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Like a Condemned Sacred Fire: Transnational Capital and Reading as Recovery and Erasure

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Abstract

This essay charts a literary voyage that begins in Istanbul in 1933 with Agatha Christie's novel of that year, *Murder on the Orient Express* and ends with its 2000 Bolivian spinoff, Juan de Recacoechea's *Altiplano Express*, in La Paz. In the commerce of imaginaries between these texts the places of provenance and arrival anchor the cartography of transnational capital. Over the course of this voyage, notions of revealed knowledge warp into ideas of simulacra, the United States devolves from being figured as an innocent child by Christie to signifying for Recacoechea a devouring siren, and the euphoric transnationalism of the interwar years mutates into an emasculated nationalism drained of its affective, economic and libidinal energies. Contemporary debates on world literature and Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life and sovereign power, Gramsci's formulation of hegemony along with the Bolivian sociologist Rene Zavaleta's insights frame the discussion of the two novels. The paper demonstrates that in rewriting *Murder on the Orient Express* as a Bolivian text, Recacoechea articulates the relationship between metropolitan literature and national identity as a paradox. If global capital enables metropolitan literatures to reach the peripheries, then these master texts also ease the passage of capital through these territories by creating fractured subjectivities. Yet, in articulating this critique as a series of readings, Recacoechea also foregrounds reading the metropolitan texts as an agentic practice undertaken by the peripheries.

Key Words: Transnationalism, detective fiction, reading, locomotives, sovereign power, hegemony, neoliberalism, mirrors

According to Emily Apter, comparative literature as a world system of knowledge emerges from Leo Spitzer's seminar in Istanbul University in 1933. In this forum, by the émigré Spitzer, European and Turkish languages jostled side by side in a "staged cacophony," which counters the virulent nationalism of interwar Europe to configure a transnational humanism as "a history of intellectual import and export in which the provenance labels have been torn off" (44, 46). Apter's discussion is of interest to this essay because the literary voyage traced here also begins in Istanbul in 1933 with Agatha Christie's novel of that year, *Murder on the Orient Express* and ends with its 2000 Bolivian spinoff, Juan de Recacoechea's *Altiplano Express*. In the commerce of imaginaries between these texts, however, the places of provenance and arrival anchor the cartography of transnational capital. Over the course of this voyage, notions of revealed knowledge warp into ideas of simulacra,

the United States devolves from being figured as an innocent child by Christie to signifying for Recacoechea a devouring siren, and the euphoric transnationalism of the interwar years—that approximates Apter’s *translatio global*—mutates into an emasculated nationalism drained of its affective, economic, and libidinal energies.

The cartography that I plot through a reading of these novels intervenes in and departs from contemporary debates on world literature, which pivot on the untranslatability of non-western texts. Like Apter, the Italian philosopher Giacomo Marramao emphasizes the inassimilable linguistic difference as the defining characteristic of the present transnational world, yet unlike Apter, who regards this untranslatability as constitutive of the world, Marramao sees a paradox: the unifying logic of capital and its attendant technologies expose the varied ways in which different cultures, or different linguistic traditions, imagine and codify the universal. One advocates configuring the world by juxtaposing unassimilable foreign texts; the other imagines a text constituted by contrasting conceptions of the world. Both, however, configure the world as a postnational network—albeit for Apter it is an intertextual network, and for Marramao it is conveyed through an intratextual maze—where the category of the nation-state seems to be fading into irrelevance.¹

But perhaps it is rather hasty to assume the exhaustion of the nation-state as a category overpowered by the relentless “standardization of the techno-economy” (Marramao Kindle Edition). The paradox of what Marramao calls the “bi-logic of our global Babel,” the simultaneous standardization of the world and its atomization in myriad clusters of values and languages, can also be grasped as an interpenetration of the transnational world with the nation. Indeed, the very configuration of the passage without destination that Marramao argues characterizes the global age allows us to contemplate their intertwinement. The transnational world system in fact enables the nation-states to articulate their own identities; by the same token, it is the nation-state through which the ramifications of the transnational world can be glimpsed.

In the dynamic between the transnational and the national, each position is articulated in relation to the other. This layered maze of dialogues complicates what Marramao calls a “passage west,” that is, a movement transforming the “economy, society and codes of behavior not only of ‘other’ civilizations but of western civilization itself” (Kindle). Though this movement, for Marramao, is devoid of a telos, its conception as also transforming “western civilization itself” betrays a latent Eurocentrism. It assumes, first, that the West is impervious to changes that, though originating from its locus, impact “other civilizations;” second, it suggests that these “others” passively submit to these changes, though the West might not. Like Marramao, Apter’s approach to world literature is also

underlined with Eurocentrism. Although Apter argues that a globalist reading practice, as exemplified by Spitzer, rescues the world from the perils of jingoistic nationalism, her formulation ultimately remains rooted in a Eurocentric imaginary. In her essay, Turkey is but an interlude in Spitzer's onward journey to the U.S. Global translation does not, in other words, factor in transnational literature's relationship to what William Robinson calls the "hegemonic fraction of capital," which steers the direction of production and social life on a world scale (354). The juxtaposition of "untranslatable affective gaps, the nub of intractable semantic difference, episodes of violent cultural transference and counter-transferences and unexpected love affairs" also map the trajectory of this motile fraction as it ceaselessly restructures the globe (Apter 64).

To a certain extent, Gayatri Spivak addresses this Eurocentric tendency of world literature in her concept of transnational literacy. Whereas Apter calls for stringing untranslatable tracts together to project a cosmopolitan fabric, Spivak regards those untranslatable tracts as "permanent parabasis" rupturing the seamless narrative of global capital and highlighting a "nation-fixed view" (566). It is through this "interruptive praxis" that transnational literacy challenges "our hope in justice under capitalism" (152). Spivak wants to train the future humanities educator to concede in these obscure patches the limits of a global literature. Yet, like Apter and Marramao, Spivak also privileges a reading subject located in the west, skilled in reading texts and making sense of them despite their opacity.

Indeed, this tendency to situate a Western reader as the subject agent of world literature is the fulcrum for these debates in which at issue is the untranslatability of peripheral texts. The emphasis on untranslatability occludes the peripheral subject's position as an interlocutor of global capital, one who reads metropolitan texts through her own material specificities and in doing so initiates the mutation of metaphors. By its very nature, transnational literature marks a passage of metaphors into other metaphors because the transnational setting cannot be apprehended through a single metaphor, no matter how evocatively it may conjure its heterogeneity. For metaphors too emerge from the specificity of one cultural-linguistic tradition. "Global Babel," a metaphor favored by Marramao, thus, may not carry the same connotations in, for example, India. Texts signify through their material contexts, and they also read each other through these geopolitical specificities. It follows, thus, that the metaphors they employ and their interpretation of other texts' metaphors are entrenched in these material conditions. Each strand of this dense network of geopolitical and historical circuits, crisscrossing intertextual readings, uncoils into a different itinerary. This undulating cartography of world literature thus demands attentiveness to the mutations metaphors undergo as they migrate from one imaginary to another. Depending on the material context it occupies, and the agent who represents

it, this hegemonic fraction can be read as transcending fractious nationalist ideologies or confounding national desires for self-determination.

Consider, for example, Bolivian sociologist Rene Zavaleta Mercado's emphasis on an active reading of the world as pivotal for a nation's self-determination. Zavaleta diagnoses Bolivia's precarious sovereignty as symptomatic of global capital's overriding control over the country's territory, resources and population. In his insightful critique of the workings of global capital, Zavaleta speaks as the subject of this periphery, in contrast to Spitzer who articulates his defense of cosmopolitanism as an émigré in Turkey. In Zavaleta's formulation, transnationalism does not rescue the world from the shrill rhetoric of a sectarian nationalism, but rather, the relentless sweep of global capital impedes self-assertion of the nation state. Zavaleta, mentions his two integral parts for self-determination: "el conocimiento del mundo y la visión sin ilusiones de uno mismo es el requisito absoluto de la autodeterminación" (65). While Spivak reads the "nation-fixed" view of postcolonial nations as paratactic interruptions to the narrative of global capital, Zavaleta argues that engagement with the workings of global capital is a prerequisite for the formulation of any national identity (Spivak 152). Both reinforce the specificity of the national context, but they do so from different vantage points: Spivak privileges a western reader of peripheral texts and Zavaleta exhorts a peripheral subject to read the world to situate the nation's position therein. Therefore, if Apter reads Spitzer's seminar in an Istanbul in the throes of Atatürk's rampant nationalization as evoking a transnational world, Zavaleta predicates national self-determination on the ability to situate oneself within the world.

The relationship between nationalism and transnationalism can thus be conceived as two readerly practices: the first involves reading the global to transcend a fractious nationalism; the second entails reading the globe to articulate national "autodeterminación en el seno de las determinaciones externas" (Zavala *Lo nacional-popular* 65). Both reading practices are predicated on the global lingua franca of modernity. Spitzer's sojourn in Istanbul marks an interlude in his journey to the United States. Zavaleta holds up the ascent of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario to power despite American opposition as a watershed moment of the country's "autodeterminación" and its inability to resist American mandated austerity measures in 1956 as its lowest moment. It is only by taking this common parlance as the point of departure that one can discern the mutation of a transnational imaginary into a national imaginary and vice versa. In both instances, however, the U.S. operates as an implicit vector for the global. Depending on the position taken, U.S. emerges as a beacon of transnational fraternity or as a measure of global capital's dominance.

Transnational dialogues thus also constitute an evolving narrative about the U.S., wherein the representation of the U.S. determines the position of one geographical point in relation to another. This essay plots the trajectory of transnational capital from Europe to Latin America through Christie's novel, *Murder on the Orient Express* and Recacoechea's *Altiplano Express*. For Mariano Siskind, the novel as genre and its global circuits of "formal and thematic imitation, importation, translation, and adaptation" promote a universal language of modernity, a process he calls the "globalization of the novel" (Siskind 31). My discussion of the dialogue between these two texts is informed by this insight, but also problematizes it by following the shifting portrayal of the U.S. in the two texts and how it mediates the relationship between the nation and transnational capital. Siskind asserts that, right from their inception, Latin American states read the hegemonic texts to "enclose[e] and regulat[e]" their own identities as modern (31-32). By treating the U.S. as a vector of the dialogue between Christie's murder mystery and its Bolivian rewriting, however, this essay argues that these readings simultaneously demarcate the peripheral modern subjectivity and subvert it.

Writing at a moment when Europe is reeling from the effects of the First World War even as it confronts the rising specter of the Second, Agatha Christie offers a way out of this quagmire in *Orient Express* through an alternate transnational sovereignty modeled on a trope of the American household. Almost seventy years later, and at a moment when Bolivia is convulsed by protests against the state's surrender of its resources to multinational corporations, Recacoechea reworks Christie's transnational utopia into a Bolivian dystopia set on the eve of the Andean nation's 1952 National Revolution. This revolution, traditionally regarded as marking the overthrow of the long-established oligarchy and its replacement by bourgeois democracy, becomes in this 2000 novel a simulacrum managed by an elusive global power, receding into the distant U.S. When read in the context of the temporal and spatial locations of the two novels, these shifting perceptions of the United States map the geopolitical dynamics regulating the movement of capital across the globe and which, in their turn, plot the commerce of literary imaginaries.

Consolidating Europe

Like its eponymous train, whose popularity was at its zenith during the 1930s, Christie's novel packages and hawks a transnational future as nostalgia for the Edwardian past framed by the U.S. transportation infrastructure. Cassetti, who is traveling on the Istanbul to Calais Orient Express under the alias of Samuel Ratchett, is killed aboard the train as retribution for the murder of the American child Daisy Armstrong. After committing the crime, Cassetti escaped and was charged with the murder

due to his wealth and connections, but those seeking justice catch up with him on this westward-bound train. Matthew Beaumont describes *Orient Express* as a “nostalgic, quasi-feudal” text (14) and says Cassetti’s murder operates as “a sacrifice necessary for preserving the class system formally inherited from the nineteenth century” (17). Undoubtedly, the murder on the train operates as a necessary sacrifice but not, as Beaumont asserts, for reinstating a nostalgic nineteenth-century feudal order. Rather, Cassetti’s unpunished murder serves to usher in a nebulous transnational order, implicit indeed in the very nostalgia permeating Christie’s text if one understands by the term an acquisitive desire for a fabled past. Fueling the plot, as Beaumont notes, is the resolve that the “train [must] arrive at its destination” or, in other words, that the uninterrupted flow of capital must continue at all costs (18). But, in this novel, the unhampered movement of the train facilitates the nostalgia that the train conjures.

Despite its Old-World charm, the luxurious Istanbul-Calais wagon remains a transient site, gathering and dispersing passengers. M. Bouc, the railway line’s executive who is traveling aboard, describes the passengers as being of “all classes, all nationalities, of all ages [who] sleep and eat under one roof, [only to] go their several ways, never, perhaps, to see each other again” (23). His observation resonates with Marc Augé’s formulation of “non-places,” characterized by “the shared identity of passengers” (101). Divorced from their cultures and geographies, people in a non-place act without any relation to those around them. There is no past binding them together, nor a future beckoning them towards a common goal. In effect, it is the movement of capital that governs conveyances. Ostensibly, the overwhelming nostalgia enveloping the wagon belies its location as a “non-place.” Indeed, in its exaggerated European ambience, the Istanbul-Calais coach reinforces the travelers’ shared geography against the foreignness of their point of disembarkation as they welcome the wagon’s familiar smells and flavors, contrasting them to the overpowering tastes and chaos of the “Orient” they leave behind. This exaggerated European atmosphere, emphasized by the difference of the Orient, minimizes the passengers’ national differences and encloses the landscape that they traverse within a pan-European vision.

As the novel unfolds, the train gets stuck in a snowdrift outside Belgrade, in Serbia, thus alluding obliquely to the First World War. In a compartment freezing from the ingress of cold air from an open window lays Cassetti’s corpse, crisscrossed by twelve stab wounds. Echoing Poirot’s remark that a death aboard the train could link the disparate travelers into a community, the discovery of his body changes the dynamic between the other passengers. They are now united by their shared concern that a Yugoslavian police investigation into the crime would delay the resumption of the train’s

movement. Put another way, the murder brings to the fore what had always been their bond—ensuring the train’s unhampered movement. Like the passengers, M. Bouc wants to avoid getting mired in the East European country’s bureaucracy. Therefore, rather than informing the Yugoslavian police of the murder, he entrusts Poirot with its investigation and orders everyone to give their passports to the Belgian detective.

This collective urgency to ensure movement across borders inaugurates a new social contract. In submitting their passports to Poirot and M. Bouc, the passengers symbolically cede to the two figures—one, a detective and the other, the executive of a train company—part of their freedom in exchange for guarantees of movement. In this transition from a non-place to community, M. Bouc, an executive whose business is movement, emerges as the representative of the new sovereign power, along with the attendant power to decide which life is worthy to be lived and which is not. With the corporate functionary’s tacit approval, Poirot decides to shield the culprits of the crime. In his inquiry, the detective establishes that the seemingly unrelated passengers had, in fact, connived to kill Cassetti to avenge toddler Daisy Armstrong’s murder. Poirot, however, concludes that had Cassetti not slipped out of the U.S. he “would have been lynched by the populace,” and thus, the victim’s own murder aboard the train did not merit any punishment (73). Cassetti’s status as a fugitive had already stripped him of his subjecthood, reducing him to the “bare life,” which Giorgio Agamben notes, “dwells in the no-man's-land between the home and the city [and is] the originary political element” of sovereignty (70).

Indeed, fugitive and animal had begun to merge in Cassetti’s identity even before his death, laying the groundwork for his subsequent unpunished murder. His initial portrayal as a “wild animal” caged in a “respectable body” resonates with Agamben’s notion of bare life (Christie 17-18). For Agamben, the modern nation-state conflates the twin identities of “man” and “citizen” such that technically a person is first recognized by the state as a citizen and only then deemed a man (or a woman). By extension, as the guarantor of citizenship, the state has the power to confer or withdraw the very right of life to its subjects, and this power over its subjects’ lives constitutes the state’s sovereign power. Consequently, sovereign power reveals itself as the authority to kill with impunity life excluded from the purview of citizenship. Befittingly, Cassetti’s body, found in a freezing compartment at odds with the wagon’s overheated luxury, demarcates the threshold between the sovereign power’s inside and its exteriority (Agamben 48).

As a savage being, Cassetti signals the bare life subsumed into a new pan-European citizenship. Marked as a beast leashed inside a human cage, Cassetti has already been deemed

“incompatible with the human world,” and his subsequent death enables the wagon to define its human wholeness (Agamben 66). The murdered man’s elimination predicates the other passengers’ identity as members of an Edenic community that his death allows them to recover. Rather than exposing their crime, Poirot shields the conspirators by concocting an alternative explanation for Cassetti’s murder. This supplementary narrative operates as the foundational fiction of this transnational sovereignty. The murderer supposedly has escaped through the window, yet no footprints in the snow mark the killer’s flight. This ontological abyss which opens out from Cassetti’s dead body marks the beyond of this artificial community and, in doing so, also delineates this community’s interiority. The stab wounds scored on Cassetti’s body map a transnational community “linked together by death” (Christie 24).

In the anonymous wound marks on Cassetti’s body, the railway corporation’s juridical authority converges with the hegemonic will of the people. The United States is the referent of this zone of convergence. Years earlier, all passengers had either been in the Armstrong family’s employ in the U.S. or were related to people who had served the Armstrongs. Together they had represented the ideal household to be found “only in America . . . a *household* composed of just such varied nationalities—an Italian chauffeur, an English governess, a Swedish nurse, a French lady’s maid and so on” (Christie 262; italics mine). A desire to avenge Daisy’s murder coalesces this transnational community aboard the train. Unanchored from all class or nationalist moorings, the absent Daisy signifies a primal emotion, transcending all identitarian divisions. Her name, exhumed by Poirot from a piece of charred paper, simultaneously connotes the web of relationships radiating out of the U.S. household and, at the same time, the hegemonic political order aboard the train.

Writing about the interwar European representations of the U.S., Jesper Gulddal observes that the French writers Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu characterize the U.S. as a “rampant ‘cancer’ of modernity” (11). In Christie’s contemporaneous novel, however, the U.S. evokes an idealized super-modern household, where people live together as workers and not as a family comprised of different ethnicities. Despite these differences in attitudes, both readings associate the U.S. with modernity. Gulddal argues that Aron and Dandieu’s strident tone is part of a larger anti-Americanism mobilized in the service of a pan-European identity. As just noted, Christie’s text disputes this generalization. Instead, through an idealized household, her murder mystery “novelizes the global” where Istanbul is the chaotic East from which Europe disentangles itself to move towards a transnational capitalist model associated with the U.S (Siskind 38). Whereas Siskind bases his formulation on travel narratives, which forge “a modern form of agency” in terms of “the production and reproduction of universal

narratives of adventure, and colonial profit,” Christie’s murder mystery charts the movement from this universal narrative of colonial profit to a transnational household model wherein economic profit is embedded in political hegemony (Siskind 38). In this transnational household the Armstrongs represent the ruling class whose “intellectual and moral” cause has been embraced by the passengers as their own (Gramsci 212). In this way, the nostalgia Christie’s novel evokes does not seek a return to a nineteenth-century Europe but, rather, passage to the “super-modern” United States.

But in doing so, the class hierarchies texturing the household are also maintained. No transformation of power relations happens aboard the Istanbul-Calais coach; instead, its transnational space repositions the national elite as a global elite. What attracts Christie is not the American economic model’s potential to eradicate class differences but, rather, its ability to transcend national divides. Writing in the same period, Gramsci asserts that Americanism, that is, the American economic model, is predicated on the absence of “numerous classes with no essential function in the world of production, in other words, classes which are purely parasitic” (564). Conversely, “European ‘tradition’, European ‘civilisation’, is . . . characterized precisely by the existence of such classes” (Gramsci 565). The American model poses a dilemma for the Europeans: they want to adopt its “competitive . . . benefits” (fordism) while retaining the “army of parasites” that characterizes their feudal structures (565). Christie’s novel echoes this predicament. For Gramsci, this dichotomy diminishes Europe’s competitive power in the “international market” because it privileges hierarchies over production (565).

Reluctant to jettison this feudal system and yet attracted by the American model’s political potential, at a moment when Europe is fractured by internecine wars, *Orient Express* reconciles these contradictions through a transnational European model, which retains the class hierarchies but does away with national identities for a transnational sovereignty. From a Gramscian perspective, this project of reinforcing old social hierarchies in a transnational space is a failed project precisely because it does not reject the entrenched feudal hierarchies. Christie’s novel, however, upholds this enterprise as it is a child’s innocence that binds the twelve passengers together. Cassetti’s murder conflates the shared resolve of the Orient Express’ passengers—justice for Daisy—with the priorities of the railway company: movement at all costs.

If Daisy’s memory reconfigures the U.S. into a non-space where people, transcending differences of class and nationality, converge as workers, then Cassetti’s murder actualizes that community aboard the Orient Express. The planning and execution of this collective murder enable a pan-European space. The self-appointed jury of passengers that condemn Cassetti as bare life

establishes a new space of sovereignty aboard the train whose objective is to ensure no interruptions in the train's movements. Poirot and Bouc, of course, conceal the truth from the Yugoslavian police to avert further delays in the journey. Put another way then, it is not in the interest of Compagnie Internationale de Wagons Lits to halt the train's trajectory. Camouflaging Cassetti's murder is the legal sacrifice required to move the train from the snowdrift of Balkan bureaucracy and, by extension, out of the political snowstorm unleashed by the First World War.

Andean Dispersals

"member little Daisy Armstrong" these two and half "words of fire" exhumed from a charred piece of paper guide Poirot to the truth in *Orient Express* (69). The message performs its own exhortation: Poirot must deduce the first word, "remember" from the truncated fragment to decipher its meaning and to solve the mystery. This exhortation that can be read two ways—memorialize Daisy Armstrong and, also, recorporealize her lost body—underscore the logocentric contours of the transnational community that would substitute the fractious post First-World-War Europe. Scribbled with this cryptic message, this charred scrap is thus the revealed text that will lead the community to the Eden, the United States, where Daisy's lost innocence can be avenged and the utopian household she signified, recreated. The scriptural clue—the only genuine lead in a wagon littered with red herrings—foregrounds reading as the praxis necessary for ushering in the transnational Eden. It is the text that orients. This abiding faith in textuality departs from a straightforward relationship between the signifiers and the signified. In its turn, however, this modernist trust in reading itself assumes coincidence between the producers and the consumers of the text. Recalling Saussure, language does not merely signal the external world because it produces it by assigning meanings to the sensorial data; thus, textuality produces the world. A crisis of identification ensues however, when texts produced in/for one context are consumed in another, making it impossible to re-member the text, or its reader.

The chasm between production and consumption of imaginaries is the point of departure for Juan de Recacoechea's 2000 *Altiplano Express*. Recacoechea, who died in 2016, was a leading Bolivian writer of noir fiction. Novels like *American Visa* (1994) and *Reina abeja* (Queen Bee, 2010) manifest the influence of American writers such as Raymond Chandler. At the same time, these mystery narratives also double as scathing attacks on forces of globalization. It is no coincidence therefore that Recacoechea reworks Christie's *Orient Express* as *Altiplano Express*: if the first is about guiding—orienting—Europe to a transnational community modeled on the United States, the second is about (mis)directing the Altiplano's capital—libidinal, literary, and economic—to a United States-bound

ship. Aboard the west-bound Orient Express, the fragment of text delivers the community out of the overpowering smells and sounds of the orient, through war-torn Europe, and into an idyllic transnational “household.” In this westward odyssey, East and West are more than geographical coordinates; they are a system of hermeneutics that establish, in Gramsci’s words, “relations between specific cultural complexes” to enable “one to arrive where one has decided to arrive” (SPN 810). Yet, this grammar, which makes the world navigable by making it knowable, emanates from the locus of this “West,” that is, Europe. *Altiplano Express* challenges this hermeneutical imperialism by inserting its narrative into the frame of *Orient Express*. Rereading Christie’s novel from the Andean context, this Bolivian pastiche signals the disjunction between the sites of production and consumption of the transnational imaginary. Simultaneously, novelizing the global—by portraying a journey through the Bolivian Altiplano to the Chilean port and onwards to New Orleans—and globalizing the novel—by rewriting Christie’s murder mystery—, *Altiplano Express* reinscribes the world in an “epistemology” of persistent neocolonial relations (Siskind 39).

Instead of guiding to the truth here, global capital and transnational literature work in tandem to seduce, disorient, and deterritorialize the peripheral reader. Three tropes, seduction, mirror, and reading, foreground the relationship between *Orient Express* and *Altiplano Express*. A text draws readers into its universe, enticing them to contemplate the world and themselves in its network of images. When the text read is not grounded on the reader’s material context, the reading becomes a seduction, disorienting readers. In this sense, reading is a mirror inveigling readers into its universe by seeming to enable them to see themselves in the text. And yet, these peripheral readers are the implicit others of the text. Such readers, as others, are asked to identify with the protagonist whose actions are driven by overcoming and obliterating this colonial other. Trapped in an inverted reading, the reading self becomes the annihilator of the material self. Set in the turbulent period leading up to Bolivia’s 1952 National Revolution, *Altiplano Express* reads *Orient Express* from the vantage point of these peripheral readers. As Ricardo Beitigoitia boards the La Paz-Arica train at the Bolivian capital’s Central Station, the air is rife with anxiety about the future of this Andean country. Uncertainty about potential actions by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, the party spearheading the unrest in the country, plagues the elite on the train. The family of Fussell, Ricardo’s friend who comes to see him off, is contemplating leaving for Brazil due to fears that the MNR, with its ties to the Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón, might seize their properties. Ricardo’s uncle Trellíz worries about the indigenous revolts convulsing his properties. As these upper-class passengers climb aboard the luxury sleeping car, the country’s poor and working class *cholos* and *indios* pile into the second class

compartments like “cucarachas esplanadas” (17). Despite its unitary space, the train reflects the divisions festering in the country, wherein as the elite agonize over potential losses of privilege under the new regime the poor on the same locomotive have been reduced to bare life. This Bolivian microcosm is a disjointed body. The railway company’s name, “Bolivian Railways,” marks the first gesture of disorientation. As a text being read in the Bolivian novel, the moniker “Bolivian Railways” names Bolivian territory, yet truncates Bolivian subjects from it through its English cognomen.

Political anxieties meld with irrepressible libidinal urges on this odyssey through the Altiplano. Ricardo, having just finished high school, boards the train to the Chilean port to undertake a journey that signals his coming of age. This scion of an elite family plans to leave for Europe for a university education. The locomotive’s portrayal here resonates with Laura Marcus’ observation that trains constitute “the focal point of the interchange between the ostensibly disparate systems of machines and bodies” (183). A sexualized language, wherein the engine operates both as the mode of desire and its object, conveys Ricardo’s and, by extension, his nation’s coming of age. Ricardo’s fascination with the locomotive reinscribes it as a phallic instrument whose movement used to transport him “comarcas lejanas y hostiles, en tanto trepaban cerros nevados, perforados por innumerables túneles en los que, de pronto, irrumpían colores mágicos, que le producían espasmos de placer” (14). The mechanic penetration of the rugged terrain produces an orgasmic pleasure in Ricardo as if the train were a prosthetic phallus. At the same time, the train is an object of desire for Ricardo as he “acarició el flanco ardiente de la locomotora” as if it had been a woman (14). Swaying between desiring the train and mastering through it the inhospitable Altiplano, Ricardo is the split subject of a fractured nation, at once desiring the West’s imperialism as well as desiring to conquer through the train’s libidinal penetration the remote heights of his own geography.

Recovery of an innocence lost motivates the transnational utopia in the British text. Its Bolivian adaptation, however, warps Daisy Armstrong’s angelic purity into Gulietta Carletti’s voluptuous greed. Gulietta’s red and blue plaid skirt and her “impecable juego de maletas tipo americano” package her as the currency of a global economy (16). Daughter of an Italian immigrant, educated in Argentina, and *en route* to the United States through Chile, her very presence on the train is registered as the “filo de navaja” of shock and insecurity (207). She is on the train due to a transaction between her mother, doña Clara, and Gulietta’s aging husband, Nazario Alderete, who had been an accountant to Gulietta’s father, a mine owner. The wily accountant had embezzled funds from the mine owner, which had eventually led to the latter’s death. Seeking to recover her stolen estate, doña Clara agreed to have eighteen-year-old Gulietta marry Alderete with the understanding that he would

return part of the fortune to the mother. The ex-accountant plans to consummate his marriage aboard the train, but Gulietta continually parries his advances.

A blend of arrogance and obsequiousness defines Alderete's attitude towards Gulietta, and, by extension, the global capital that through her he owns and yet does not possess. Even as he struts around with her, he is also wary of would-be contenders for his nubile bride's affections. Similarly, an ostensible braggadocio cloaking a deep inferiority also characterizes his attitude to the U.S. and its currency: "No sé una papa de ingles pero cuando uno lleva muchos dólares traducen de inmediato" (71). Alderete believes that the same capital that has enabled him to buy Gulietta will also allow him to command the U.S. Since he had appropriated this money from the dead Italian and had acquired Gulietta as a condition for returning part of it, Gulietta represents the "filo de navaja" of an elusive, yet tantalizing, capital produced by an Italian mine owner by appropriating Bolivian resources and then siphoning them to the United States by a *cholo* upstart (207).²

Through Gulietta's body, *Altiplano Express* couples the engine of colonial power with the speed of global capital. Ricardo's fascination with the Garrett engine, which he had been admiring when he first spotted Gulietta on the railway platform, morphs into an immediate infatuation with her. In the struggle over Gulietta's body, two groups, the *cholo* upstarts and the Europe-educated elite, compete for this capital. Ultimately, though, she eludes them both, using one man, Ricardo, to dodge the other, Alderete.

As the train's whistle merges into Gulietta's orgasmic screams, she becomes the train's sinuous movement, extracting the nation's vital fluids. Gulietta's "danza sin pausas" replicates within the train the locomotive's own passage through the Andean landscape (113). Transformed into rapacious carnality, Gulietta now overwhelms Ricardo who compares her to "esas criaturas espaciales que se nutren de la vida terrestre" (142). Gulietta's insatiable lust is further emphasized when, upon finding a bloodstain left on the sheets by their lovemaking, she exults in English, "There it is, the proof of the recent crime" (144). Although celebrating the loss of her virginity, her phrasing is significant, especially since the moment coincides with the murder of her husband in the adjacent compartment. Equally significant is her choice of language, English, the lingua franca of global commerce. She *is* the global capital slaying the Bolivian national subject. Gulietta's vampirish portrayal also taps into the anticolonial Aymara lore of the *kbari-siri*, the monster who, in Sivlia Rivera Cusicanqui's words, "ha llegado para acabar con la gente, sacándole el untu . . . sea el fluido vital más importante del cuerpo" to manufacture industrial goods with it (30).³ In the neoliberal period, the *kbarisiri* lore morphs into a trope describing free market encroachments into indigenous communities in a scenario where the

state itself is regarded as being in cahoots with foreign powers. The lore references Bolivia's historical role as an extraction economy, understood here in Álvaro García Linera's terms, as an economy where "la riqueza de una región sirve para alimentar la bonanza y disfrute de otra región" (n.p.). As García Linera notes, the Bolivian economy can be organized in three stages, all clustered around the export of natural resources: during the colonial period this resource was silver, during the Republican period, guano, rubber and tin and, in the neoliberal period, petroleum. Recacoechea's novel reconfigures the demonic figure, traditionally male, into a femme fatale. Her body is the site where the nation's energies and resources are harnessed in the services of an invisible transnational capital. Her voracious sexual appetite drains Ricardo of his libidinal energies, and her freedom requires Alderete's blood and a maimed mineworker's incrimination. At best disparate and at worst mutually antagonistic, the three men nonetheless become metonymies for the Bolivian nation, mere stepping-stones in Gulietta's transnational caper.

From primal innocence originating in an idyllic United States household, global capital waxes into the rapacious lust of a U.S.-bound femme fatale. No secret message can re-member Bolivia's truncated body into an Edenic transnational community, where sovereign power resonates with the collective will. The utopian global family writ into the British novel is beamed back as atomized fragments in its Bolivian reflection. Spivak urges the metropolitan reader to string these fragments as "permanent parabases" to read through them the breakdown of the universalizing narrative of global capital (566). She instructs a metropolitan reader on how to make sense of the opacity of peripheral texts as interruptions *within* a transnational text. Recacoechea's novel turns this call on its head. Here the metropolitan text is a hermeneutic mirror in which a peripheral reader can only regard himself as an incomplete reflection of what he *should* be, that is, as a western subject of modernity. Contemplating himself "sin euforia" in a mirror, Alderete encounters a "rostro esculpido en barro, a medio hacer. El escultor se había olvidado de meterlo al horno y el modelo permaneció amorfo y parecía que cualquier golpe iba a dejar una abolladura de por vida" (71). This simultaneous self-recognition and self-rejection is the fulcrum on which revolves Alderete's rapacious drive to possess the economic, social, and libidinal capital that produces his precarious subjectivity. Gulietta's "gota de juventud" is the elixir that Alderete had hoped would varnish his half-baked identity—racially marginalized and yet economically dominant—into a modern capitalist (69). In the intimacy of the mirror, he constitutes himself in the image of how the custodians of modernity's master text regard him, that is, as a racially inferior being. Alderete's subjectification, his recognition of his identity, is thus also his desubjectification, his self-effacement. Appropriately enough then, the man who delivers the fatal blow, toppling this wobbly

subject, is Rocha, Alderete's half-brother. They shared an indigenous mother. The racial trace that Alderete seeks to erase in his ruthless ascent within the social hierarchy ends up obliterating his very presence.

For his part, Rocha too is caught in a similar dual movement of subjectification and desubjectification. Popular Western literature more explicitly operates as a hermeneutical mirror through which Rocha struggles to make sense of his own life and fails. If Alderete is plagued by the half-finished visage that stares back at him, then Rocha is a truncated man, a literal and figurative cripple. Rocha "siempre quiso ser excepcional," but, he was a sad and lonely man "casi nada" (173). Romantic pirate figures compensate for his ordinariness, infusing him with an identity "fuera de lo común" (173). The mineworker had read Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and "pensaba en John Silver y . . . se identificaba con él" (59). In his intimate moments, however, this desire for the romantic pirate figure morphs into an anxiety about his ineludible identification with workers trapped in a mine. Following the mining accident that maims him, the destitute Rocha is tormented by a recurrent nightmare wherein he is being suffocated by his fellow workers' naked torsos, which are "espejos en los que se reproducía ese rostro angustiado que no era otro que él mismo con melena y una larga barba descuidada" (54). The mirror of the miners' glistening bodies produces subjectification because he recognizes himself as one of them; yet, it desubjectifies him because he wants to erase this identity. This blend of desire and revulsion stunts his agency, rendering him incapable of any positive action. He dreams "le era imposible moverse. Sus piernas no le respondían y cuando intentaba gritar, su garganta era como un pozo de arena en el desierto" (54). The action he does take, killing Alderete per doña Clara's order, ultimately erases his presence as he joins the "secta prohibida" of murderers (173). And his invisibility enables the Carlettis to recover their lost capital and siphon it out of the country. Saddled with the murder, Rocha as fugitive is, in effect, consigned to bare life.

Sons of the same indigenous mother, one a mine owner, the other an alcoholic mineworker, one a corpse made to pass as a living man, the other a figurative living dead, ultimately, Rocha and Alderete configure the "escisionista o cismática" Bolivian subject whose moment of self-recognition is also the moment of effacement, one who can only be by not being (Zavaleta, "Forma clase..." 287).⁴ Alderete, reading himself in the mirror, is filled with self-loathing, and Rocha is repelled by his reflection in his fellow workers' sweaty bodies. Yet the code that ciphers these readings is crafted in the metropolitan centers of global capital. Indeed, modernity's narrative is propelled by the assumption of their bodies' incompleteness. For it seduces them by promising them their bodies' remembering. Their truncated identities also reference Bolivia's own amputation from the ocean in the

wake of its defeat in the 1883 War of the Pacific—Bolivia lost the port of Antofogasta to Chile. Ceding this port meant a loss of direct ocean access to trade routes and, therefore, dependence on Chile for the export of its raw materials: tin, petroleum and gas. In the same war, Peru also lost Arica to Chile. Meandering through the Andes, the British-owned Altiplano Express does not re-member the Andes. Rather, it is a reenactment of its dismembering. Rocha's nightmare allegorizes Bolivia's geopolitical limitations. Unlike his hero, Long John Silver, Rocha is denied the freedom to ride the seas fearlessly. His quest for adventure facilitates the movement of Bolivian capital to the U.S. Identifying with a British novel's seafaring character, Rocha loses his moorings without, at the same time, being able to create a space where he too could lead an exceptional life worthy of his British hero. Metropolitan master codes elide with global capital to entice peripheral subjects with a world that seems within grasp but which ultimately evades them. These textual mirages emasculate the Bolivian subject who is trapped in a frame that can only discern him as a half-done body.

Even this emasculation, this plunder of the nation's libidinal and economic capital by the United States, is evoked through the lens of a Western text. In the novel's last scene, Ricardo helplessly observes Guliotta flirting with an American sailor aboard a ship that will sail to New Orleans and compares the man to an "irresistible personaje marino siguiendo la tradición literaria anglosajona. Una invención de Melville" (206). Anglo-Saxon literature (metropolitan literature) connives with global capital to entice peripheral subjects in a web of words spun by this tradition "con la efectividad de una araña tejedora" (205). This seafaring captain draws Guliotta into a space that "Ricardo no había podido crear" (205). If Rocha's feeling of confinement is due in part to the disconnect between the milieu he inhabits and the world that metropolitan literature leads him to envision, Ricardo is deterritorialized by a space "invented" by the web of the same literary tradition and against whose spell the Bolivian national subject was defenseless. Ricardo's inability to forge a space where he could possess Guliotta and the capital she represents epitomizes Bolivia's surrender to an anonymous global power that, implied through the novel's portrayal of Guliotta, radiates out of the U.S. From the vantage point of Guliotta's libidinal "deseo de libertad," Ricardo's affective sacrifice, "como un condenado fuego sagrado," feeds her relentless movement (206, 205).

Optical exercises (reading and seeing) are governed by an underling epistemology that sifts through, organizes, and hierarchizes reality. In reading *Orient Express* to write *Altiplano Express*, Recacoechea shows us what Bolivia looks like when read through, or when reflected in, the mirror of a European novel. In effect, his male characters are plagued by inadequacy because they see themselves through a vision regime that, established and regulated by an alienating aesthetics and semantics,

discombobulates them. At a physical level, disorientation is a disconnect between the body and the mind. Recacoechea's fragmentary subjects struggle to reconcile their bodies with their desires. Their bodies are conditioned by the Bolivian milieu, but they see them as incomplete, half-done mud figures through an optical regime bequeathed to them by their colonizers. The secret scribbled on the charred scrap in Christie's *Orient Express* enables the passengers to recover their household's shattered wholeness. As the mirror in which the Bolivian Altiplano sees itself, however, this metropolitan text impedes its apprehension because its referent is the West. This reading thus, like "un condenado fuego sagrado," simultaneously subjectifies and desubjectifies the Bolivian subject (206). It is an act that at once illuminates and obliterates. A symbiotic relationship thus binds transnational literature to transnational capital. Global market circuits enable transnational literature to reach its peripheral readers and these metropolitan texts facilitate the flow of global capital by seducing peripheral readers through their narratives.

It is also in the reading of these master texts that the transnational sovereign power, otherwise elusive, can be grasped in *Altiplano Express*. In *Orient Express*, Poirot and M. Bouc, one a figure of law and the other of capital, interpret the message on the charred paper to re-member the community, this ideal transnational household. Together both men serve as the interface between the transnational sovereign power and the passengers to articulate a collective telos. In *Altiplano Express*, Durbin, the Irish functionary of Bolivian Railways and avid viewer of American films, also undertakes interpretive exercises of these global texts. He relishes the scenes wherein "apaleaban negros y tipos de color café parecidos a sus vecinos de butaca" (105). Alderete and Rocha have been alienated from their own images by the texts produced in the metropolis. Durbin, representative of the transnational capital in the periphery, can only regard these subjects as racialized others. M. Bouc's implicit identification with the travelers enables the realization of a pan-European community because the text's producers and consumers are a homogenous group. Durbin, viewing the American film with racialized Bolivian viewers in a provincial cinema hall, dramatizes the divide between the consumers and viewers of the global master texts. White tormentors of the "black and brown types" reassure him that he is not one of those subjugated others, that he is not, in other words, from the people or of the people. Consequently, as an agent of Bolivian Railways, the Irishman is not for these people.

It is possible that Durbin's fellow moviegoers also experience a similar euphoria at these scenes. Unlike for Durbin, however, their satisfaction does not affirm their identity. For the compatriots of Alderete, Rocha, and Ricardo, these metropolitan films produce dislocation, their desire to identify with the assailants destabilized by anxiety that they are their victims. As a site of

public sphere, the cinema hall, dominated by images produced in the metropolis and yet consumed by these peripheral subjects, offers no possibility of intersubjectivity between the transnational sovereign power and the black and brown bodies reduced to bare life by its commerce of imaginaries. The denouement of Christie's novel turns the train into a space of intersubjectivity, where the figures of law articulate the collective will. In contrast, *Altiplano Express* ends with a "disbanding" of the passengers into a haze of anonymity on a foreign port (*AE*, 209).

The one instance where the travelers do congregate on the train—for a game of poker—ends up being a charade set up to cheat Alderete of the money he had previously embezzled from them. Whereas in Christie's novel, a message recovered from the charred remains of a scrap of paper leads the train to the truth, in this pastiche of the British text, one duplicitous act overlays another. In this complex of mirages, there is no truth, no possibility of a primal innocence. In effect, *Orient Express* is also harnessed in this literary web of deceit. A text produced in the metropolis and consumed by Bolivian readers, Christie's novel facilitates the flow of global capital by beguiling its peripheral readers into believing that they too can aspire to an idyllic community, where transnational sovereign power resonates with the people's collective will. Just as the mirror hanging over the poker players subverts Alderete's game by affording "un panorama completo" of the *cholo's* moves, metropolitan texts also impede the peripheral states' ability to forge their identities (128).

However, as a late arrival (Zavaleta's "second comers") to the network of nation states Bolivia cannot forge the community premised in *Orient Express* (164). A mere *tromp l'oeil* for global capital, as a peripheral state, Bolivia is ultimately a space of transit for the flow of resources. Therein lies its, in Zavaleta's words, "imposibilidad del estado nacional" (164). Global capital needs nation-states to channel its flow but, at the same time, it also requires these units to be weak so that it can streamline an unhampered flow through their territories. The original states ensure these dual goals—sustain the world market system and safeguard their own sovereign power—by funneling the resources of the second comers to fuel the world markets (Zavaleta 163). The rigged game enacts the warped intersubjective domain of this impossible nation state, where people like Alderete are set up to lose even before the game commences. As a racially mixed *cholo*, who has cheated and manipulated his way into the echelons of economic clout, Alderete represents, on the one hand, the racial stratification of a peripheral society, which excludes men like him from the social and economic privilege monopolized by the elite and, on the other, he represents the masses who read their own uplift in terms of their inclusion in the very circles that denigrate them. In Christie's text, the transnational sovereignty emerges due to a consensus reached by the train passengers. In the Bolivian remake, the sovereign

power is illusory and relies on exclusion and not consensus to maintain its façade. As Alderete is defeated in the spurious card game, outside “el tren le robaba espacio al Altiplano” (139). Alderete is the Altiplano being robbed by the train of capital, even as he remains trapped in its game of mirrors.

As noted earlier, the terms for this specular game are set by metropolitan texts. Seduced by these narratives, peripheral readers find themselves in illusory subject positions, from where they interpellate a phantom state, that is, a sovereign power, stripped of its territoriality and its temporality. Not only does the train of global capital, fueled by the narrative of modernity, rob the Altiplano of its space, but it also smothers its undulating geography in what Apter has called “Eurochronicity”—a temporality referencing the West but within which non-western spaces and literary traditions are inserted. Trapped in this foreign time, the Altiplano is a parched darkness, where “los más sólidos arbustos crecían con dificultad” (139). Ricardo laments that unlike “en el París -Estambul” the twenty-four-hour journey through the Altiplano holds no possibility for relationships to “iniciarse, desenvolverse y encontrar esperanzas una vez en destino” (51). In this sterile space, desiccated by stories germinated in other lands, no relationships can take root. The Andean trek’s brevity, a day in comparison to almost a week of the European journey, augments but also frustrates Ricardo’s romantic desires. These western texts have primed his expectations of what the journey ought to be. Frustration of these desires is therefore inevitable.

Even as these subjects are hypnotized by global capital, texts germane to their own history and geography swirl unnoticed around them. Consequently, while the travelers of the first-class compartment read Vicky Buam, allude to Shakespeare, compare their journeys to those undertaken aboard *Orient Express* and *Anna Karenina*, “un artista reivindicacionista,” whose canvasses with their black seas and red crests, mourns Bolivia’s maritime amputation as he travels in the grimy second-class wagon, ignored and unnoticed by all (118). As Ricardo gazes mesmerized at Gulletta from across the dining car, the disheveled artist, sitting next to him, expresses surprise that Ricardo has never heard of him. Ricardo admits that he is not “muy al tanto de las artes plásticas en nuestro país,” before resuming his contemplation of Gulletta (118). To this gaze, mystified by capital, and untrained to read a time and space that is its own, the Andean landscape appears to grow “sin orden, bordeando barrancos, tratando de alcanzar las cimas de las colinas” (25). With its abysses to be avoided or heights to be scaled, the undulating geography defies inscription into a text, where a state that is global capital’s agent and an ever-elusive civil society can find a “punto de intensidad . . . o correspondencia” (*Zavaleta Lo nacional popular* 64). Instead of the people as a collective subject, a complex of self-alienating subjectivities stretches out into a hall of mirrors.

From Lost Innocence to Seductive Simulacra

Writing about the impact of transnationalism on Latin American identity, García Canclini observes that “Latin America is not complete within Latin America. Its image reaches it from the mirrors disseminated in the archipelago of migrations” (19). Emigration to other countries produces a spatial and temporal disconnect that shapes Latin American identity as one lacking a single localizable referent. For Recacoechea, movement outside Bolivia (and Latin America by extension) of migrants and to it by transnational conglomerations along with the ensuing alienation so jumble up the national identity as to render it illegible. In substituting the mirror for the real clue of charred paper, Recacoechea displaces the unitary origin holding Christie’s transnational utopia together to a domain of simulacra. For the interwar British text, the U.S. is the single referent that enables the transnational European utopia. In its Bolivian avatar, the U.S. marks the receding point of an archipelago of mirrors, which erodes the very ground of the peripheral nation-state. This ground is constituted by the interface where sovereign power reads the collective will and vice versa. When transnational companies control the nation’s resources, sovereign power becomes a mobile point that ultimately references an ever-elusive American capital.

Altiplano Express’s own narrative reads like a game of mirrors, where the Andean text, set on the eve of the national revolution, references both the interwar British novel and Bolivia’s battles with neoliberal policies at the turn of the twenty-first century. An important event that marked this crisis was the water wars in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba in 2000. That year, the city water distribution was sold to a company, Aguas del Tunari, which was controlled by a U.S. conglomerate in San Francisco, the Bachtel Corporation. The train journey in *Altiplano Express* allegorizes this flight of resources from the country. Gulietta’s movement out of Bolivia charts a similarly circuitous route: she travels to Chile, another Latin American country, but her actual destination, material and affective, is the United States. This kafkaesque moment of free market reforms in Bolivia marks the height and the start of the decline of neoliberal politics in the country. *Altiplano Express*’s train drama registers this privatizing frenzy as a rail journey, operating at the behest of a shadowy transnational sovereignty, and the country’s putative national subjects have been reduced to serving as its unwitting pawns. Undoubtedly, Recacoechea’s is a sexist text, where the woman represents the nation’s capital to be managed by its male subjects. It is in this light that we understand Ricardo’s consternation when he witnesses Gulietta’s flirtation with the American naval officer. Left behind like a “doomed, sacred fire,” Ricardo represents, figuratively, the national elite’s lack of control over the country’s resources.

The recurrent image of the mirror in *Altiplano Express* reiterates this disconnect between sovereign power and civil society as a series of Bolivian men, of varying races, social classes, ages and moral dispositions, are all instrumentalized to abet the flight of capital from Bolivia to the U.S. via Chile. Their Chinese-box relationships, where one is used to mark the other as the exception, points to a power that gives the lie to Bolivia's sovereignty. José Rabasa notes that "Revolutions or insurgencies, by definition, constitute a state of exception, and, insofar as they counter the law, they stand outside the law, break (with) the (regime of) law, and sidestep the applicability of the constitution to preserve the Estado de Derecho" (270). Recacoechea channels a moment before the revolution, inching towards this state of exception, to allegorize the present through the past.

The contemporary 2000 neoliberal crisis is thus the oblique referent for his "nostalgic" portrayal of the pre-revolutionary era. Yet, whereas in Christie's novel the nostalgia evoked packages and hawks a transnational utopia, in this Bolivian novel the Old World atmosphere must be understood in relation to the overarching trope of the mirror. Just like the mirror turns the dining car poker game into a charade for duping the avaricious Alderete, the wagon's nostalgic atmosphere is a simulacrum conjured by metropolitan texts and devouring the country's resources and its libidinal energies. Alderete's murder itself becomes a ruse that at first occludes the fact that his "unpunished" murder, while making two Bolivian subjects complicit in the crime, frees Gulietta—associated from the beginning with transnational capital—to continue her relentless movement out of the country.

Conclusion

Inscribed in this metamorphosis of the American imaginary is transnational capital as a wandering signifier, a passage west, where the West represents, rather than a coordinate orienting the globe, a disorienting chimera. In the Europe of the Interwar years, the U.S. embodies global capitalism tinted with nostalgia for a bygone feudal structure. The U.S. is in this iteration, at once, the inaccessible yet cherished past and a transnational future just beyond reach. In the Bolivia reeling from the effects of a neoliberal economy, the U.S. has morphed into a wanton vampire, sucking Bolivia's territory from it.

By writing his incisive commentary on a Bolivia ravaged by neoliberalism as a reading of *Murder on the Orient Express*, Recacoechea pays tribute to the British classic while also highlighting the nexus between global capital and transnational literature. If global capital enables metropolitan literatures to reach the peripheries, then these master texts also ease the passage of capital through these territories by creating fractured subjectivities. The British novel and its Bolivian adaptation "globalize the novel,"

that is, together they plot the passage of transnational capital in the twentieth century. The exchange between the two texts, however, also “novelizes the global” in that both constitute particularistic accounts of the global reach of capital from their specific geo-historical vantage points (Siskind 38). The United States’ protean image anchors and separates their particular trajectories. Recacoechea, however, sets out explicitly to showcase through this dialogue with Christie’s *Orient Express* the agency of a peripheral reader in the web of transnational literatures.

Scholars like Apter, Spivak, and Marramao, in their contributions on world literature, tend to focus on how the metropolitan readers should read texts produced in the periphery. Apter, for instance, contends that the metropolis must be sensitive to attempts to straightjacket non-western literary traditions in a western temporality. Spivak similarly argues that the metropolitan reader must be trained in transnational literacy, or reading texts paratactically, and not subordinating some literatures within the dominant western narratives. Marramao, on the other hand, seeks some universal metaphors that can encapsulate our contemporary global society, whose inherent condition are multivalent connections. Despite their different positions, all of them articulate positions from the perspective of world literature. Writing a bit earlier and from the vantage point of a peripheral nation state, Zavaleta has argued that national identity demands attentiveness to the world—national identity too can only be conceived within a global setting. Recacoechea’s reading of *Orient Express* calls attention to how metropolitan texts at once shape and thwart the national expressions of peripheral states. Siskind notes that “the peripheries of the world have an intense desire for sociopolitical and cultural modernization,” which is represented in and by the novels (33).

In Recacoechea’s novel, this desire abets the relentless spread of transnational capital, which eventually subverts the same peripheral aspirations. In consuming these seductive narratives that simultaneously entice and exclude them, these marginal readers are enlisted in their own desubjectification. And yet, the act of reading these texts also constitutes their agency. For, the peripheries do not merely reproduce universal ideals articulated from the West. Rather in reading them, they also imprint upon them the vicissitudes brought about by their own status as second comers to the global arena. In doing so, the text at once upholds universal ideals, but it also anchors them to the materiality of the particular, thereby articulating its own critique of global capital. Inversely, it is only within the framework of transnationalism that Recacoechea’s text can articulate the material specificities of global inequality circumscribing the periphery.

Through this dialogue with *Orient Express*, *Altiplano Express* thus asserts that the peripheral readers’ consumption of dominant western texts is as agentic as the Western readers’ interpretation

of peripheral works, even if, like a doomed sacred fire, it is an agency that comes accompanied with erasure. In doing so, the Bolivian novel calls attention to the active participation of the peripheries in the global production and consumption of literary imaginaries.

Notes

¹ *Murder on the Orient Express* will henceforth be referred to as *Orient Express* in the article.

² The word *cholo* literally denotes a person of mixed-race descent. Another term used to refer to racially mixed people is *mestizos*. In practical terms, the nuanced differences between *cholos* and *mestizos*, however, attest to Bolivia's complex race and class hierarchies. In the period leading up to the 1952 National Revolution the differences between *cholos* and *mestizos* came to signify the ideological underpinnings of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR). The *mestizo* was upheld as modern Bolivia's national subject—racially miscegenated but intellectually European due to the education received. The *cholo*, an uncouth, wily and uneducated half breed, was in contrast projected as one of the adversaries of the revolutionary ideals whose containment would lead to the triumph of modern, liberal democracy. In contemporary Bolivia, however, the *mestizos* signify the old Eurocentric elite and *cholos* have gradually come to embody an empowered indigenous middle class, though the old prejudices still persist.

³ According to Silvia Rivera, the *kharisiri* is a mythic anticolonial figure dating back to the XVI century, alluding to a supernatural being that lived off the fat (a vital fluid as important as blood for the Aymara people) (See Rivera, *Violencias (re)encubiertas en Bolivia*). In the colonial period, it represented the whites' encroachment into indigenous communities to exploit indigenous labor and resources. (See Brent Kaup, *Market Justice: Political Economic Struggle in Bolivia*).

⁴ Zavaleta's own assessment of the proletariat's role in the development of Bolivian national consciousness undergoes transformation. Writing in 1967, he had called the miners "una clase despierta y peligrosa" (La formación . . .). By 1983, in the aftermath of the 1979 mobilizations, his thinking had changed so that now the miners were "una clase peligrosa, separatista, descontenta" but incapable of offering "una reforma intelectual y moral" ("Forma clase" 287).

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