that his students are making, an enigmatic scene that calls attention to the classroom chalkboard:

Los chicos ya había entrado a clase. [...] En la mía estaban gritando. No les cuidaban. [...] Yo me fui acercando. Los vi por la puerta de atrás. Todos estaban de pie y hablaban, otros daban vueltos entre los bancos. Comentarían el paseo, lo que habían hecho. Su cachito de libertad. También había tres o cuatro sentados en los pupitres. Hacían ruido, demasiado ruido. Yo me quise asomar un momento; que hubiera un poco de orden. Cuando me vieron entrar, se quedaron en silencio. Estaban a la expectativa. En el pizarrón había un dibujo grotesco. Ése era yo. Un muñeco ridículo, un poco repugnante. Debajo habían escrito: *el Padre Ferré se los tira de santo*. (247-248).

I have highlighted the problem of perception, mediation and reading in *Un dios cotidiano* through Ferré’s exposure to the novel’s field of scattered, historical objects which includes references to literary texts, etchings, graffiti and photographs. These objects, synecdoches relating to politics, history, literature and writing, configure a system of limits to Ferré individual project to forge his personal God and serve others. No doubt, the grotesque etching that concludes the novel constitutes a final limit to Ferré’s perceptual horizon. What the puppet-saint depiction of Ferré signifies is, above all, ambiguous, pointing up to the novel’s allegorical dimensions and its relationship to Argentine history.

Written in 1956-57, and set against the backdrop of reaction that contextualizes the Argentine “década infame” of the late 1930s, *Un dios cotidiano* is composed, as I have shown, through a sequence of political and historical threads. And yet the problem of the novel’s final allegory, its mediation of history, is not merely, following Georg Lukács, the presentation of the pre-history of the present through an ambivalent social type, such as Ferré, that is able to come into contact with a host of competing political classes. Far from imposing a set-in-stone version of the past, a Lukacsian synthetic demonstration,¹⁵ *Un dios cotidiano* articulates a dynamic, mediating allegory of the past

which at once also weaves, through the metaliterary and history that invades the fictive field of Ferré's confession, an *allegory of literature* committed to mediating politics in the present. The keys to this allegory are told through Bruno and the final etching on the chalkboard, an inverted pedagogical image for this novel of commitment.

The Limits of the Letter

With his name connoting the “brute” and barbarous, it is apt that Bruno “never knows” the answers in Ferré's classroom. Averse to Ferré's mode of knowing through his distant, rhetorical teaching style, Bruno represents a de-disciplined epistemological object, a “barbarous” line of flight that defies Ferré's gaze. A point of non-penetration, like the novel's final etching of the puppet-saint Ferré, Bruno exposes the shortcomings and flimsiness of Ferré's perspective and principles, his ultimate falling into violence and desire for control. A violence that is, above all, epistemological, ethical and diagramed by a line of demarcation separating the intellectual Ferré from the disciplined students that he is “teaching.” According to this view, it could be said that the students' final etching constitutes a writing back and across this divide with an interpretation of “lo de Bruno” from below, an ambiguous set of signs emitted by the boisterous students that beckon the reader's reflection.

The etching fits within the novel's system of signs that Ferré fails to read, the elliptical series of *writing figures*. These scriptural figures invade the subjective world of Ferré, suspending his personal fiction and illusions. As objects of writing and metaliterature, such as the Sarmiento, Borges or Arltian intertexts and inversions, they point to the novel as a sight of invention and intervention: to a fabrication of signs and stories and their relation to history, politics and literature.

Bruno's story and mediation articulates, then, an allegory of the rise of the immigrant masses in Argentine society in the 1930s and 50s and their divorce from the lettered class in Argentina—a problem that united Viñas and the contributors of the *Contorno* review that he largely directed.¹⁶ We should recall that Viñas postulated this divorce in reason of the historically conditioned political, existential and semiotic “visión del mundo” of the lettered that symbolically “violated” the “other,” posited as “barbarian,” with an essentialism and elitism (*De Sarmiento* 10). And yet, when reading *Un dios*, we are faced with an ensemble of partial writings and a palimpsest, an axis of signs whose function is elliptical and to express the half-said. This is so because the system of writings that underwrite *Un dios cotidiano* suspends representation and invades the narrative will to description and storytelling with *figurations of writing*, forcing the reader to approach the text from the perspective of composition and the political manipulation of signs and history.

Accordingly, to the extent that in Sartre, the problem of engaged literature ultimately concerned its commitment to mediation, to advancing reflection by engaging the reader's freedom in an alienated political conjuncture and what he deemed the age of the “unfindable public” in the post-war France of 1947, Viñas's *Un dios cotidiano* radicalizes Sartre's concept: the novel not only frames the historical past, like Sartre's trilogy, but inscribes it through a long allegorization of writing proper so as to advance the reader's reflection on the past's tactical composition and manipulations. But we should note that the gesture of metaliterature also powerfully mediates the construction of the present, in the case of Viñas, the ouster of Peron in October 1955, largely initiated by the Church in collusion with the military, and the disenfranchised masses he left in his wake.¹⁷ In this view, the invasion of the fictive field by the historical and metaliterary, in Viñas, points up to no thesis, nor to any schematic Marxian optics, but rather maps literature as a problem of concrete construction, perception and invention of the word and its limits; that is, to the construction of a politics of aesthetics, an aesthetic

interface that maps history in fragments through figures and fissures of writing, what I have posited as the making material of the word.¹⁸ The maneuver is significant. Far from ideological, Viñas's literature of commitment suspends the imposition of abstract schemes and stereotypes, the violence of received ideas, on the excluded, de-disciplined others, like the Brunos of the past and present. From this angle, with respect to the allegories of writing that the novel foregrounds, Viñas's *Un dios cotidiano* ultimately inverts the cultural trope of civilization versus barbarism in the 1950s, Sarmiento's paradigm that the novel parodies, by a barbarous, de-disciplined, multiple, and above all, inventive modality of writing which deterritorializes and unmasks, like Ferré's grotesque puppet-saint depiction on the chalkboard at novel's close, the horizons and epistemological limits of the lettered in the Argentina of 1950s.

Notes

¹ See Sarlo's lucid study, in *La batalla de las ideas (1943-1973)*, 108-155.

² In an early essay entitled, "La historia excluida: ubicación de Martínez-Estrada" (1954), Viñas writes about the ethical responsibility of intellectuals vis-à-vis the Peronist masses and engaging the public as a totality. Due to the problem of censorship under Peron in 1954, Viñas writes in a veiled, metaphorical register which also reads like a manifesto: "Pareciera que se pretende hacer de la necesidad [la política y protagonismo de las masas] virtud porque esa misma totalidad a la que la política actual ha servido de catalizador ha insertado violentamente a todos en la historia. Pero, no. La historia ha dejado de surgir como un muñeco de resorte cabeceando sin tino, grotescamente. Y hoy —en el tiempo que le toca vivir la nueva generación— ya no se puede decir *los otros* tengan la culpa. Hoy la culpa es de todos. Y es necesario escribir y vivir como culpables. Sin ventajas, porque *los otros* son todos, que se repiten en los diarios, en las revistas, en el comité, en la tribuna, en las calles, en las reuniones secretas" (16). For an informative biographical account and interpretation of Viñas's early novels and critical project, see Valverde, 31-135.

³ See Viñas's critique of Cortázar in *De Sarmiento a Cortázar*, 122-132. See also Viñas's critique of the Boom in his essay, "Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana," 13-50.

⁴ See Sarlo's essay, "Los dos ojos de *Contorno*." *Punto de Vista* 4:13 (noviembre 1981): 3-8. See also Kutra, *Contorno: Literary Engagement in Post-Peronist Argentina* (1988), especially 63-67. While I disagree with Kutra's historical assessment of the *Contorno* generation that, according to him, begins with their "confusion" and "misplaced priorities" regarding their "political orientation," he offers an informative mapping of the cultural field in the 1950s and an extensive interpretation of Sartre's impact on the writers of *Contorno* (63-67).

⁵ See Fredric Jameson's thesis, 125-156.

⁶ In Emir Rodríguez Monegal's assessment: "las novelas de David Viñas carecen de una estructura nacida desde adentro; él se propone una tesis como cosa previa y, de acuerdo con ella, va manejando

situaciones, personajes, hechos. Todo está movido en función de la tesis que sustenta y que va a demostrar en las páginas de sus novelas” (73). Pilar Roca’s recent book on Viñas’s novels provides an interpretation that is more nuanced, but still anchored in a discourse tied to theses and Viñas’s personal positions: “es cierto que la novela de Viñas es una novela de tesis y ello implica una serie de limitaciones previas, pero no lo es menos que suele demostrar una enorme capacidad de autocritica para señalar sus carencias” (14). According to Marcela Croce’s reading of Viñas’s critical project as postulated in the pages of *De Sarmiento a Cortázar*, “en Viñas la literatura —representación desde la perspectiva lukacsiana— es confirmatoria de una dominante orden política: la literatura argentina da cuenta del proceso de la construcción de una ideología dominante” (*David Viñas* 58). While Viñas certainly championed a self-reflexive and critical Marxian politics in his assessment of the Argentine literary tradition, he also called for a literature of “violence” against schemes and any sort of “sanctified” book. Accordingly, it is my contention that his literary production cannot nor should not be reduced to a Lukacsian “science,” or ideological thesis of Marxism. While I advocate historically situating Viñas’s project, perhaps our political task should consist in looking with and beyond Viñas’s personal positions and to closely read what I consider his “heterodox” labor on language, his commitment to mediation, and in what I call his fabrication of an aesthetic politics in literature.

⁷ As in Masotta, this seems to be a principle theme in William Kutra’s interpretation of the *Contorno* project as one of “literary engagement.” For Kutra, Sartre served as a mentor guide that the *Contorno* writers didn’t always fully grasp: “Their writings reveal that they passionately embraced [Sartre’s] principle ideas on engagement, even though at times they failed to capture entirely the spirit of his message” (34).

⁸ In an important comparative study with the works of Borges, Juan Carlos Tealdi characterizes the ideological thrust behind Viñas’s literary production as one that articulates a fundamental “disconformity with liberalism and its literary project” by means of “materializing the spiritual” (93). By focusing in on the reflexive and textual dimensions of Viñas’s novels, I am making the claim, with and against Tealdi’s insightful reading, that Viñas’s novels in fact mediate and materialize the letter, de-authorize the author and fiction, and free the reader to perceive, mediate and articulate her own political commitment. See Tealdi, 93-161.

⁹ See Juan José Sebreli, “Los “martinfieristas”: su tiempo y el nuestro.” *Contorno* 1 (noviembre 1953): 1-2.

¹⁰ See Adolfo Prieto, *Borges y la nueva generación*. Buenos Aires: Letras Universitarias, 1954.

¹¹ See Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas*, 83-98; and *Contorno* 5-6 (septiembre 1955): 1-2. See also, Marcela Croce, “De la fundación a la crisis de la literatura argentina,” in *Contorno: izquierda y proyecto cultural*, 81-110.

¹² In an interview with Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano, Viñas connects his readings of Sartre and Arlt with his personal “avant-garde” will to form and negotiation of the present: “la reivindicación de una cierta marginalidad: el caso de Arlt, a quien se dedica un número de la revista. Allí hay, si ustedes quieren, un elemento vanguardista, en la voluntad de manejar un escritor más bien secreto. Además: como aparece con el sartrismo esta preocupación por lo nacional. Primera persona: era fácil que el existencialismo, en la Argentina, se vinculara con esto, a través de lo concreto, mi situación, lo cotidiano” (Emphasis added 12). If I highlight, with Viñas, his desire and project of aesthetic and

political vanguardism, it is to reconsider the avant-garde gesture that underwrites his articles in the *Contorno* journal and Viñas's own literary production in the 1950s—often overlooked and written off as a literature of thesis. Far from merely introducing a new critical style with Marxian and Sartrean categories, and breaking with the field's generally descriptive appraisal of *vanguardia* solely from the vantage of the 1920s, Viñas's novels articulate a sequence of "avant-garde" elements that not only negotiate and challenge the legacy of the historical Argentine avant-gardes—Borges, Arlt, the *Martinfierristas* and Boedo—but which invade and mediate the fictive field of representation through his narrative texts' constant interpellations and intertexts, calling attention to the texture of politics, history and literature from the perspective of composition and transgression. Accordingly, if "every avant-garde declares a formal break with preceding artistic schemata," following Alain Badiou, "it's always a matter of going further in the eradication of resemblance, representation, narrative or the natural" (132).

¹³ See Ismael Viñas's recent autobiographical account, "Una historia de *Contorno*," III-IX.

¹⁴ In addition to being an iconographic revolutionary, the founder of the party, La Unión Cívica Radical, and leader of the failed "Revolución del 90," historians concur that Leandro N. Alem was, like Viñas's Padre Porter, a conspirator that was anti-authoritarian, and personally and politically "impetuous." In Félix Luna's account, "Alem era puro ímpetu, pura espontaneidad" (129). In Viñas's essay, "La historia excluida: ubicación de Martínez-Estrada," he makes reference to the protagonists of the Revolution of 1890 as "los *outlaws* de la historia argentina"—touching upon the theme of betrayal that not only structures Ferré's relationship to Porter, but which underwrites Viñas's vision of Argentine politics and what he considers, no doubt, a major trope in Argentine literature (11). See also Noé Jitrik's *La revolución del 1890*.

¹⁵ See Lukács, especially the chapter entitled, "The Historical Novel of Democratic Humanism," 332-350. "The historical novel of the humanists of our day is closely linked with the problems of the present. It is on the way to portraying the *prehistory of the present*—very much in contrast, say, to Flaubert's type of historical novel. Its topicality—in a large historical sense—is one of the great advances achieved by the anti-Fascist humanists[.] [...] On what does the significance of these novels rest? On the fact that these authors have tried to show artistically the concrete *historical genesis* of their time" (337-342). See also Neil Larsen's reading of Lukács's theory and its relation to the Latin American tradition, 121-128, and Noé Jitrik's essay which examines "la autonomización que logra la novela histórica respecto de la historia" (23), in "De la historia a la escritura: predominios, disimetrías, acuerdos en la novela histórica latinoamericana," 13-30.

¹⁶ See Ismael Viñas, "La traición de los hombres honestos." 2-3; and León Rozitchner, "Experiencia proletaria y experiencia burguesa," 2-8. "Pero no hay punto de pasaje entre nosotros y ellos," writes Rozitchner, "no existe la mediación. Se trata ahora de crear los puentes más allá de la abstracta disquisición [...] Se trata de hacer nacer entre nosotros una corriente concreta que los englobe, una totalidad que no los excluya" (8).

¹⁷ Viñas's short story, "¡Paso a los héroes!," published in the issue of *Contorno* dedicated to interpreting Peron's ouster, stages the conflict between the Church and the Peronist masses. According Luis Alberto Romero: "la fundación del Partido Demócrata Cristiano marcó el comienzo del conflicto entre Perón y la Iglesia, que rápidamente llevó a su cabo. [...] Se prohibieron las procesiones, se suprimió la enseñanza religiosa en las escuelas [...] y se envió un proyecto de reforma constitucional para separar la

Iglesia del Estado. Muchos sacerdotes fueron detenidos y los periódicos se llenaron de denuncias públicas y comentarios groseros sobre la conducta y moralidad de prelados y sacerdotes. La defensa de la Iglesia no fue menos eficaz y demostró su poder como institución [...] inundó la ciudad con panfletos, mientras sus asociaciones laicas, particularmente la Acción Católica, movilizaron sus cuadros, engrosados por los opositores, que encontraron la brecha en el régimen[.] ...El 8 de junio, el día del Corpus, se celebró una multitudinaria procesión; el jefe de la Policía —luego se demostró— hizo quemar una bandera argentina y acusó de ello a los opositores católicos. El 16 de junio se produjo un levantamiento de la Marina contra Perón” (128-130). According to Tulio Halperín Donghi: “A second opportunity was created by an anticlerical campaign that [Perón] initiated as part of his drive to consolidate all power in the hands of the state. The measure provoked resistance in the military, never totally in Perón’s camp even at the height of his influence, and in September 1955 a fairly small group of officers was able to overthrow the populist leader and send him into exile” (264).

¹⁸ See, “Problems and Transformations of Critical Art,” 45-60. While Jacques Rancière does not theorize the functions of the metaliterary and its relationship to the historical and subalternity, his recent reflections on what he deems “critical art” and its relationship to the sensorium, matter and the social field provide insight into the mediational character of “political” art forms.

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