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Publication Date

2013

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

The Alter-Worlds of Lispector and Saer and the End(s) of Latin American literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Comparative Literature

By

Peter James Lehman

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Alter-Worlds of Lispector and Saer and the End(s) of Latin American Literature

By

Peter James Lehman

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Randal Johnson, Co-chair

Professor Kirstie McClure, Co-chair

My dissertation seeks to intervene in current debates about both comparative perspectives within Latin American literatures and the place of Latin America within new models of world literature. Despite the importance of this call to a more planetary approach to literature, the turn to a world scope often recapitulates problems associated with the nineteenth century emergence of the term “world literature”: local concerns and traditions dissolve into the search for general patterns or persistent dependencies. If these new comparative models tend to separate the local from the construction of literature’s “world,” significant strains of Latin Americanist criticism have also sought to distance the local from literature and the literary, often identifying the latter alternatively with either the collapse of previous emancipatory dreams or a complicity with power and domination. Focusing on several central narrative texts of the Brazilian Clarice

Lispector and the Argentine Juan José Saer, I argue for a more contested notion of both the literary and the world.

Both Lispector's and Saer's pairs of narrative texts in this dissertation make it difficult to untangle the literary construction of their respective worlds from local forms of alterity and otherness. Despite the differences between Saer's attention to an apparently more circumscribed local world in the littoral zone of Santa Fe, Argentina, and Lispector's more seemingly abstract flights from place, their writing nonetheless meets in common spaces and experiences that have little to do with either a recognizably "Latin American" aesthetics or the generality of a world model free from contradiction, suffering, and the traces of history. In part one, on Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964) and *A hora da estrela* (1977), and part two on Saer's *El entenado* (1983) and *El río sin orillas* (1990), I explore the different ways that their writing alternatively represents or contains the possibility of altering the world and selves in literature. While the dictatorship period negatively inflects this possibility in both *A hora da estrela* and *El entenado*, I argue that the inscription of their literary worlds into local, national, and regional traditions becomes a resource for more subtle connections between the texts and the periods, calling into question the attempts to make literature tell a story of either collapse or hope at end of the last century.

The Dissertation of Peter James Lehman is approved.

Michelle Clayton

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Kirstie McClure, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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The Alter-Worlds of Lispector and Saer and the End(s) of Latin American Literature

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- “A Call for the Same? The Place of Subtraction in Juan José Saer’s *El río sin orillas*”; *Arrivals and Departures*, ACLA Annual Meeting, Long Beach, CA (April 2008)
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Introduction:

The Alter-Worlds of Lispector and Saer, and the End(s) of Latin American Literature

Since the “boom” of Latin American literature in the 1960s, comparative models of world literature and Latin American studies have seemed to move in opposite directions. The current revival of “world literature” as a concept has reasserted the need to think literature on a more planetary scale. We have thus witnessed in recent years an increasing turn to the “world” in literary criticism and philosophy as a response to the current phase of globalization. In the new literary models or approaches, a *world* space does not appear primarily as an image, imaginary, or representation, but rather as a relational structure, system, or circulation of works beyond their culture or language “of origin.”¹ Despite a common emphasis on the asymmetry of its world space, the predominant models of a new world literature nonetheless seem to presuppose a kind of transcendental axis that accounts for literary relevance (or irrelevance) from a place more or less still located in Europe or the U.S. Thus what Pascale Casanova calls the “Greenwich meridian” of literature measures the present of a singular literary world from a center located in Paris, roughly from the sixteenth century poets of La Pléiade to the 1960s.² Similarly, Franco Moretti’s “literary world-system” largely reproduces the unequal relations of the politico-economic one, with autonomous development in the core and the rule of formal compromise in the world peripheries.³ Both suggest that the *world* of world literature only begins to take on a planetary dimension in the twentieth century, with the process of decolonization or the geographical shift in the center of literary creation, which Moretti himself identified in an important precursor study with the global boom of Latin American “magical realism.”⁴

During this same period, Latin American literary and cultural studies not only moved away from the “boom” and a conception of literature still residually centered in Europe. It also increasingly moved towards a reengagement with otherness or alterity in the region. At the beginning of the 1970s, this approach could still be subsumed under the politics of post-revolutionary Cuba, as in Roberto Fernández Retamar’s proposal to appropriate Caliban, the maligned slave from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, as the “symbol” of Latin American culture on the stages of world literature. But with the growing dominance of military dictatorships across the continent and the bankruptcy of national developmentalism, the concern with alterity took other aesthetic or ethical forms. Despite frequent overlapping and a predominately Hispanist purview, these positions also vie for the most adequate way to account for Latin American alterity: new anti- or post-literary genres (*testimonio*); gendered, ethnic or racialized subjects on the borders of traditional class categories (heterogeneity, subalternity); categories of power that outlast the period of colonialism (the lettered city, coloniality); philosophical approaches to the hegemonic projects of modernity (deconstruction, philosophy of liberation), to name some of the most prominent.⁵ The diverse forms of reengagement with alterity largely share a critique of Enlightenment universalism and the exotic reification of difference in boom genres like “magical realism” or the “marvelous real.” Yet this critique, as de la Campa has suggested, does not preclude the risk of producing a kind of negative universalism: Latin America (and other postcolonial regions outside Euro-America) all come to signify a common alterity or Other, with little attention paid to different areas within the continent (a problem familiar to Brazilianists). One could, of course, add recent Brazilian examples (say marginal literature, marginality, or cosmopolitanism of the poor) to this Latin Americanist debate.⁶ But I want to emphasize another problematic result of the divergence between the new models of world literature and the

paradigms of Latin Americanism: the separation of a “world” literature from local concerns and matters; and the separation of the local from the possible “worlds” of literature.

In this dissertation, I explore central narrative texts of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) and the Argentinean writer Juan José Saer (1937-2005), works that require attention to both the imaginary of their literary worlds and localized figures or forms of alterity. Saer’s writing rigorously forefronts the construction of a literary territory and world: though Saer lived primarily in France for the majority of his literary career, virtually all of his fiction returns to the circumscribed “zone” and littoral region of Santa Fe, seeming to anchor his world in a material sense of place. Lispector’s writing, on the other hand, repeatedly depicts encounters with otherness or an alterity of the material world: though primarily located in an urban Rio de Janeiro, the subjective “searching” of her fiction often takes on the appearance of a metaphysical or even mystic flight, seeming to leave any notion of place behind. However, as I argue in this dissertation, just as Saer’s literary world is defined by uncertainty and the subjective perceptions of place, Lispector’s paths of flight are never separate from the traces of the material world and history. What I propose to call “alter-worlds” in the two writers emerge at these conjunctures, when the subjects and worlds represented in literature undergo forms of alteration, or conversely, seem to delimit the kinds of alteration that can take place. Chapters one and four, focused primarily on Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964) and Saer’s *El río sin orillas* (1990) respectively, approach this former possibility; chapters two and three, on Lispector’s *A hora da estrela* (1977) and Saer’s *El entenado* (1982), the latter.

While I situate these narrative texts in tension with both some of the more influential interpretative systems of Latin American literature in the 1970s and 80s and current models of world literature, my study also attempts to answer questions that arise from this organization

itself: the middle of my dissertation deals with narrative texts that fall within the period of military dictatorships in Brazil (1964-1985) and Argentina (1976-1983); the beginning and end touch on the immediately pre- and the post-dictatorship periods. Rather than suggest that these events determine the kind of alterations that take place in literature, I examine the more subtle ways Lispector's and Saer's writing reconfigure the partitions of the social imaginary and the ends of Latin American literature. My argument thus has less to do with "Latin America" as some timeless repository of alterity and exteriority, than with specific moments where aesthetic alteration can modify the ways we conceive, divide, feel, and think the worlds in literature, precisely at a time when it is no longer easy to separate them from the world outside it.

This reading of Lispector and Saer seeks to intervene in current debates about comparative literature within Latin Americanism and the literatures of Latin America within world literature. Lispector's and Saer's writing, I contend, resists being read in terms of a representative aesthetic or identity category of Brazilian, Argentine, or Latin American literature. This is one sense of what the "ends of Latin American literature" refers to in my title. But I also mean "ends" in the sense of the purposes invested in Latin Americanism as well as the uses of Latin American literatures in the present. I read Lispector's and Saer's "alter-worlds" in a productive tension with the emancipatory or egalitarian purpose invested in both earlier Latin Americanist projects, articulated during the general period of my dissertation, and current ones, whose contemporaneity is often defined by a distancing from literature. Throughout this dissertation, I show how both writers inscribe their literary worlds into local, national, and regional traditions, making them newly pertinent through their alterations and rereadings. Against either a reassertion of literary autonomy sealed off from the world, or an identification of the literary with the general heteronomy of the world market, I argue throughout this dissertation for a more

contested notion of both the literary and the world in relation to the systems that encompass them.

A History of Eternity: “Literature” and Its World

It has become more common to trace the historicity of “literature” and the emergence of “world literature” back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe. The new idea of “literature,” as many have argued, marked a departure from its previous sense as the knowledge of educated or lettered men. But the breakdown of hierarchies associated with aristocratic *belles lettres* has been interpreted in various ways. Foucault identified the conditions for modern literary intransitivity with an epistemological break that augured in new sense of labor, life, and language at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The new philological studies of “Oriental” languages broke down the previous hierarchies between languages, at least in principal, when they reduced all languages to a question of “internal structure”; literature then emerges somewhat unexpectedly as both a contestation and double of philology, turning back on the same origin to encounter the new modern “being of language.”⁷ This version coincides in large part with what Jacques Rancière has called the modernist paradigm. In the latter, literature and “literarity” usually appear as a radical break with representation and the gradual conquest of its autonomy, the signifying materiality of language. For Rancière, literature first marks a break with a “representational regime” of mimesis, the idea of correspondence between specific forms and specific social subjects (noble genres for elevated characters and their actions; low genres for histories of common people). This slower and perhaps never complete transformation happens both within literary texts and outside them, in the belletristic reaction to the loss of proper subjects and in a new public of readers. The “literarity” that made literature possible meant, in

the first instance, a “radical democracy of the letter that anyone can grab hold of,” a “new regime of the art of writing in which the writer is anyone at all and the reader anyone at all.”⁸

This literature without a proper addressee or proper master assumes a partial departitioning of social hierarchies and a circulation of literature (especially cheap literature) widely available to “anyone.” It has its literary exemplar in the character Madame Bovary, who attempts to turn the popular literature she reads into her personal life, and the disappearance of Flaubert’s narrator into an “absolute way of seeing things,” a style that differentiates itself from the protagonist not only by making literature an impersonal life of meaningless sensations, but also by effectively putting Bovary to death.⁹ Despite almost antagonistic approaches, Rancière’s argument converges here with what Casanova calls the “literary aesthetic” that emerges at the historical crossroads of political and aesthetic revolutions in different regions of the world at different times (*World* 197). Although the transcendental, even transhistorical role French literary space has in her “world republic of letters” remains more problematic, it nonetheless obviates the conditions for presuming its “universality”: Paris owes its transcendental status in the “world republic of letters” to its accumulated “linguistic and cultural capital,” how Casanova reinterprets modernist “literarity.”¹⁰ Although an anonymous “anyone” who reads or writes does not depend on the French Republic or its literary space, it takes for granted a relatively widespread literacy in a language relatively unencumbered by colonial fissures.

Such an emphasis on the capacity for *anyone* to appropriate literature seems radically out of place in postcolonial Brazil and most of Spanish America, where a large majority of the population was illiterate and what Ángel Rama terms the “lettered city” has profoundly structured power from the colonial period well into the twentieth century. I maintain, however, that we cannot adequately account for recent debates about Latin American *testimonio* or, more

pertinently, *literatura marginal* in Brazil, without some notion of this capacity of *anyone*—not *everyone*—to grab hold of literature and “the letter.”¹¹ A more contested notion of literarity, one not delimited solely as either the specificity of literary language or the accumulation of linguistic-literary capital, helps account for the often vehement reactions to the limited democracy of the letter, whether external or internal to the text. This conflict, present to some degree in all four of the texts at the center of my dissertation, takes on a salient form in Lispector’s *A hora da estrela*: like Madame Bovary, the poor copyist Macabéa attempts to turn the images and words of mass culture into her life; and Lispector’s narrator-writer Rodrigo S.M. both identifies his writing with the marginalized Macabéa and attempts to differentiate them, putting her to death in a highly ambiguous “accident” (rather than an “absolute” style, the unreliable and authoritative first-person narrator inscribes the novella in a Brazilian literary tradition that goes back to Machado de Assis). A contested literarity, moreover, allows us to question both what Josefina Ludmer calls a “post-autonomous” literary era and Casanova’s reformulation of the modernist autonomy at a higher level. Both divergent positions exempt themselves from competing readings by identifying their position with an objective state of literature: the former with the end of the literary field and its autonomy (exemplified by Latin American literature that forefronts mass mediatized daily life); the latter with the teleology of autonomous “pure literature” in world literary space (a process of literary accumulation exemplified by Beckett).¹² The immanent stance towards the heteronomy of the commercial market declares the end of divisions, literary value, and the struggles of the field, but it can also be read as redeploying them in new ways. The transcendent stance separates a “pure” world literary autonomy from all extra-aesthetic concerns (national, social, commercial, philosophical),

but it reemerges when the constitutive impurity of literature and the role of criticism in reproducing the asymmetry of a world literary system have become increasingly clear.

In this way, the return to “world literature” brings with it the conflicting interpretations that define its original emergence. As is well known, the coining of the term “world literature” occurs in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s posthumously published *Conversations with Eckermann* (1835). Although Goethe’s primary sphere of dialogue is Western Europe (the German-French-English core of traditional comparative literature), the term *Weltliteratur* emerges in discussions that already include the positive valuation of literatures outside of Europe (Chinese novels or Serbian poetry, for example), but without threatening the Greek “pattern.”¹³ If Goethe’s world literature aims in part to deprovincialize German culture or Europe more generally, his declaration that national literature has become “a rather unmeaning term” (175) is not only buttressed by a transnational or regional European literature. It also occurs precisely when national literatures were in a process of contradictory formation in the colonial and ex-colonial peripheries, emerging out of the same contradictory matrix as world literature (Kadir 5-6; Sánchez Prado 11).

Although Marx and Engels share this primary frame of reference, their return over a decade later to the term *Weltliteratur* in *The Communist Manifesto* clarifies the material conditions of possibility for its extension:

The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. [...] In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (224-5)

Marx and Engels' mixed celebration of "world literature" bring us closer to current comparative literary models, in dialogue more with Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory and Fernand Braudel's world market than with Goethe's partial valuation of foreign literatures. Removing the "national ground" from national industries, the world market makes possible the imperialist extension of new industries to the "remotest zones" of the globe in a search for new "raw materials" and new markets for consumption—obviously, a very uneven notion of "interdependence" and "intercourse in every direction." For, as Marx and Engels clarify immediately after, this process also reproduces relations of "dependency" on a worldwide scale: it draws "barbarian" and "semi-barbarian" nations into "civilization," a term synonymous for them with the "bourgeois mode of production" or what the bourgeoisie call "civilization." The problem of a European bourgeoisie that projects "a world after its own image" thus also applies to the projection of "world literature." It is not just that the system of world literature, as Moretti suggests, has become much more unequal than the one that Marx and Goethe hoped for ("Conjectures" 56), but that inequality already appears through the process of this expansion.

Albeit in altered forms, this problem also reemerges in current critical re-elaborations of world literature in comparative literary studies: non-core European literatures appear largely relegated to relations of domination or peripheral ("barbarian") and semi-peripheral ("semi-barbarian") dependency until a relatively autonomous representative attains recognition by the Western core ("civilization"). Owing to an earlier diffusion of dependency theory throughout Latin America, Brazilian and Spanish American critics have tended to view the discovery of inequality in a world literary system with a certain sense of familiarity.¹⁴ If the emergence of world literature was coextensive with the invention of national literatures, its resurgence has renewed concern with literary and critical correlates to both the destruction of national industries

and the removal of a “national ground” in ex-colonies. As Cornejo Polar argued, the combined hegemony of English language criticism and a metropolitan postmodern theory was already contributing in the 1990s to a new universalization that “seems—under old industrial models—to take Spanish American literature as raw material and return it a sophisticated critical artifact” (“Mestizaje e hibridez” 9). In a more recent intervention into the debates about world literature, Roberto Schwarz has similarly argued that the “literary theories with the most validity in the principal universities of the world (overdetermined by the American ones) seek to extend their field of application as if they were firms. The intellectual interest does not disappear, but it is combined with the establishment of franchises [*franquias*]” (“Leituras” 66). This logic is no longer Fordist homogenization, but a heterogeneous mixture of theories from various places that nonetheless superimpose an “involuntary common shape” on literature (Schwarz “Leituras” 66).

These methodological warnings obviously apply to a critical study like my own. Although focused on the problems of different areas (Andean in the case of Cornejo Polar, Brazil in the case of Schwarz), both critiques stress a connection between contemporary capitalist globalization and the liquidation of national or regional traditions (critical as well as literary)—as if, to assume the risk of metaphor, literary and cultural studies can also operate as a form of “accumulation by dispossession.”¹⁵ Neither critic is calling for a return to an unproblematic national “ground” or to the equivalent of a national culture or literary industry (both present an immanent critique of just such homogenizing notions).¹⁶ But they do highlight the importance of responding to three interrelated dimensions of a world literary system. First, the importance of language as a kind of “ground,” a social relation enmeshed with experience, but also as an experimental relation with the social. To quote Lispector’s version of this problem: “Each new syntax is an indirect reflex of new relations, ... of a clearer consciousness of the world and of our

world. Each new syntax opens little liberties” (“Literatura e vanguarda” 106). Second, attention to a modified culture-industrial logic (“the franchise”) that pertains to the approach of literary and cultural studies itself, not only to their object of study. The problem with “the incorporation of industrial forms of organization”—how Adorno and Horkheimer defined their own metaphoric use of “industry”—is not the internalization of external forms, but their *incorporation*: conformity to the dominant organization of social relations, productive forces, and the community, whether on the side of the object (standardization over the alterity or “non-identity” of the object, technique as the rationalization of distribution techniques over technique as internal organization) or on the side of the subject (the embodied reproduction of class distinctions as “taste”).¹⁷ What I call “imaginary bodies” in Lispector and Saer’s writing intersect and conflict with incorporated conceptions of class, gender, race, or the material world, but require attention to social imaginaries differentially inflected by practices and discourses of *mestizaje/mestiçagem*, transculturation, and cultural hybridity. Finally, my dissertation also proposes a critical account of traditions that considers their use or pertinence in the present, without erasing the tensions that define them.

In this respect, the defense of local traditions or their “value” is not immune from problems that a metropolitan-oriented criticism attempts to resolve through their liquidation. The concept of *tradition*, as Saer argues, has become discredited by a *traditionalism* that dogmatically regulates cultural norms and their transmission, closing it off from any heterogeneous “exteriority” and treating any “deviation, modification, or rupture” as a form of “heresy” (“Tradición y cambio” 97). For Saer, this concern with tradition becomes inseparable from a renewal of culture-industry critique, understood now as a “technological market,” “world system of exploitation,” and the spectacle of an “already Westernized planet”: “In the present, local,

national, and regional traditions tend to dissolve in a kind of international magma that either assigns them a fixed, extreme singularity, destined to represent the exotic on the common stage, or stylizes them through a simplifying language, immediately comprehensible to a statistically calculated world average receptor” (ibid. 100). This concern with traditions should not be reduced to a form of localism (or nationalism, or regionalism). For, in the case of the Río de la Plata, it includes Borges’ irreverent claim that national and regional tradition should not be the “instinctual” drive towards local color and native themes like the gauchesque, as the nationalists argued, but “all of Western culture,” a claim for Saer that is no less prone to simplification.¹⁸ In Brazil, it would include Machado de Assis’ much earlier (1873) but still apposite argument against a romantic nationalism’s “instinctual” identification with Indianist themes, and his own use of Shakespeare to demand a “certain intimate feeling that turns [the writer] into a man of his country and time even when he deals with subjects remote in time and space.”¹⁹ This concern, I suggest, is relevant for reading the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit ways both Saer and Lispector inscribe their narrative texts into specific traditions, rewriting them as thematic or formal problems—what Lispector’s narrator calls “seeing the other,” for example, in the implicit dialogue of *A paixão* with Brazilian *modernismo*. One task of my dissertation is to show how Lispector and Saer alter the traditions that they inscribe their literary worlds into, troubling both their easy consumption as the tropically exotic and their simplified translation into pre-given general concepts (whether from “metropolitan” or “peripheral” theory).

In the remainder of this introduction, I first provide a brief outline of Lispector’s and Saer’s corpus of works, focusing on the two pairs of narrative texts in my dissertation. Then I proceed to a critical genealogy of previous comparative approaches to reading Brazilian and Spanish American literature contemporaneous with the writing in my dissertation. First, I turn to the

regional projections of a “Latin American” literary system in the influential theory of *transculturación narrativa*, developed by the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama during the 1970s in dialogue with the Brazilian Antonio Candido’s apposite theory of *superregionalismo* and his earlier formulation of a national literary system. My aim here is to historicize these frameworks but also to stress the symptomatic points where they help elucidate the divisions between the paradigms of Latin Americanism and the comparative models of world literature that followed in their wake. Second, I turn to the more cosmopolitan approach to world literature in the cultural strategy of *antropofagia*, first proposed by Brazilian modernists in the 1920s then redeployed, after a resurgence in the 1960s and 70s, as a Latin Americanist discourse on world literature. In the hinge between these two parts, I return the concept of “imaginary bodies” as a different approach to linking bodies and worlds. In the final section, I provide a preview to the arguments that follow in my dissertation by returning to Lispector’s figure of the “deserter” and Saer’s conception of “place.” Rather than a dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, cosmopolitan and regional, these two concepts help elucidate the points of proximity between Lispector’s and Saer’s literary worlds. This kind of comparison, I suggest, moves beyond Latin American literature as an identitarian or aesthetic category, to a reconsideration of the more indeterminate purposes of literature alongside, but also with, the projects of Latin Americanism.

Clarice Lispector: *A paixão segundo G.H.* and *A hora da estrela*

Clarice Lispector was born in 1920 to Jewish Ukrainian parents in Podolia, Ukraine. In flight from the pogroms following the Russian civil war, her family arrived in Northeastern Brazil when Clarice was just over one year old, staying first in Maceió Alagoas before moving to the coastal city of Recife, Pernambuco. In 1937, several years after her mother’s early death, the family moved to Rio de Janeiro, where Clarice Lispector began her law degree and worked as a

journalist before marrying a diplomat and living the majority of the next sixteen years in cities abroad (Naples, Berne, Torquay, and Washington D.C.). Her experimental debut novel, *Perto do coração* (1943), was well received by critics, who linked its introspective style to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as well as to the experimental Brazilian *modernista* prose of the 1920s. She published two novels while living abroad, *O lustre* (1945) and *A cidade sitiada* (1949), along with a book of short stories, *Alguns contos* (1952), with less critical repercussion. Already at one remove from the “writer-functionaries” of Brazilian literature (and the ubiquitous public functionaries within it),²⁰ Lispector divorced and returned to Rio with her two children in 1959, continuing to supplement her writing with journalism, now more closely tied to the culture industry: women’s columns either ghostwritten (for the actress Ilka Soares) or signed with pseudonyms (Helen Palmer), following a similar practice in the early 1950s (Teresa Quadros).²¹

With the success of both *Laços de família* (1960), a book of short stories, and *A maçã no escuro* (finally published in 1961, but in limbo since 1956), Lispector’s national recognition allowed her to supplant the pseudonymous women’s columns with the more hybrid genre of *crônicas* (chronicles) that assumed her proper name. In 1964, the same year the military took power in a coup, Lispector published *A legião estrangeira*, a book split between short stories and chronicles, and the novel *A paixão segundo G.H.* Beginning in the late 1960s, she wrote a regular column of chronicles for the *Jornal do Brasil* (published partially in *Visão do esplendor—impressões em leve* [1975] and posthumously in *Descoberta do mundo*); did interviews with artists and intellectuals for the magazine *Manchete*; and published a novel *Uma aprendizagem, ou O livro dos prazeres* (1969), several children’s books (*O mistério do coelho* [1967], *A mulher que matou os peixes* [1968], *A vida íntima de Laura* [1974]),²² and collections of short stories (*Felicidade clandestina* [1971], *A imitação da rosa* [1973], *A via crucis do corpo*

[1974], *Onde estivestes de noite* [1974]). *A paixão*, considered one of her most important works, introduced the first of several first person artist-narrators, taken up again in the novel *Água viva* (1972); the novella *A hora da estrela* (1977), published shortly before her death from cancer; and *O sopro da vida* (1978), a posthumously published novel edited by her friend Olga Borelli.

Unlike her contemporary João Guimarães Rosa, Lispector's formal and linguistic experimentalism did not figure centrally in the projects or politics of Latin American literature in the 1960s and 70s; nor did it secure her international reception with the principal "boom" authors (Júlio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes), since the translations of her work would only really take off after her death in 1977.²³ This recognition owed less to the philosophical or metalinguistic readings predominant in the Brazilian criticism of the 1970s, a focus on what Lucia Helena calls the "existentialist and universalizing tendency of the plot and epiphanies" (38),²⁴ than to Hélène Cixous' inscription of Lispector's writing into the category of *écriture féminine* and her subsequent resonance within a transnational feminist theory.²⁵ With important exceptions in Brazilian criticism, both of these critical tendencies either largely elided the local and social dimensions of Lispector's literary world or identified them more solely with her late work, especially *A hora da estrela*.²⁶ *A hora da estrela*, however, has also had a retroactive effect on criticism. Along with its more overt representation of poverty, the more explicit allusions to Jewishness have also reopened inquiry into questions of class, race, and ethnicity in her earlier work, including the hermetic *A paixão*.²⁷ The exploration of Lispector's relation to Jewishness has connected to both previous biographically oriented inquiry and readings of Lispector's "mysticism," while recent studies have tended to include the other concerns under the sign of nomadism.²⁸ In critical dialogue with both of these recent tendencies as well as the earlier ones, I read *A paixão* not as an anticipation of the figure of the

nomad and the nomadic (Nina 15), but the crystallization of the deserter and desertion, concepts explicitly and implicitly explored in Lispector's writing during this period.

I return to more fully define the different modalities of this concept at the end of the introduction and in the first two chapters. For now, I want to suggest how its dual semantic emphasis—a line of flight that also refers back to something abandoned—provides a productive figure for exploring the relations between the universal and the local in Lispector's worlds. In *A paixão*, G.H., a well-off sculptor, narrates her disorienting double encounter with a mural scrawled on the wall by her departed black maid and with a cockroach that emerges from the maid's quarters. The narrative events are set in motion when G.H.'s reactions to the maid's writing blur with her unexplained rage at the cockroach. Although G.H. remains immobilized in the maid's quarters, her narrative path of desertion involves both a personal exodus and an exodus from the person: passing through a series of negations (“disorganization,” “dehumanization,” “depersonalization,” “deheroization”) she imagines the collapse of the urban landscape into a desert composed of shifting references to Rio de Janeiro, Egypt, and Africa (the personal exodus); and, following this vision, she gradually approximates the dying cockroach as a neutral form of “inhuman” life, which, in the novel's most notorious act, she ingests (her exodus from the person). As I show, *A paixão* involves an implicit dialogue with Brazilian *modernismo* around what the narrator calls, paradoxically, different ways of “seeing the other,” a path that includes both haptic and gustatory approaches but ends in an ethical and intransitive love.

A hora da estrela returns to this basic scenario in the very different context of military rule, substituting the dialogue with *modernismo* for one with *regionalismo* and engaged writing more generally. The narrator-writer Rodrigo S.M.'s concern with Macabéa, the poor migrant copyist

from the Northeast, repeats the concern in regionalist social novels with the rural worker on the margins (if not outside) of lettered culture. Macabéa, though, appears within an urban Rio de Janeiro defined by consumerism and mass commodity culture. The narrator, himself (like Lispector) a “migrant” from the Northeast, fashions himself as a marginal writer who deserts his social class to reveal the life of a marginalized other who obstinately fails to recognize her miserable condition. Despite his metalinguistic reflections, Rodrigo writes Macabéa’s fate into a cruelly ironic melodramatic plot: she falls for a steelworker from the Northeast, but he leaves her for a more voluptuous workmate; she seeks alleviation for her abstract pain, but receives only inconsequential or cruel advice; she sees a fortuneteller who promises a fortune of Hollywood happiness, marrying a rich blond foreigner, but this materializes as her death by a yellow Mercedes Benz. At the same time, Macabéa’s small flights from her assigned place and role connect to a more poetic register and constellation, in dialogue with an engaged experimental poetics that Rodrigo both calls up and attempts unsuccessfully to delimit.

Juan José Saer: *El entenado* and *El río sin orillas*

Juan José Saer was born in 1937 to immigrant Catholic Syrian parents in the city of Serodino, Santa Fe, but lived primarily in the city of Santa Fe and the countryside of Colastiné Norte. He worked as a journalist in the late 1950s then taught at the Instituto de Cinematografía de Universidad del Littoral in Santa Fé. Aided by a scholarship to study the *Nouveau roman*, Saer left for Paris in 1968, bypassing the central cultural axis of Buenos Aires. This self-described voluntary exile became permanent and he remained in France, where he taught Latin American literature at the Université de Rennes, until his death from cancer in 2005. Unlike Lispector’s acclaimed debut, Saer’s first book of short stories, *En la zona* (1960), received little attention outside the literary circles of Santa Fe. Between *En la zona* and his move, Saer published a

series of short stories and novels often considered close to a kind of realism: *Responso* (1964), *Palo y hueso* (1965), *La vuelta completa* (1966), *Unidad de lugar* (1967). The narrative texts written after this period demonstrate a closer proximity to the “objectivism” of the *nouveau roman*: *Cicatrices* (1969), *El limonero real* (1974), *La mayor* (1976), and *Nadie nada nunca* (1980). Although Saer’s national consecration did not happen until the late 1980s, in what Dalmaroni has described as a trajectory from “silence to consensus” (“El largo”), the criticism during this period began to emphasize some of the distinctive features of Saer’s writing: a constructive rigor combined with a poetic intensity of perception and the sensible; a return to the same regional territory or “zone” of littoral Santa Fe, but markedly different from the *costumbrismo* of regionalism; and a recurring network of characters with a group of intellectuals, artists, and writers at its core.²⁹

As with Lispector’s *A paixão*, Saer’s *El entenado* (1983) marks a certain shift in Saer’s work, though with precursors in some of the short stories from *La Mayor* (1976). On the one hand, it appears to take on a more linear and intelligible narrative form compared to the repetition that structures his two previous works. On the other, it departs from the network of characters that populate his literary world. Like the later *El río sin orillas* (1990), *El entenado* returns to the “origins” of the “zone” or region where virtually all of Saer’s fiction takes place, from *En la zona* to the posthumously published *La grande* (2005), while anticipating the oscillation between the zone and other spaces in the later novel *La pesquisa* (1994) and the stories of *Lugar* (2000). Set during the first colonial expedition in the region, *El entenado* was the first of several longer narratives that occur in earlier periods, followed later by *La ocasión* (1988) and *Las nubes* (1996), both of which take place in the nineteenth century, and *El río sin orillas*, Saer’s “imaginary treatise” on the region that spans colonial contact to the post-dictatorship present.

Unlike other narrative texts that relate more directly to the violence of the dictatorship (*Nadie nada nunca*, *Glosa* [1986], *El río sin orillas*, and *Lo imborrable* [1992]), scene of colonial encounter in *El entenado* remains far more elliptically tied to its present: the unnamed narrator, a former cabin boy on the first Spanish ship to arrive in the region of the Río de la Plata, writes his memoirs in old age, focusing on the ten years that he spent with a cannibal tribe who killed and ate the rest of the landing crew. The concrete references to history, however, are also largely erased: the region has not yet been named, and the story that frames it has been elided, though *El río sin orillas* refers more explicitly to the episode and critics have sought to fill in the historical details. What stands out more prominently as a result, then, is the double massacre that marks the world of *El entenado*, since the Spanish who rediscover the narrator and send him back to Europe ten years later also exterminate the tribe.

The thematic of cannibalism and colonial intertextuality have helped make *El entenado* one of Saer's most widely circulated works, both within Latin Americanist criticism and beyond it, while *El río sin orillas* has received relatively little attention as a narrative text, even among the specialist criticism on Saer. The criticism on the relation of *El entenado* to history, however, has produced markedly different judgments, from its subversion of, to complicity with, official History.³⁰ While Saer's own insistent polemics against the "historical novel" do not disqualify these readings or debates, they nonetheless suggest other possible interpretative directions. For Saer, the "path of fiction" comes closer to myth rather than history and, as he argues in his own rereading of Ricardo Piglia's dictatorship-period novel, *Respiración artificial* (1980): "Every novel's point of departure is the present of writing, and what transports the narrative text are the sensorial, emotional, and intellectual guides [*pautas*] of this present and nothing else."³¹ A focus on the "guides," "guidelines," or "standards" [*pautas*] of the writing present, I suggest, requires

attention to its aesthetic labor or praxis as well as the aesthetic and discursive forms that define its present more generally. In *El entenado*, in fact, the narrator's reflections turn on other questions related to the myth and trope of anthropophagy: the problems with two previous versions of his story (a *testimonio*-style report and an internationally successful comedy); the purpose of the tribe's perennial cannibalistic orgy performed for a captive observer; and the meaning of his own role representing the tribe in the exterior after their "collapse." In this way, *El entenado* also contains a speculative and subjective inquiry into the boom of a "Latin American" literature and the representative figures or genres (Caliban, anthropophagy, magical realism, *testimonio*) of its incorporation into a world literary system.

El río sin orillas returns to the mythic foundations of the regional imaginary, but in a seemingly more referential vein and from the perspective of the present. Like other narrative texts of Saer's, *El río* reworks the rules of the genre that he takes up: "non-fiction." Reinscribed within what Saer reads as a tradition of "hybrid texts" in Argentine literature, *El río* combines elements of autobiography, reportage, and academic study in the four sections of the "imaginary treatise": "Summer," on the colonial period, from the event in *El entenado* to just before Independence; "Autumn," on images of the region in the writing of European travelers and intellectuals, from late colonial times to the Second World War; "Winter," on political violence and instability in the twentieth century, from Peronism to the last Argentine dictatorship; and, "Spring," on the region at the base of Saer's literary world and the ends of literature in the post-dictatorship present, which becomes Saer's affirmative response to Adorno's question of the possibility of art after Auschwitz. The combination of historical progression and cyclical time connect to two intersecting uses of myth in the narrative text: Saer's own personal "myth of rediscovering the affects and places of infancy and youth" (12), the ostensible reason for his

ritual return from Paris begun during the decline of military power; and mythological devouring bodies, adapted from Book Twelve of *The Odyssey*, which figure recurring oligarchic violence in the region and lend the narrative a certain structure. In this way, Saer's imaginary treatise turns the inquiry towards the violent incorporation of the region as "Western civilization."

The Transregional Turn and a "Latin American" Literary System

At the end of this introduction, I return to how Saer's construction of place troubles both the limits of the region and the uniformity of a global imaginary. Before reaching this point, it will be helpful to consider the earlier systems and tactics in the 1970s and 80s that linked Brazilian and Spanish American literatures. Both Antonio Candido's concept of *superregionalismo* and Ángel Rama's *transculturación narrativa* represented an unprecedented attempt to integrate Brazil and Spanish American writing into a coherent transnational Latin American literature or system. This Latin Americanist project partially reconfigured a long-standing comparative divide: Spanish American continental projects either tended to exclude Brazil through grounding in a shared language, culture and history, or incorporated Brazil through a projection of Spanish American identity; Brazilian national exegesis, on the other hand, tended to assert its singularity and difference not only from Portugal, Europe or the U.S., but also from Spanish America.³² The transnational integration of a Latin American literary system, which Rama developed in dialogue with Candido's own earlier formulations of a national literary system,³³ took place within a general forcefield opened by the Cuban Revolution; the boom of Latin American narrative; and the conservative or authoritarian modernization organized by military dictatorships, already themselves in transnational expansion across the continent. In tension with the dominant narrative of the boom and dismissals of "regionalist" literature, both Candido and Rama emphasized the social, economic, and cultural realities that gave "the region" continued

relevance. This configuration grouped together writers who not only engaged with cultural areas outside the metropolitan centers of Latin America, but also broke with the naturalism or social realism of previous regionalist aesthetics: the Mexican Juan Rulfo, the Columbian Gabriel García Márquez, the Peruvian José Maria Arguedas, the Brazilian João Guimarães Rosa. The transnational integration presupposed a common turn to the regional interior, oral traditions, popular cultural forms, and indigenous languages or cosmovisions.

In this sense, both narrative transculturation and superregionalism contributed to reorienting critical thinking and the spaces of the imagination onto an “internal axis,” one of the principal practical objectives of national developmentalism (Schwarz “O fim” 156). This “new social imaginary,” as Roberto Schwarz argues, attempted for the first time to encompass the entire nation—or in Candido and Rama’s criticism, the entire continental region—in an internally coherent way while opening up a “testing” of culture with “social practice and the fate of the excluded and the oppressed.”³⁴ Despite sharing the same corpus of writers, though, the two formulations reconfigured a regional social imaginary in different ways. In Candido’s “Literatura e subdesenvolvimento” (“Literature and Underdevelopment” [1970]),³⁵ the techniques of “superregionalism” constituted an overcoming of reference based on an “empirical vision of the world,” but in an “era” defined sociologically by the “consciousness of underdevelopment” and anticipated aesthetically by the earlier regionalist writers of the 1930s and 40s (162, 156). The superregionalist horizon projected a “cultural interdependency” that would make Latin Americans conscious of their “unity in diversity” and contribute to the “transnational integration” of Latin American literature—a reciprocal process of assimilation that could extend to the metropolitan and imperialist core (155). For Candido, superregionalist writers like Guimarães Rosa helped establish the “universality of the region”: the presence of a

regional dimension in works already considered “universally significant”; and a process that Candido identifies with a metaphysical “disembodying” of formerly picturesque traces.³⁶ The former raises a question that Gonzalo Aguilar poses in terms of Guimarães Rosa’s writing: should it be seen as a “universalization of the region” or the “localization of any petition of universality” (“Salidas” 85)? This question remains pertinent to my study. But, with respect to the second process, I also argue that Lispector’s writing forefronts the question of disincorporation, rather “disembodiment,” since what many critics consider the “metaphysical” or “mystic” aspects of her writing remain inseparable from both the body and a materialism.³⁷

Rama’s narrative transculturation also raises the question of localization as it turns more definitively onto a regional axis of continental integration, extending the theory of a national literary system to Latin America as a whole. Although also in dialogue with variants of dependency theory, Rama’s does not focus on Candido’s political-economic category of “underdevelopment,” but instead adapts the cultural-anthropological term “transculturation” from the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.³⁸ Following Ortiz, narrative transculturation emphasizes more dynamic cultural processes than the notion of “acculturation,” which presumed the passivity and loss of African or indigenous cultures under European cultural dominance, rather than creative responses that emerged from processes of both “deculturation” and “neoculturation.” The literary transculturators returned to “structures peculiar to the Latin American imaginary,” reclaiming and revitalizing them under historically new circumstances of intensified modernization (*Transculturación* 123). Narrative transculturation, in Rama’s schema, ideally fostered a combination of local cultural materials and avant-garde techniques that did not entail the “destruction of identity” (43)—a formulation that oscillates between a majoritarian national-continental identity and a minoritarian subaltern one.³⁹

This symptomatic tension becomes clearer, I want to suggest, in the changes to Rama's formulation of this integrative system, from the initial 1974 essay that lays out his argument, "Los procesos de transculturación en la narrativa latinoamericana," to the more complete study, *Transculturación narrativa*, published in 1982 shortly before Rama's unexpected death. In the 1974 essay, Rama had linked Brazil to Spanish America (a "conglomerate in development") as a "Latin American culture" and denominated this field "the Latin American literary system" ("Procesos" 217). Altering the larger formulation only slightly, Rama argues in the longer study *Transculturación* that the "cultural configuration" (*conformación cultural*) resulting from "secular forces of accumulation and re-elaboration" had not only established an "organic national culture" in Brazil and a "fruitful intercommunication" between the diverse areas of Spanish America (55). It also fostered a "dialogue" between modernism and regionalism through a "broad literary system, a field of integration and mediation, functional and self-regulated" (56). In addition to abandoning the transcendental name "Latin American" for this "broad literary system," *Transculturación* downplays the more harmonic reconciliation proposed in the earlier essay and the idea that transculturators would make legible the "original orb [*orbe*] of Latin American culture" in its present state of "evolution" ("Procesos" 232). At the same time, the Brazilian model of an "organic national culture" in *Transculturación* continues to presuppose similar notions and represents a continuity with Candido's national literary system, which also projected a kind of organicity.⁴⁰ Although the reasons for abandoning a "Latin American literary system" are not clear, it appears to follow a rationale laid out early in *Transculturación*: "Latin America" would be an adequate name only when the interior regional cultures ceased being expropriated as mere "raw material" and provided a cosmovision, language, and technique of their own (20).⁴¹

Rama's reluctance in naming and consolidating a "Latin American" literary system, though, exemplifies a central tension surrounding the ends of Latin American literature. On the one hand, transculturation projects an integrative literary system on a continental scale, a "Latin American" world (or "orb") that includes the cosmopolitan avant-garde but grounds itself in the interior regional subcultures. On the other hand, the withholding of this transcendental name appears tied to the possibility of an alternative integration and inclusion of marginalized cultures, represented through narrative transculturation (or more problematically, represented *by* it).⁴² In this sense, Rama's argument also recognizes the danger of the integrative literary system operating as a kind of regional culture-industry, renewing, in an era of national developmentalism, the very logic Marx and Engels described as the original conditions of "world literature." Even for sympathetic critics like Antonio Cornejo Polar, who signaled the advance of *transculturación* over an earlier ideology of *mestizaje*, the generalized use of the term tended to project a "syncretic plane that finally incorporates in a more or less unproblematic totality (in spite of the conflictive character of the process) two or more languages, two or more ethnic identities, two or more aesthetic codes and historical experiences" ("Mestizaje, Transculturation" 117). Against this incorporated totality, the task was to maintain a sense of conflict and alterity, embodied for Cornejo Polar in the notion of socio-cultural "heterogeneity" and a "migrant subject" that accompanies the large-scale exodus from the countryside to the city.⁴³

A second end to a Latin American literature, this one more U.S.-based, takes a different account of this period of disaggregation and disintegration of national illusions: it inherits the emancipatory or egalitarian goals of these earlier Latin Americanist projects but separates them from a Latin American literature now re-identified with the authority of the lettered elite. This anti- or post-literary paradigm of Latin Americanism has refocused attention on the failures of

national integration and the persistent partitions of the regional social imaginary, replacing the “oppressed” or “excluded,” for example, with the coloniality of the “subaltern” or the migrancy of the “nomad,” what remains below or beyond the hegemonic discourse of the nation. This shift has come with a powerful critique of the notion that either literature or the lettered elite could legitimately represent marginalized cultures and subaltern subjects within a national or regional project.⁴⁴ It falls to a theory of subalternity to mark how academic knowledge is “structured by the absence, difficulty, or impossibility of representation of the subaltern” (Beverley *Subalternity* 40). But in the reversal from a structuring presence to a structuring absence we may find another use of the previous Latin Americanist literary paradigms of transnational integration. Both the new comparative models of world literature and, perhaps more surprisingly, the newer paradigms of Latin Americanism often operate with an undifferentiated “Latin American” space. Latin Americanism has, as critics like Neil Larsen argue, “successfully constructed a theoretically ‘regional’ object with almost no remaining connection to any real place” (“Latin-Americanism” 37). As Román de la Campa asserts in a less polemical vein, research often lacks a comparative attention to “different modern/colonial hybrid formations within each area” (451). The new models of world literature, on the other hand, assume a unity of “Latin America” that disconnects its literatures from these previous debates, social imaginaries, and local matters.

In this sense, the projections of an integrated Latin American literature or system did not simply fail with the “bankruptcy” of national developmentalism (Schwarz “Fim” 155), but proceeded largely independent of the emancipatory dimension that critics like Candido and Rama sought to maintain. The recent anthology of essays *América Latina en la ‘literatura mundial’* provides a telling marker of this change. By and large, all of the essays respond critically to the place of Latin America within the new models of world literature proposed by

comparatists like Moretti and Casanova. The skepticism evident in the title, *Latin America in 'World Literature'*, establishes an implicit dialogue with the affirmative integrationist project of *América Latina en su literatura* (1972), the collection that included the original Spanish version of Candido's essay ("Literatura y subdesarrollo"). The editor of this recent collection, in fact, begins with an epigraph from another critical text by Saer, a writer otherwise wholly absent from the subsequent discussions. In the epigraph, Saer criticizes the convergence between "the nationalism of the colonizer," Europe's role in allocating the proper themes and forms based on its "image" of Latin America, and the "nationalism of the colonized," Latin American writing that readily concedes to this partition of the imaginary.⁴⁵ Saer's essay, virtually contemporaneous with the novel that I take up in chapter three, polemically aims at the ideology of representativeness in Latin American literature: on the one hand, the idea that the writer should represent a national or continental identity, a rejection articulated earlier by Julio Cortázar, another Paris-based Argentine writer; and, on the other, the idea that literature should express *lo latinoamericano* ("the Latin American") as an *a priori* criteria, an argument laid out in Borges' canonical essay "El escritor argentino y tradición." Unlike Cortázar, who touched off a major polemic with Arguedas when he differentiated his own "aesthetic freedom" to write literature outside of "historical time and space" from the more limited focus on one's locality, what he calls a "labor 'of the zone',"⁴⁶ Saer's critique is not aimed at a regionally situated writing: Guimarães Rosa, who circulated more transregionally, was important not only to Lusophone African writers like Mia Couto and Luandino Vieira, but also to Saer in Argentina.⁴⁷ Instead, the principal target of Saer's critique is the aesthetics of "magical realism" and the novel that codified it as a marketable style—García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, an antagonist replaced more recently by the novels of Isabel Allende. It is arguably García Márquez's *Cien*

años, not Arguedas or Guimarães Rosa, which came to signify the region of Latin America within world literature.⁴⁸

Indeed, in an important precursor to his own reformulation of “world literature,” Franco Moretti presented a similar critique of “magical realism,” a category he otherwise unproblematically applies to a wide range of Latin American literature. On the one hand, *Cien años* marked a decisive shift in the geography of literary creation: like other texts Moretti labeled “modern epics” (from Goethe’s *Faust* to Joyce’s *Ulysses*), *Cien años* produced a literary mapping of the world-system from the uneven conditions of its “semi-periphery.” With the advent of the new narrative from Latin America and India, though, one could speak for the first time of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* beyond the territory of Europe (*Modern Epic* 233). Moretti directs his critique at the functional “incorporation” of García Márquez’s fictional semi-rural community of Macondo into the modern world-system: “magical realism” turns the “hundred years” of post-colonial accelerated modernization and conflict into an “adventure filled with wonder,” readily consumed back in the metropolitan West (*Modern Epic* 250). Although he remains agnostic about the possibilities of myth within postcolonial India or Latin America, Moretti reads the function of magical realism in Europe as a re-enchantment that happens only in “exotic” locales (250), akin to the “lost transcendence” that European “world texts” attempted to reinstate through either a new sacredness or blasphemy (109). Moretti’s term for this—a “compromise formation” for Western readers—provides the basis for his reformulation of world literature, where formal “compromise” becomes the central analytic unit for reading all “peripheral” literatures.⁴⁹ Insofar as “magical realism” becomes the endpoint and sum of Latin American literature for Moretti, the astute critique of Macondo’s magically real modernization also conforms to the system, relegating local, national, and regional traditions to this

representation of the “exotic.” A literary world that coincides with the world-system (“magical realism”) cedes to an interpretive system that seeks the literature that confirms its logic.

When Saer goes on to defend a somewhat idiosyncratic definition of “myth” or the “value of myth” in both critical interventions and *El río sin orillas* (as I show in chapter four), he mobilizes a personal “myth” against the tendency of myth to turn into the rituals that engender “dogma” then “heresy” (correlating to what Moretti calls “sacredness” and “blasphemy”). Similarly, in Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.*, the narrator’s temporary desertion of her former life and world constructs a personal myth of exodus that differentiates itself from heresy or apostasy, dogma or the law. Although my dissertation considers some of the myths or mythology that Saer and Lispector consciously redeploy in their fiction, I focus on how these personal “myths” intersect with and alter them. What Saer polemically calls the “value of myth,” I suggest, provides a way to continue thinking about art, literature, and aesthetic experience after various declarations about their putative end. Saer conceives this “value” as the contemplation of reality brought about not by myth per se, but by an experience or “epiphany,” a Joycean category important for criticism on Lispector: the experience of forming a whole with “I and the universe”; or, in *El río sin orillas*, the sensation of “forming a single body with the world.”⁵⁰ The staging of this formulation in *El río sin orillas* makes clear that a “single” or “unique body” (*cuero único*) does not reduce to the empirical “I”: it takes place when a *mestiza* woman marked as other in class and race terms wades into the river and the writer feels the same sensations in his legs, linking them through an identificatory projection. In Saer’s imaginary treatise, as I show in chapter four, this scene involves the return of traces of alterity suppressed from the crystallization of the region and previously embodied in mythological form; in turn, it provokes a new conception of the region in the world. Lispector’s narrator of *A paixão*, G.H., professes a

similar desire to form a body with world: “If I am the world [*Se eu for o mundo*], I will not be afraid. If we are the world [*Se a gente é o mundo*], we are moved by a delicate radar that guides” (101). In the course of the narrative, the shift from this “I” to a micro-collective “we” (*a gente*) similarly approaches the suppressed alterity of what she calls the “inhuman,” a category that includes the lowest orders of animal life, emblematically represented in the bodily mass of a cockroach that she approximates and eventually ingests. The encounters between these bodies and “the real” of their imaginaries reconfigures the partitions of the social and the human, altering (not erasing) the incorporated logics of class, race, and gender, but also the forms of the visible and invisible within their literary worlds.

Anthropophagic *Weltliteratur*: Latin America and/or the World

Attention to these imaginary bodies and alter-worlds in Lispector’s and Saer’s writing also presents an alternative to another influential theoretical place and practice connecting Latin Americanism and world literature. In “Da razão antropofágica: Europa sob o signo da devoração,” an article originally published in 1981, the Brazilian poet and critic Haroldo de Campos proposed a locally-inflected return to the idea of “world literature,” preceding by a good two decades the recent comparative reformulations. As with the more recent returns, Campos cites Marx and Engels’ materialist re-elaboration of Goethe’s term *Weltliteratur*, retranslating it as the “world of communications,” an “inter-semiotic *praxis*” that turns the universal literary sign into an ideological sign. For Campos, the key strategy developed by Brazilian *modernismo*—Oswald de Andrade’s *antropofagia*—already conceives the national and universal in “dialogic and dialectical relation.” Unlike Brazilian romanticism, which took up the “good savage,” Oswald’s anthropophagy proposed the “critical devoration of the universal cultural legacy” from the perspective of the “bad savage,” the “devourer of whites.” Cultural

anthropophagy's "critical devoration" thus performs a similar desacralizing task for peripheral literatures that Walter Benjamin identified with both the European avant-gardes and film. But rather than the "liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage" ("The Work of Art" 254), cultural anthropophagy proposed a Nietzschean "transvaluation" that went beyond "transculturation," making possible a critical view of History, "capable as much of appropriation, as expropriation, de-hierarchization, deconstruction" ("Da razão antropofágica" 11-12). Campos's argument coincides with one advanced by Silviano Santiago, who similarly redeployed the anthropophagic trope a decade earlier as a tactic of the "in-between place" (*entre-lugar*) of Latin American discourse. Illustrating his examples via the two most cosmopolitan Argentine writers, Cortázar and Borges, Santiago deemphasized the "invisible" elements of writing from the peripheries (the presence of the European and especially French model), to show the "visible" supplement of the Latin American text, its "aggression" against the European original ("O entre-lugar" 26-8). For Santiago, this "tactical deconstructive project" within comparative literature opened up "non-ethnocentric" rereadings that establish new criteria for judging the metropolitan text's "universality," but also the Latin American one, which becomes universal in spite of its dependence.⁵¹

Like Santiago, Campos' argument poses anthropophagic world literature in an *and/or* frame—"avant-garde and/or underdevelopment"—that breaks from underdevelopment or dependency as the defining category for culture on the peripheries. At the same time, however, they maintain a reference to both, folded into a claim that identifies Latin America with a vanguard position in the world literary system. After noting the importance of Borges for French theory and the "boom" of Latin American literature for world literature, Campos' argues that now European writers would also have to assume "the increasingly urgent task of recognizing

and redevouring [*redevorar*] the differential marrow of the polytopic and polyphonic planetary civilization's new barbarians" (24). Campos' provocatively baroque formulation converges with several of the turns taken by Latin Americanist and postcolonialist criticism at the end of the last century. The proliferating sounds and places of a "planetary civilization" resonate with recent appeals to the "planetary horizon" of the world-system, against a Eurocentric model of modernity as autonomous development (Dussel), or a "planetarity," as a way of thinking and feeling the indefinite alterity of the planet obscured by the "financialization of the globe" (Spivak).⁵² The privilege Campos gives the "new barbarians," moreover, partially converges with the earlier Caribbean appropriation-expropriation of Caliban (Fernández Retamar) and the more recent appeals to "barbarian theorizing" (Mignolo).⁵³

Yet the prescription for an anthropophagic world literature—to recannibalize the cannibals—also helps make visible several limits in this politics of a Latin Americanist aesthetics. If anthropophagy leads the way in a "critical devoration" of History, appropriating any past that is "other" as its own, this strategy becomes hard to distinguish from what Frederic Jameson defined shortly after as a key tendency of "late" capitalism's cultural logic: "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the 'neo'" (*Postmodernism* 18). Of course, the proposal to recannibalize the cannibals is not simply "random" history or citation. On the one hand, it appeals to a specific national tradition (or "counter-tradition"): Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagus "technologized barbarian," proclaimed in his 1928 manifesto ("O manifesto antropófago" 19). On the other, while it performs a specific politics of aesthetics, reclaiming the *universal* for peripheral cultures, it also identifies *the* universal first with Europe and then the mass mediated "universal code," the "world of communications" (12). Unlike, of course, the old

“barbarians” targeted by State power in the name of “civilization,” the neo-barbarians appear instead with the mask of pastiche, an expression of “modernist styles” becoming “postmodern codes,” the moment for Jameson when art finally incorporates the techniques of the culture industry. But this is also the moment for Saer, in a less deterministic renewal of similar critical-theoretical sources, when art assumes the “stylized crystallization” of stereotypes proper to the “terrain of the Other” (*El río* 214).

To approach an anthropophagic world literature as a “stylized crystallization,” rather than a mediatic code, moves beyond either its celebration or its negation. Cultural anthropophagy has been criticized for assuming, like the nationalists it opposed, a general national subject that hides its class, ethnic, and gendered dimensions: its creative solution to the problem of imitating European or American models also obscured the ostensible source of malaise attached to this problem in the first place—“the segregation of the poor” from access to the means of contemporary cultural production (Schwarz “Nacional” 125). Similarly, Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda has argued that neither women nor black Brazilians have taken up anthropophagy’s “carnivalized discourse,” an acute observation which is only partially true (“Parking”). Like Patricia Galvão, one of the more radical late members of the original anthropophagy group, Lispector’s writing critically intertwines digestive and indigestive gestures, incorporation and disincorporation, anthropophagy and anthropoemia (to use Lévi-Strauss’s term for the “vomiting” out of the other, first proposed as the “modern” Western obverse of “primitive” anthropophagy⁵⁴). Lispector shares this intertwining of the two logics not only with the *modernista* Mário de Andrade,⁵⁵ but also, as I show in my dissertation, with Saer. To argue, as Schwarz does, that “analogy with the digestive process clarifies [*esclarece*] nothing of the politics and aesthetics of the contemporary cultural process” (“Nacional” 121), relegates these

corporeal metaphors to the realm of unenlightened myth. These imaginary bodies and processes, I maintain, help us think and feel the uneven terrain of the contemporary—terrain that also includes the competition for what should or shouldn't qualify *as* contemporary.

The prescription for an anthropophagic world literature stylizes a history of colonial violence that it also ironically invokes. But the prescription also appears “baroque” precisely in the sense that Borges ironically defined it, as “the final stage of every art, when art shows and squanders [*exhibe y delapida*] its means,” exhausting its possibilities in a performance that borders on “its own caricature” (9).⁵⁶ Assuming the role of cannibal or barbarian (“the devourer of whites”) takes place within an uneven racial and ethnic drama that effectively reverses the logic of Fanon’s well-known analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon described how the racialized subject emerges when the equality assumed by a person of color is painfully unmasked, reducing them to a body shaped by colonial axioms and projections. An anthropophagic world literature, on the other hand, performs a drama of “white face, barbarian masks,” an almost self-caricatural exhibition of aesthetic means that allows a Latin Americanist subject to play civilization’s other without any of the negative connotations attached to the other’s body. Lispector and Saer, I argue in my dissertation, engage critically with these digestive tropes and corporeal dramas, charting different paths through and beyond them.

Lispector and the Figure of the Deserter

In the first two chapters, I return to the question of the dialogue between modernism and regionalism, but shift it towards Lispector’s intertextual dialogue with each. Unlike Saer, who published several books of critical texts, Lispector largely theorized about her own writing practice within both her fiction and the hybrid form of the *crônica* (“chronicle”). I want to focus here on one of her often cited but under-analyzed chronicles “Pertencer” (“Belonging”), because

it introduces a figure that is central to the two narrative texts I take up in this dissertation: “the deserter.” My aim is to put this concept, scattered throughout her work during this period, into dialogue with two different interpretative approaches to her corpus: one, an emphasis on nomadism, largely Deleuzian-inspired; the other, a renewed attention to Lispector’s elusive relation to Jewish culture and Judaic tradition. In “Pertencer,” Lispector explains her belonging to Brazil and Brazilian literature as part of her “intense will to belong,” a condition that the *crônica* enigmatically attributes to an originary “non-belonging,” her having been a “deserter” since birth. Let us then follow the movement of the chronicle, from the question of her “belonging” to Brazilian literature to her self-figuration as a “deserter” on a solitary path through the desert.

The “intense will to belong,” Lispector argues, does not simply come from weakness or a need to join some larger association. Instead, it comes from a desire that her “force” or “strength” (*força*) might “fortify a person or thing” rather than be useless (*Descoberta* 152). She illustrates this through both her belonging to her country—“I am like millions of other people so belonging to it [*tão pertencente a ele*] to the point of being Brazilian”⁵⁷—and to Brazilian literature: “I am happy to belong [*pertencer*] to Brazilian literature for motives that have nothing to do with literature, since I am not even a *literato* or intellectual. Happy only ‘to be a part’ [*fazer parte*].” The first sense of “belonging” (*pertencer*) clearly suggests belonging to a whole (national literature); the second sense of belonging, *fazer parte*, literally suggests “being a part,” “doing one’s part,” or “making a part.” But it is not a “belonging to” or “being a part of” (*fazer parte de*) any determined whole—and it matters little whether this whole is national literature or a more abstract whole, like world literature, that might replace it. As Lispector remarks elsewhere, using the same inverted commas, the *fazer* or “doing/making” of literature

and aesthetics differs from the *fazer* of politics, “doing” in the sense of contributing with acts (*Alegria* 149). To assert that there is “no formula for an appropriate correlation” between art and politics—or between Lispector’s “force” or desire to “fortify a person or thing” and a larger process of construction—does not mean that they do not interact (Rancière *Politics of Aesthetics* 62). Their interaction is responsible, on the one hand, for her relative absence from the central politics of Brazilian (and Latin American) aesthetics during the dictatorship period, even its more heterodox cosmopolitan currents like *tropicalismo*⁵⁸; and, on the other, for her relative presence within the politics of a transnational feminist aesthetics and theory. Lispector’s notion of “*fazer parte*” returns us to a sense of writing that both belongs to Brazilian literature and belongs in itself, a writing whose purposiveness (the desire “to fortify a person or thing”) also lacks a defined purpose and identity.

The chronicle links this question of belonging to the figure of “the deserter,” a concept explicitly and implicitly explored in her fiction from this period. Much recent criticism has reconceptualized Lispector’s view of writing as “searching” in terms of nomadism or the nomadic. This criticism tends to share a view of Lispector’s literary world as “extraterritorial,” driven by a “nomadic” movement (Curi 77), or as a “space of errancy” whose place is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, an abstract “non-place” (Sousa *Figura* 33; “A revelação” 141). The focus becomes less Lispector’s “foreignness” than the various logics of negation in her work: disintegration, disaggregation, deterritorialization. The deserter and its correlates (desertion, the desert), I argue, suggest a more tenuous relation to either biographical identity or a plane of absolute deterritorialization. The military connotation of “the deserter” is only one of several shifting references that also include deserting one’s inscribed social role, family ties, or deadening romantic relationships. Lispector’s self-figuration in the chronicle

“Pertencer” invokes both the familial and military connotations. After explaining her “belonging” to Brazil and Brazilian literature, Lispector recounts her birth as the inauguration of her ordinary non-belonging and status as a “deserter.” She relates this autobiographical story in a typically allusive and elusive way, recounting how her sick mother had her, the third child, based on a popular belief that the birth might cure her disease. When Clarice was simply “born,” her parents forgave her betraying their “great hope,” but she did not pardon herself—it was as if they had “counted on her in the trenches” and she had “deserted,” failing the “mission” given to her (*Descoberta* 153). Lispector configures this failed “mission” as the cause of her non-belonging, a shameful “secret” that sends her into flight as a “deserter.”

The chronicle, however, does not explain this enigmatic “secret” or the reasons for the military metaphors. As with similar allusions in *A paixão* and *A hora da estrela*, the deserter says something, without saying something, about Lispector’s Jewish heritage.⁵⁹ Biography could provide one response, and recent critics have returned to her elder sister Elisa’s loosely autobiographical *No exílio* (1948), which begins with celebratory news of Israel’s founding and recounts the family’s flight of exile from the Ukraine to Brazil, including the violent pogroms in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution, violence that may have also been the source of her mother’s unexplained disease. This context, however, does little to dispel the enigma and shame that pertains to the deserter. As a figure of the writer and for literary subjectivity, the deserter presents a break from the obscure “mission” attached to her biological birth, establishing a disjunctive relation with both the past and Lispector’s own Jewish heritage (her “non-belonging” to her parents). Similar to Adorno’s argument about the shame that overcomes the “the descendent in face of an earlier possibility that he [sic] has failed to bring to fruition,” the deserted “mission” makes present the “broken promise of a new beginning,”

opening up an experimental and quasi-messianic relation between past and present. Precisely because they are not simply abandoned, the deserted mission or broken promise might be actualized in other ways. These may be more utopian, as with the desert “vision” in *A paixão*, written during a period of radical mobilization that ended with the military coup: a kind of anti-Brasília, which gathers the “unclean” life expelled from the functionalist capital city. Or it may be more dystopian, as in *A hora da estrela* or “Pertencer,” written during different periods of the dictatorship. In “Pertencer,” Lispector redefines belonging at the very end of the *crônica* as an almost bare but nonetheless intense experience of “living”: “living” is the experience of a subject momentarily quenching her thirst in the desert before that desert surrounds her again (*Descoberta* 153). In *A hora*, Macabéa’s fragile memories of the sky exploding in fireworks forms part of a constellation negated by the narrator, Rodrigo, who writes her fate in a more sadistic script where she can appear only in her death.

Saer and the Indeterminacies of Place

As I’ve suggested above, both *El entenado* and *El río sin orillas* have narrators that comprise figures of the writer, and more specifically, a dual narrative subjectivity: immigrant and exile, or immigrant-exile. While this pair of narrative texts displaces Saer’s familiar network of characters, their returns to the putative “origins” of the region forefront the other constitutive feature of Saer’s literary world: the region or littoral “zone” of Santa Fe as a recurring imaginary territory for his fiction.⁶⁰ The cyclical return to the same region—the largely unnamed city of Santa Fe, but also the surrounding *pampa* plains and the Paraná river—becomes the basis for Saer’s reconception of “place,” especially after Saer’s own relocation to Paris in 1968. “Discusión sobre el término zona” (1967), one of the short “arguments” from *La Mayor* (1976), highlights the constitutive tensions around the term zone and region. Dated just before Saer’s

relocation, “Discusión” stages an argument between one of Saer’s recurring writer-figures, Pichón Garay, and his friend Lalo Lescano. In anticipation of his own imminent departure for Paris, Pichón asserts, “one always remains faithful to a zone, a region” (102). Lescano, in contrast, notes the difficulty of specifying the “limits of a region” and initially proposes “principles of differentiation” rather than “different regions,” juxtaposing the “creole coast” with the more economically powerful “foreign plains” (*pampa gringa*). And yet, he notes, the *pampa* also connects to a coast and there are creoles in the *pampa* just as there are foreigners on the coast; in the city, “good families” live in the center as well as in the suburbs. He thus abandons the term “region” altogether and the short story concludes with Pichón’s disagreement: “I don’t agree” (*No comparto*), a phrase suggesting both how he refuses to take *part* in sharing this space and how he does not share this view of the part dissolving into the whole. For if Pichón Garay’s fidelity to the region is overdetermined by his own ironically ostentatious *criollismo* (the family’s claim of filiation to Juan de Garay, the founder of Santa Fe), Lescano, from more humble means, appeals ultimately to the economic forces that deterritorialize the rural region and the urban city alike.

In this way, Saer restages Sarmiento’s famous dichotomy of “civilization and barbarism” in altered terms, between the forces of capital and the limits of the zone or region.⁶¹ The other fragments of Pichón in *La mayor*, however, undermine his triumphant claim to regional fidelity in other ways: Pichón’s prolonged distance from the region afflicts his memories with a new sense of “irreality” and “the alien” or “foreign” (*el extranjero*) (147, 148). In *La pesquisa* (1994), Pichón experiences an even more radical sense of displacement on his return from France to the zone, one that replaces the affects tied to a birthplace (*tierra natal*) with the strangeness of being born in a “larger, more neutral place, neither friend, nor enemy, unknown,

which no one could call theirs, [...] a home that is neither spatial nor geographic, not even verbal, but rather, and as far as these words can continue meaning something, physical, chemical, biological, cosmic, and of which the visible and invisible [...] form a part” (98). The poetic syntax that renders Pichón’s experience circles back in multiple clauses to modify and dissolve the original object (“place”) into its constitutive elements.⁶² However, this indifference is also contradicted later by a “bitter memory” that spurs other associations in turn, forcing Pichón to recall the disappearance of his twin brother Gato and Elisa (147-8), characters at the center of the novel *Nadie nada nunca* (1980) who became victims of the military dictatorship, as readers of Saer had learned in the novel *Glosa* (1986). Pichón’s failure to return, his lack of fidelity to both family and “the region,” emerges in the tension with his friend Carlos Tomatis, who remained in Argentina during the dirty war and took charge of searching for Gato.

Here we are much closer to Saer’s notion of “place” as indeterminate and difficult to escape, liable to return in a kind of “involuntary memory,” to use the Proustian term that Saer both implicitly and explicitly invokes throughout his writing. For Saer, the writer does not write “in” (*en*) but “from” (*desde*) a place that is also written by the writing subject; moreover, insofar as it becomes “the paradigm of the world,” this place also “impregnates the written, voluntarily or involuntarily, with its peculiar flavor [*sabor*].”⁶³ This aesthetic sense of place, reality, and world is notably uncertain and problematic: it assumes neither their anteriority to literary appearance nor the literary text as the sole cause of appearance.⁶⁴ Saer’s appeal to the “empirical” as the “model of the imaginary” maintains the tensions between aesthetic appearance and the given empirical world, tensions otherwise lost by an exclusive emphasis on either textual play or construction and technique.⁶⁵ For this reason too, we should understand Saer’s polemical claim for a “literature without attributes” in the late 1970s as something other than a program for a

literature to come or what Alain Badiou has recently called “affirmationist art”: art that arrives at the “universal” through a “subtraction” of all particular attributes and has as its common landscape certain “void” spaces (the desert, the ocean, a bare place).⁶⁶ The desert spaces in Lispector’s and Saer’s worlds are never quite bare nor devoid of all traces of history. Like a literature “without attributes,” they take place as a moment within the narrative text, as in Pichón’s experience or the experience of the “river without banks” in *El río sin orillas* (a title, *The River without Banks*, which rewrites the earlier formulation). In this way, we can better understand Saer’s seemingly contrary claim in “La narración-objeto” (1999) that narrative fiction has less to do with the universals of discourse than with the object, a “singular organization of particular attributes” (20). Through attention to the role that both traditions and place play in the literary worlds of Lispector and Saer, I suggest, we arrive at something other than the relegation of Brazilian, Argentine, or Latin American literature to either the “very differentiated” or “the generic” (Saer “Tradición y cambio” 100).

My first two chapters read Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.* and *A hora da estrela* against their grain and as counterpoints to each other. In chapter one, I explore how the narrator’s imaginary flight from her everyday life crystallizes the figure of the deserter explored in other texts from this period. Although recent cultural criticism has renewed attention to the class and racial otherness of the maid, Janair, correcting the more exclusive focus of previous criticism on the narrator’s quasi-mystical communion with the cockroach, both surprisingly ignore the maid’s enigmatic “writing” as what mediates the encounter with both. What I call the G.H.’s path of desertion—the subjective flight from her social identity, the imagined collapse of her urban landscape into a desert, and her eventual communion with the cockroach as a form of neutral “inhuman” life—only begins after she is localized and shamed by associating the maid with the

squished cockroach. The narrator's subsequent reactions to this "writing," I argue, establish an implicit dialogue with Brazilian *modernismo* on a path through different ways of "seeing the other": not seeing, possessing, eating, and a kind of ethical proximity. As I show, the ritual-like possession in *A paixão* reworks a similar scene in Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* where both Jewish and Afro-Brazilian identities are also ambiguously at play. This heterogeneous mixture also affects the narrator's personal exodus and the "vision" of the desert outside her window. Neither a locatable place nor a non-place, the desert combines references to Rio, Egypt, and Africa, forming an alter-world and counter-reality to the images of the new capital Brasília in Lispector's chronicles. By opening to the "unclean" animal life banished from the modernist city and presenting the inhuman cockroach as itself composed of industrial materials, the hermetic *A paixão* inscribes traces of history in its narrative construction. Here I take the focus of earlier criticism on existentialism and mysticism in another direction, placing the "inhuman" cockroach in constellation with similar images in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Rather than critically devouring the most advanced developments of European culture, the narrator eats the devalued otherness previously excluded from her bourgeois life, an act reinterpreted as a form of neutral love. Her final mode of "seeing the other," an ethical approximation to the other that refuses its heroic incorporation, thus also becomes a mode of relating to the other's writing, whether "foreign" or "domestic."

A hora da estrela returns to this scenario in a much more concretely social and historical plot. Whereas in chapter one I argue for the importance of the oblique traces of the social and historical in *A paixão*'s otherwise hermetic path of desertion, in chapter two I emphasize the traces of a poetic constellation that the overt narrative of social denunciation works to negate. *A hora*, I argue, charts two intersecting narrative paths: on the one hand, Rodrigo's plan to write a

formulaic story with a coldly delimited end, adequate to represent Macabéa's poverty and her incapacity to recognize let alone alter her condition; on the other, Macabéa's small flights from her assigned place and role that begin to diverge from this script. The writer resolves the tension by rerouting the latter back into the former, a tactic that not only belies their common marginality, but also calls up vampiric images implicating him in the story's perverse economy of misery and redemption, guilt and compensation. Macabéa appears increasingly redundant in the text, someone who can neither consume properly nor be properly consumed by others; her body is marked as racially other and an object of distaste, with faint traces of a resistant survival in which black and Jewish references again intersect. Although her cruelly ironic stardom allows her to really appear only on condition of her death, I show how a negated poetic constellation emerges in the cracks of Rodrigo's discourse, calling into question a series of delimited "ends" both within the novel and outside it: not only the end that decrees Macabéa's fate, but also the end of modernism and its elliptical engagement with the social.

Chapter three returns to Saer's speculative fable of anthropophagy in *El entenado*. Although mediated by the return to the origins of the "zone," Saer's representation of the anthropophagic tribe also takes place against the backdrop of a general transatlantic return to the cannibal myth and trope, where it ambiguously signified the "resistance" of Latin Americanist writing and a society against the State, but also the inhuman oppression of communism. In *El entenado*, the ambiguity revolves around the automatic repetition of the act, the theatrical gestures that appear directed towards reproducing a recognizable image in the exterior, and the role of the captive-witness in representing them. As in *A hora da estrela*, the narrative maps out divergent trajectories of his story among the cannibal tribe. On the one hand, the narrative stages a certain end of avant-garde rupture through the two previous versions of his story, the testimony to the

priest and the commercially successful comedy: after the Spanish conquistadors massacre the tribe and expel them from the land, the European public consumes the tribe aesthetically in a play already suited to their “taste”; while the narrator attempts to break the consensus by introducing negative gestures of silence into his role on stage, they do nothing but rigidify into a pose of cynicism. On the other hand, after the narrator abandons the stage for the bare room of writing, his reflections turn on the remainders of successful incorporation and consumption: the tribe’s language that forefronts inexistence and the uncertainty of appearing; a desperate hope concealed in their stereotypical poses and a void dissimulated by eating others from the exterior world; and memories that slightly alter the laws of this cannibal theater, questioning the purpose of him representing either their resistance or their collapse. Although *El entenado* does nothing to subvert the disappearance of the autochthonous collective, the memories at the end undo the certainty attached to the meaning of their acts and roles, substituting another constellation of bodies and the figure of an eclipse for the more definitive narratives of collapse and disintegration that mark the end of the last century.

Chapter four reads Saer’s “imaginary treatise,” *El río sin orillas*, as a narrative text in its own right, following the writer’s desire that it not be separated from his other fictional or poetic work. I examine how *El río sin orillas* undermines the conventions of “non-fiction” on micro- and macro-levels of the narrative text, diverting the more explicit historical and referential function of the treatise towards the more uncertain and aesthetic dimension of the imaginary. This challenge happens on the micro-level when the genres—academic study, reportage, and autobiography—intersect and interrupt the narrative flow, provoking an interrogation of cited material, the landscape, memory, and conflicting traditions in the region. These interruptions connect to the writer’s personal “myth” of reencountering the “affects and places of infancy and

youth,” a myth that includes renewing the possibility of aesthetic experience, beauty, and the common. On the less obvious macro-level, *El río* also turns historical reference towards mythology and epic: Saer adapts the episodes with Scylla and Charybdis in *The Odyssey* to formally structure the recurring oligarchic violence in the region, from the extermination of Amerindian tribes and the erasure of Afro-Argentines in the nineteenth century to the “disappeared” in the dirty war. As I show, Saer’s adaptation of Scylla as a devouring figure inscribes itself in a series of texts that include Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as Echeverría’s “El matadero” and Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, two foundational texts of Argentine literature that figure regional postcoloniality as an “intestinal” struggle. The mythical violence of swallowing up that culminates in the violent expulsion during the last dictatorship also overlaps in Saer’s imaginary treatise with a regional suppression of race that suddenly returns at the end in an experience of exteriority (“the river without banks”). Although *El río sin orillas* reclaims beauty, the common, and the Same as the ends of literature and art, it does so only after the experience of the “river without banks” dissolves the stereotypically Other, enabling a reconfiguration of the region in the world, where both sameness and otherness remain at play. In conclusion, I suggest how Saer’s regional addition to its series alters the more famous critical-theoretical interpretation of modernist autonomy embodied in the Sirens episode—not by renouncing or reasserting it, but like Lispector, by reimagining how it might emerge out of the heteronomy of the world rather than simply against it.

Chapter 1

Neither Integration nor Disintegration:

Paths of Desertion in *A paixão segundo G.H.*

“But it is in disillusionment that the promise is
fulfilled...”

—Clarice Lispector⁶⁷

In her chronicle “Literatura e justiça” (“Literature and Justice”), Clarice Lispector makes several claims that help elucidate the singular place of the novel *A paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.* [1964]) within her larger corpus. Despite feeling the importance of the “social fact” (*fato social*) and the “beauty of the struggle” since her childhood in the Northeastern city of Recife, the Brazilian writer asserts that she “did not know how to approach the ‘social thing’ [*coisa social*] in a ‘literary’ way (that is, transformed into the vehemence of art).” Moreover, she continues, the “problem of justice” could not in itself provoke the “searching” and “surprise” that serve as the impetus for her writing. For these reasons, she pardons herself for being “not totally ashamed for not contributing anything social or human through the medium of writing” (*A legião* 149). Written, like *A paixão*, during the period of social foment and instability that precipitated the Brazilian military coup in 1964, these claims seem to support a still common and not altogether incorrect view of Lispector’s writing as hermetic and disconnected from political exigencies.

For many critics, though, the more overt “social fact” of poverty and injustice in the final novel published before her death, *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star* [1977]), belies the categorical nature of her assertion. Along with its more explicit allusions to Jewish culture or tradition, this later novella has also attuned criticism to these questions in her earlier works.⁶⁸

This chapter seeks to contribute to both these lines of inquiry. But I also propose to take Lispector's claims here rather literally. *A paixão* may not contribute much to either the conventional understanding of the human or the given partitions of the social (in Lispector terms, the "social fact"). The narrator instead seeks to approach what she calls the "inhuman," while the narrative events are themselves set in motion because the "social thing" has already become "literary" and made a claim on the narrator's artistic space.

We can begin to clarify these points with a brief outline of the story. In *A paixão*, the first-person narrator, a well-off sculptor in Rio de Janeiro who goes by the initials "G.H.," begins her narration in a disoriented state that she attributes to the events of the previous day. These events, we learn, are conditioned by a disruptive alteration of her daily life: G.H. discovers that the recently departed black maid that cleaned her penthouse apartment has left a charcoal mural scrawled across the white wall of the domestic servant's room. Curiosity about the mural and the maid's intentions quickly turns into hatred and just when she is about to erase the writing a cockroach suddenly emerges from the closet and she squashes it. The subsequent shame G.H. feels from her unconscious association of the maid, Janair, and the bug immobilizes her in the room as the bug itself gradually transforms from something repulsive to a thing of attraction, becoming, in effect, part of the mural's enigma. As a result, the narrator's desertion of her former self-identity comes to involve both a personal exodus and an exodus from the person: her introspective searching passes through a series of negations ("disorganization," "dehumanization," "depersonalization") in which she becomes more like the cockroach that has revealed to her a kind of "inhuman" life (her exodus from the person); she imagines the collapse of the urban landscape outside her window into a desert composed of shifting references to Egypt, the *favelas* of Rio, and Africa (her personal exodus). In the culminating act to this

desertion and the new subject that she has become, the narrator forces herself to ingest part of the cockroach mass. As the narrator contemplates her return to everyday life, her declaration of a neutral intransitive love in the last line of the novel replaces her earlier reaction of hatred to the maid and her mural.

Criticism has curiously downplayed if not ignored how the becoming literary of the “social thing”—the maid’s writing on the wall—mediates both the narrator’s perception of the absent maid Janair and her subsequent encounter with the cockroach. Ligia Chiapinni rightly emphasizes how much of earlier formalist criticism simply bypassed the existence of the maid, focusing instead on the novel’s ritual-like language, which turns the cockroach into “an allegory of the material and primordial universe in which G.H. seeks to integrate herself.”⁶⁹ More recent cultural criticism has drawn attention to the oblique proximity of urban poverty, the spectral presence of the absent black maid, and the racialized connotations of her association with the cockroach.⁷⁰ However, this important correction risks merely inverting the earlier tendency by dissolving the aesthetic into the socio-historical rather than vice versa. Just as the two forms of otherness—Janair and the cockroach—can be neither completely separated nor simply identified with each other, the aesthetic dimension remains neither transcendent nor reducible to the terms of socio-historical analysis. The writing on the wall instead sets the stage for the more unstable ways in which gender, race, and class are played out in the text. On the one hand, it marks the moment of a different “literarity” when the narrator comes to recognize the maid’s mural—the bare outlines of a man, woman, and dog—as a form of “writing.” On the other hand, the combination of the writing on the wall and the enigmatic cockroach initiate her into what she calls “different ways of seeing the other” in this new “world”: “looking at the other without seeing them; possessing the other; eating the other; one only being in a corner and the other

being there too” (*A paixão* 76). These different ways of seeing the other both mark the different turning points in her path of desertion and establish an implicit dialogue with similar modes in Brazilian *modernismo*.

In what follows, I chart the narrator’s path of desertion through these different modes of seeing the other. First, I briefly situate the other’s claim on artistic space within both the predictorship context of the early 1960s and a genealogy of marginal literature. From here, I introduce a series of transcolonial parallels with Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noir, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), emphasizing their common links between race, technology, the inhuman cockroach, and the path into a desert. Second, I return to outline the form of the narrative and examine more closely the varied reactions of G.H. to her maid Janair’s emergence from social invisibility, from an initial hatred to the shame of associating the black maid with the cockroach that she squashes. Third, I show how “possessing the other” conditions both the narrator’s imaginary exodus and her becoming a “deserter,” a concept that Lispector’s writing explores during this period and which says something, without saying something, about G.H.’s Jewish “roots.”⁷¹ This mode not only rewrites a scene of possession in Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaíma* (1928), where both Afro-Brazilian and Jewish elements similarly intermix; it also forms the basis of a desert alter-world that contrasts sharply with Lispector’s own contemporaneous chronicle of Brasília. Lispector’s alter-world, I argue, opens itself to the same unclean and unworldly animal life that, on the eve of the military dictatorship, appears excluded from the modernist capital in the desert. Fourth, I consider how the narrator’s reinterpretation of her act ingesting the cockroach mass as a form of neutral love modifies the more aggressive approach to eating the other in Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto antropófago” (“Anthropophagite Manifesto” [1928]), a reading that I demonstrate in relation to the monstrous

bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Finally, I argue that the narrator's neutral, intransitive love presents a new reading of the maid's mural as a relation of ethical proximity to both the other and the other's writing, whether "foreign" or "domestic." Although this approach to comparison appears in sharpest relief at the end, I also attempt to show it at work throughout this chapter.

Genealogies of Literary Marginality: The Social Imaginary, Domestic Space, and the Transcolonial

Let us begin by returning to the problem introduced at the outset. In his retrospective account of the "end" of the twentieth century, Roberto Schwarz has argued that, despite nationalist and populist fallacies, one of the signal achievements of national developmentalism in Brazil was the assembly of a "new social imaginary": a reorientation of critical thought and the spaces of the imagination around an "internal axis" that sought for the first time to encompass the nation in a coherent way; and a new relation of "testing" culture with "social practice and the fate of the excluded and the oppressed" ("Fim" 156, 157). As I argued in the introduction, the projections of a Latin American literature or literary system in the 1970s extended this imaginary and axis to the region as a whole: both Antonio Candido's superregionalism and Ángel Rama's narrative transculturation turned to the rural interior and its subaltern cultures as the basis for integrating Brazilian literature and the various literatures of Spanish America into a common system. While neither excluded what Candido called the more "urban values" of writers like Lispector, both projections deemphasized the metro- or cosmopolitan pole of Latin American literature to allow the regional difference or "authenticity" to emerge more fully into view.⁷² Beginning in the early 1960s, Lispector's writing similarly involved a turn onto the internal axis of *domestic* space, a minor correlate to these major projections. As Marta Peixoto has provocatively argued, the mistress-servant relation that appears throughout Lispector's *crônicas*

in the 1960s takes a starker and more brutal form in *A paixão segundo G.H.*, despite the fact that the domestic maid, Janair, remains absent from the narrative events (“Fatos” 115). However, the fissures in their relation emerge through the narrator’s reactions to the maid, who has deserted her allotted social role and left the enigmatic mural in her place. In this sense, we could say that here the writing of the “excluded” or “oppressed” also serves to “test” literary or artistic space.

Although Lispector defended a writing separate from directly political exigencies, her reflections on writing in this period repeatedly return to both what separates and what connects art and politics within the larger social imaginary. In “Literatura e justiça,” cited at the outset, Lispector’s assertion that social injustice “pains” and “humiliates” her accompanies her self-pardon for an inability to use writing “‘to do’ something, as if writing was not doing [*fazer*’ *alguma coisa, como se escrever não fosse fazer*]” (*A legião* 149). Not “contributing with actions,” not “doing” in this first sense of *fazer* marked by inverted commas, would continue to be a source of shame.⁷³ But her defense of writing, of a *fazer* or “doing/making” that does not contribute anything social or human, coincides with what she elsewhere calls, citing Mário de Andrade, “the ‘permanent right’ to aesthetic research” that Brazilian *modernismo* helped inaugurate with the “movement of 1922.”⁷⁴ Indeed, her other claims in “Literatura de vanguarda no Brasil” (“Avant-Garde Literature in Brazil”)—a conference talk originally given in 1963 at the University of Austin, Texas, then delivered several times over the next decade at different universities in Brazil—stress writing’s “avant-garde” practices as both work on literary form and experimentation with conceptual language. To define “avant-garde” experimentation, she suggests, one could start from either “formal renovations that would lead to the reexamination of concepts, even unformulated concepts”; or “from the consciousness, even an unformulated one, of new concepts, including a consciousness that gives the appearance of a classical form”

(*Outros* 97). These hesitant redefinitions of “avant-garde literature” cut across the operative division between avant-garde formal experimentation, linked to Brazilian *modernismo*, and the more traditional form of the social novel and the *regionalismo* that emerged in the Northeast shortly after.⁷⁵

Tracing a path between these two positions, Lispector also mentions a third work on form that pertains more directly to *A paixão segundo G.H.*, the novel begun shortly after this talk. This third possibility begins with a new “mode of seeing” that “slowly and necessarily transforms the form” (105). In a suggestive juxtaposition, Lispector compares these new aesthetic “modes of seeing” to a conception of the political vanguard as “liv[ing] an atmosphere of the front line, where new modes are outlined.” These new aesthetic “modes” or “ways of seeing” are not the same as the new social or political “modes” emerging in social practice. But nor are they completely unrelated. As Lispector reiterates, in countries like Brazil “politicization” was only one of the manifestations of the urgent need to “understand our things in what they have that is peculiar to Brazil and in what they represent of our profound necessities, including even aesthetic ones” (*entendermos as nossas coisas no que elas têm de peculiares ao Brasil e no que representam necessidades profundas nossas, inclusive mesmo as estéticas*) [*Outros* 105].⁷⁶ This task implicitly renews Mário de Andrade’s critique of “colonial”—or in Lispector’s terms, “intellectualized”—writers: those whose concern with “novelties” and “trends” leads them to be “inspired by foreign literature, by the ‘already literalized thing,’” rather than with the “thing itself.”⁷⁷ Lispector’s concern with the “things” that compose part of the social imaginary, with the peculiarities and even aesthetic necessities relevant to Brazil, also involves connects to what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”: the way “an *a priori* system of forms determining what presents itself to sense perception” delimits the visible and the invisible, the

proper use of spaces and time, the distinction between speech and mere noise, and, I would add, the identification of what counts as writing and what as mere ornament.⁷⁸ For in *A paixão*, what the narrator calls different modes of “seeing the other” turns on the ways this relation has been already “literalized” in Brazilian *modernismo*, but it also emerges as a response to reading the maid Janair’s mural as a form of “writing.”

This recognition of the mural as “writing” takes on particular salience, I want to suggest, if we reinscribe it within a genealogy recently proposed by the writers and critics of *literatura marginal*. Somewhat unlike *testimonio*, a genre at the center of U.S. Latin Americanist debates in the 1980s and 90s, the recent denomination of “marginal literature” in Brazil has involved both a literary claim to self-representation and a genealogical link to earlier cultural production placed (sometimes self-consciously) on the margins of dominant or more official culture. Ferréz, one of its most visible writers and spokespersons, defines marginal literature as “culture from the periphery by people from the periphery, period” and locates its nominal precursors in the “marginal cinema” and “marginal poetry” that emerged in the 1970s during the dictatorship (an affiliation Rodrigo S.M., the narrator-writer of Lispector’s *A hora da estrela*, also claims, as I show in chapter two).⁷⁹ For the critic João César de Castro Rocha, marginal literature forms part of a larger “dialectics of marginality” that has introduced into contemporary cultural production a heightened visibility of urban violence and contestation that does not conform to older cultural models of reconciliation. Indeed, the claim by writers on the margins of society to belong to both literature and the discourse about literature is unexpected testimony to what Antonio Candido called the “right to literature,” though not necessarily in the conciliatory terms he laid out.⁸⁰ Much more than urban violence, it is this claim on literature and “literarity”—the capacity for *anyone* to grab hold of the letter (Rancièrè *Politics* 13)—that connects *A paixão* to the book

that both Ferréz and Castro Rocha inscribe as the forerunner to contemporary marginal literature: Carolina Maria de Jesús's diary *Quarto de despejo* (*Child of the Dark* [1960]).

The literary careers of De Jesús and Lispector outline two very different trajectories that nonetheless intersect in the years immediately prior to *A paixão*. De Jesús's best-selling diary was published in the same year (1960) and by the same publisher (Francisco Alves) as Lispector's collection of short stories, *Laços de família* (*Family Ties*). For Lispector, the relative publishing success of *Laços de família* marked a new turn in her national reception: together with the belated publication of her novel *A maçã no escuro* (*The Apple in the Dark*) the following year, *Laços de família* helped bring Lispector to a wider reading public and assure her a more prominent place within the field of Brazilian literature.⁸¹ In contrast, the bestseller *Quarto de despejo* brought de Jesús, a poor black paper collector from the *favela*, out of anonymity and into temporary celebrity status.⁸² Yet as different as the subject matter and literary spaces of these two texts were—largely middle-class family life and its gender constrictions; a poor and defiant single mother struggling to feed and raise children in the *favela*—they were not separate worlds. Carolina Maria de Jesús worked for many years as a maid for wealthy São Paulo families and moved into a *favela* only after she was fired for getting pregnant. Writing on the paper she then also collected for money, she was discovered by a journalist who published and edited her diaries into a book. As I have suggested above, the conditioning event of *A paixão segundo G.H.* is the mural that the wealthy sculptor G.H. discovers in the servant's room of her penthouse apartment, inscribed on the wall by her mysteriously departed black maid.⁸³ Several of the possible meanings of de Jesús's metaphoric title, *quarto de despejo*—"garbage room," but also a room of "eviction," "unloading," or even "insolence"—resonate with the servant's room where all of the events happen in Lispector's

novel. Certainly the two literary trajectories manifest different access to both cultural and real capital: de Jésus published several other books but returned to poverty not many years after; and, according to scholars like Levine and Meihy, her writing continues to be dismissed as merely documentary or ornamental by many literary critics, especially in Brazil.⁸⁴ Rather than an explicit reflection on de Jésus's diary, I argue, Lispector's novel represents a corresponding internal rupture in literary space when the narrator, G.H., recognizes the black maid's mural as "writing" and not mere "ornament" (*A paixão* 40).

This encounter with a racialized other through her "writing" on the wall presents some striking parallels with Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. To follow these parallels, I divert the earlier critical emphasis on European existentialism (Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard) towards a political rereading of existential "depersonalization" in terms of decolonization,⁸⁵ bringing Lispector's narrative text into proximity with Fanon's racial drama—and more specifically, with the common links that it establishes between race, technology, the inhuman cockroach, and a path into a desert. Although the particular paths the (Jewish) Brazilian writer and the (black) Martinican thinker take involve different processes of decolonization and different dialogues with the avant-gardes (Brazilian *modernismo* in the case of Lispector; Francophone *négritude* in the case of Fanon), both begin with a common scene of recognition and racial subjectivation. Before returning to this scene and the different modes of "seeing the other" in *A paixão*, I want to first outline Fanon's analysis to make visible the proximity and intersections between them. Fanon's dialectical narrative turns on an initial scene when the black individual, who had assumed equality among white others, suddenly encounters a gaze that makes them aware of their racial otherness. For Fanon, the resulting feeling of nausea cedes to an experience of shame: the racialized subject is attached to a distorted body composed

of racial projections and axioms. This shameful body, though, also opens the racialized subject to shared histories of oppression, not only between black people, but also potentially with other groups who have been oppressed or discriminated against (one of Fanon's central comparisons is between anti-Semitism and negrophobia).

From here, Fanon's subject—the "I" that emerges from this experience—moves through a critical analysis and rewriting of *négritude*. Less emphasized, however, is how this new "sensory" subject takes on both a human and non-human form, oscillating between a connection with technology and a reduction to the inhuman.⁸⁶ In Fanon's narrative, this subject adopts more clandestine tactics for research, emerging out of corners with "long antennae encountering the various axioms on the surface of things" (96 / 93). With the body out of view, the antennae pick up and retransmit the racial axioms that become the object of analysis. These ambiguous "antennae" appear associated with both radiophonic transmission and insect-like appendages, a doubling that Lispector's *A paixão* repeats, as we will see below.⁸⁷ They reappear in the first, radiophonic sense, when Fanon turns to the more affirmationist tendency of the *négritude* movement, largely embodied for the Martinican thinker in the Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor. Senghor alerts the "prolific antennae of the world" to the enunciation of "the Negro," a singular but also homogeneous identity (*Black Skin* 107 / 103). Fanon characterizes this project as an inversion of the negative racial axioms to privilege affect over reason; a reappropriation of a cultural world of coexistence in the "primordial One"; and the reassertion of a direct connection with the cosmos, rhythm, a sacred bond with Mother Earth, a body and soul not in opposition (101-111 / 98-107). In Fanon's caustic reduction, claiming "my unique sauce" (107 / 103) also serves up the magical aura of this world for outside consumption.

This “unique sauce,” I want to suggest, provides a peripheral contrast and correlate to what Adorno refers to as the “uniform sauce” consumed in products of the metropolitan culture industry.⁸⁸ For Adorno, the culture industry cultivates a false and consumable aura, saturating its products with a “uniform sauce” devoured in consumption: this “sauce” offers a “contrived nearness of the distant,” the sense that happiness is not only within grasp, but identical to what already exists. For Fanon, the “unique sauce” claimed by *négritude* offered the flavor of something both distant and different, pre-colonial culture, as if it were actually within grasp (an especially problematic claim, according to Fanon, for the French Antilles). But the outside world recognizes this magical aura as either the childhood of humanity or an earlier stage of development, contradicting its supposed separation from European colonialism and capitalism: in the first case, polite society finds reconciliation with itself by momentarily bending down to recognize the “adorably expressive faces” of a playful, child-like existence; in the second, inhabitants of the metropolitan center seek out an authenticity and exotic flavor—the “unique sauce”—apparently immune to industrial standardization (111 / 107). We can draw a comparison with the “unique sauce” offered up in some of the most commercially successful Brazilian and Latin American literature, from the Afro-Brazilian Bahian dishes in Jorge Amado’s later fiction to the traditional Mexican recipes of Laura Esquivel’s bestseller *Como agua para chocolate*.⁸⁹ In *A paixão*, the eventual ingestion of the cockroach mass contrasts markedly with the consumption of these pleasurable and exotic tastes. For in Fanon and in Lispector, the inhuman body of the cockroach shadows this scene of condescending recognition and it emerges when the racialized subject refuses their allotted role and place.

Fanon’s dialectical narrative draws this out in his subsequent turn to the more negationist tendency of *négritude*, largely identified with his fellow Martinican, the poet and writer Aimé

Césaire. This movement replaces the condescending recognition with a scene of hatred. In addition, the appendage-like antennae that previously functioned as radiophonic transmitters, capturing the affirmative enunciation of “the Negro,” now seem to collapse into the abject bodily image of the cockroach. Fanon constructs a constellation of scenes and poetic images from Césaire’s texts to restage the subjective leap into the “black hole,” a putative return to the source that would become the foundation for rupture and resistance. In the first scene, taken from a play by Césaire, a good slave violently confronts his white master during a slave revolt: when the slave sees only reflections of cockroaches in the master’s eyes, he strikes the master; after this sacrificial “baptism” of blood, the subject then declares he must honor his “repulsive ugliness.”⁹⁰ In Fanon’s reading, this staging of a subjugated black man killing the white man in himself conditions a leap into a “black hole” in Césaire’s poetics, a return to the source “from which will gush forth ‘the great black scream with such force that it will shake the foundations of the world’.”⁹¹ For Fanon, the leap returns to a “mystical past” without realizing that the source has already been dried up: sympathetic European reception recognized this “black scream” simply as a “weak” but necessary stage in a predetermined dialectic and destiny.⁹² This is why, at the beginning of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon suggests that the descent into this dried-up source through his own narrative would confront a “true Hell,” “a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline essentially stripped bare, from which an authentic appearance can originate.”⁹³ Although Fanon aims to make this descent something black and other people of color can take advantage of, he also affirms that even if he does utter a shout or scream in this subjective process, it will not be “black” (*Black Skin* 13 / 28).

In Lispector’s novel, G.H.’s encounter with the maid Janair’s writing on the wall approaches the question of “seeing the other” from both the other side and another gender. When first

confronted with the enigmatic mural, the white mistress G.H. images Janair in a seemingly affirmative vein as an “African queen.” Placed herself then in a position of implicit subjection, G.H. reacts negatively with a violent desire to erase Janair’s writing from the wall. When the cockroach suddenly emerges from the closet, she shifts her rage to the cockroach, squashing it, but then feels remorse for her largely unconscious association of the black maid and the bug. In *A paixão*, however, this act then provokes a slow metamorphosis that brings her into proximity with the inhuman form of an insect, differing in this respect from Gregor Samsa’s literal transformation in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Her path of desertion—her personal exodus that also becomes an exodus from the person—leads to the vision of a desert outside her window, a landscape combining African, Jewish, and Brazilian references. On this path, the “void” or “nothingness” (*o nada*) that she encounters appears “alive and humid” (61) and her experience with inhuman cockroach becomes the basis for imagining an alter-world in the desert: a world that includes its formerly excluded alterity. Towards the end of *A paixão*, the narrator explains her previous account, not as scream, but as a springing forth after her own fall into the woman’s body in the mural: “I was the petroleum that today gushed out, when a black African woman drew me in my house, making me spring up out of the wall” (114). The particularities of this process involve an implicit dialogue with different modes of “seeing the other” in Brazilian *modernismo*, as we will see below. But the narrator’s assertion here also serves as a poignant reminder of the black maid’s writing on the white wall as a frame for this experience.

From Social Invisibility to the Face: Hate, Shame, and Localized Worlds

As I noted above, criticism has tended to pass over the narrator’s encounter with Janair’s writing, and this overlooking can be explained in part, I would suggest, by the punctuation of events in the novel. The opening line, “— — — — I am searching, I am searching. I am

trying to understand” (11), presents the narrative events as anterior to the present of narration; or, in other words, as the fiction of an experience the previous day. The same elliptical broken lines punctuate four moments in the narrative text and, read together, they mark the events as a process that begins with killing the cockroach and ends with ingesting then vomiting out the cockroach mass:

“— — — — I am searching, I am searching. I am trying to understand” (11)

“I raised my hand as to take an oath, and, in a single blow, I closed the door on the half emerged body of the cockroach— — — —” (53)

“— — — — ‘because you are neither cold nor hot, because you are warm, I will vomit you from my mouth’” (167)

“And so, I love. — — — —” (179)

The criticism of *A paixão* has often characterized the form of the novel as a kind of circular repetition:⁹⁴ every chapter begins with the concluding phrase from the previous chapter while the final punctuated line of the novel (“And so, I love.— — — —”) graphically reconnects to the elliptical lines with which the novel opens (“— — — — I am searching”). But the last punctuated line reinforces a spiraling movement of the narrative more than a circular or cyclical movement of myth, one that returns to alter the determinants of the original act of squashing the cockroach—the reaction of hate is displaced by the intransitive declaration of love. The novel’s opening line marks the initial interruption that this event has caused in G.H.’s life, setting off the process of “searching.”

As we learn in the narrative digressions that follow, though, the narrator’s attempt “to understand” (*entender*) her encounter with otherness or alterity would initially amount to a betrayal of it. She therefore differentiates between “understanding” what happened, which would assign a definite meaning to it, and “comprehending” (*comprender*) it, a grasping of the

situation that she compares to “an acute incomprehension” (16). Her immediate modification of this claim, however, proposes a different relation than a simple resemblance between the two terms: “Every sudden comprehension is finally the revelation of an acute incomprehension. Every moment of finding [*achar*] is a losing oneself [*um perder-se a si proprio*].” This experience is not one of “finding” (*achar*) oneself (or one’s *self*); nor, since the verb *achar* also implies “thinking” (in the sense of relating how one judges or perceives something), is it one’s *self* “thinking.” Finding and thinking only emerge here by losing or being lost from one’s proper self, as the novel’s epigraph by the Lithuanian-born American art historian Bernard Berenson suggests: “A complete life may be one ending in so full identification with the nonself that there is no self to die” (9). G.H. refers to this enigmatically as losing a “third leg” that has kept her tied to her superficial, all too human life (13). It is not so much that the incomprehensibility of pure alterity stands as the revelation in itself—arguably the source for much of the focus on Lispector’s “mysticism.”⁹⁵ Rather, the “sudden comprehension” reveals the site of the former self (the “third leg”) that now appears as an “acute incomprehension”—a limit of non-knowledge that the former self either did not acknowledge or could not yet accept as a positive condition for the creation of something new. The central name for this limit in *A paixão segundo G.H.* is “life” and it is only revealed through G.H.’s jarring encounter with the inhuman.

The narrating subject of this encounter can thus be construed as conditioned by this event: she must, as she asserts, “create” both what has happened and the “truth” of what has happened to her (21). Much of the meta-narrative interrogations that take up the beginning concern the risk of abandoning the unfolding implications of this comprehension. If she abandoned searching, she would reassume her former self and possessions (including that possession called “my life”). To circumvent this possibility, the narrative proceeds both dialectically and undialectically.

Approximating the search to a form of “disorganization,” she suggests, risks dialectically invoking her former “organization” (11). G.H.’s (and Lispector’s) solution is to multiply the negative forms of her subjectivation (“disintegration,” “dehumanization,” “depersonalization,” and finally “deheroization”) on the narrative path towards both the “inhuman” and a series of related neutralizing terms that cluster around “life” and “living”: *o insosso* (“the tasteless”); *o inexpressivo* (“the inexpressive”); *indiferença* (“indifference”); and a “neutral love” (*amor neutro*). In *A paixão*, the “inhuman” is what comes “before” the human is formed, yet it is not definitively located in a lost past: it appears, rather, as an interior limit within the human—“the thing part of people” (69)—and as an adjacent or subjacent reality that G.H.’s encounter with the cockroach brings into proximity. For Lispector’s narrator, not only is the inhuman what “humanization” and the human as an ideal have obscured; she also comes to realize that losing the “inhuman side” of the human is the origin of a positive “lack” or “need” (*carência*) (161).

This “lack” (*carência*) understood as “need,” I want to suggest, differs from a “lack” (*falta*) usually more associated with sin, blame, and guilt. As Benedito Nunes acutely observes, Lispector’s writing responds to a call that comes from disorder or from the margins of order and it externalizes this “secret mission” (*O drama* 155). However, what is exposed is not, as Nunes maintains, the “inexcusable lack” or “privation” (*falta indesculpável*) that opens itself to a “general condemnatory judgment” for which the writer “has no alternative than to increase the guilt [*culpa*].”⁹⁶ As G.H. declares, “it is necessary to be bigger than guilt” (87), a sentiment affirmatively echoed by the anonymous narrator at the end of *Água viva* (1972): “we are not guilty [*não somos culpados*]” (*Água viva* 86). G.H.’s path of “searching” instead suggests the relevance of thinking “need”—what in Cixous’ reading is the “feminine” response to the fear of possible loss—with both “shame” and its negation or displacement.⁹⁷ Although the narrator’s

path of “passion” includes moments of shame and humiliation, she also identifies the latter with a “lack of humility” (*A paixão* 162). Her description of humility as “reality seen through the minimum good sense,” rather than a feeling, coincides with Lispector’s own definition that identifies “humility” as a technique for “approaching” or “approximating” (*aproximar*) the “thing”—a difficult narrative dialectic since, as Lispector herself notes, an overemphasis on either humiliation or humility can revert into a form of pride.⁹⁸ “Need” in *A paixão* is not simply negative. It also becomes the very condition of an immanent excess in both *existence* and *abilities* that Lispector’s narrator refers to idiosyncratically as partaking in, or even creating, what the narrator often substantiates as “the God”: “the more we need, the more God exists; the more we are able, the more God we will have” (152). It is similarly the existence and abilities of the previously “invisible” maid that condition the sequence of events in the novel. By drawing the mural on the white wall of the domestic servant’s room, Janair alters this colonial space built into the architecture of the modern. G.H.’s subsequent desire to both efface Janair’s writing from the white wall and then squash the cockroach also provokes the shame that localizes her in a room no longer her own.

Let us look more closely at the daily rituals that lead up to both her act and her recognition of Janair’s existence. To begin with, Janair’s desertion of her allotted role and place turns on a telling ambiguity: G.H. simply notes that the maid “had said goodbye” (*se despedira*), a use of the pluperfect indicative verb form that could also mean she “had been fired” (24). The ambiguity itself helps highlight G.H.’s attitude towards this precarious labor: the departure needs no further explanation because the life is of little concern to G.H. Imagining she herself could have done similar work if she had been born into a different class, she happily takes up the duties

of the domestic maid and wants to clean the entire house, beginning with the “unclean” or “filthy” (*imundo*) maid’s quarters (34). The “unclean” (*imundo*) later appears in its biblical sense, when the narrator cites a passage from Leviticus on the prohibition against eating winged animals. The unclean domestic’s quarters, though, not only contrasts with the clean room that G.H. actually finds. But the negative class and racial associations that it betrays also carry over into her reaction to the charcoal mural on the white wall.

G.H. prefaces this whole scene by declaring that what she narrates is more a “graphism” than a “writing” (*escrita*), more a “reproduction” than an “expression” (21). Yet, the subsequent recognition of the mural as “a writing” (*uma escrita*) and not just an “ornament” (40) helps clarify this claim: her “graphism” becomes a kind of reproduction of this non-expressive or inexpressive “writing” on the wall. She renders this graphism initially in terms of radiophonic reproduction: she will translate “telegraph signals,” broadcasting the unknown into a language she does not know. At the same time, the non-human “antennae” blend the technological with the insect-like appendages: “The world bristled with antennae, and me capturing the signal” (22). This bristling anticipates the “enunciatory tremor of the antennae” (52) that marks the emergence of the cockroach; later the “delicate radar” that might help navigate a new “world” (101); and finally the “irradiating center of a neutral love in hertzian waves” that enigmatically defines the nonhuman reality opened to the narrator (171). But the first unknown “signal” that the narrator picks up is the maid’s writing, and her translation of it appears as a much more legible message—hate.

Janair’s mural, one of several enigmatic triangles that appear in the beginning of the novel, does not in itself appear to merit such a strong reaction. The mural’s structure—the bare outlines of a man, woman, and dog—both invokes and diverges from an Oedipal familial triangle. The

dog occupies the third position instead of a child (the financially independent G.H. has no children and chose to abort a pregnancy in the past). In G.H.'s interpretation, because the figures do not seem to have any connection or bond between them, they fail to form a coherent "group" (39). Their unbound relation thus coincides with the relation that G.H. establishes with the anonymous interlocutive "you" (*tu*) that she appeals to throughout *A paixão*. This informal second person *tu*, connoting a familiar form of address, initially appears without any body—only an anonymous hand she at various points in the narrative asks for, lets go of, and even demands. If the "you" at times seems to refer to her previous lover, it also provides a figure for the reader, the "already formed soul" that "C.L." deceptively interpellates in the note "To Possible Readers": "This book is like any book. But I would be content if it were only read by people whose souls are already formed [*pessoas de alma já formada*]. Those who know that the approach [*a aproximação*], to whatever, is made [*se faz*] gradually and painstakingly—traversing even the opposite of what is going to be approached."⁹⁹ This dictum on the approach to/approximation of [*a aproximação de*] the thing certainly provides an abstract account of what the narrator's "passion" does/makes [*se faz*] in the course of the narrative. But it remains deceptive precisely because the "formed soul" will eventually accompany G.H.'s deformation and her spiraling descent into an "Inferno."

This deformation is already prefigured in the peculiar force that appears to animate the figures on the wall. At first, they resemble "automata" or "mummies" (39) and this inhuman force is what leads her to affirm that the design was "a writing" (40). Then, after she begins to think about the maid's possible intention, she refers to them as "zombies" (41). This shift in the interpretation of their automaticity or undeadness is significant. Together with the transformation of the room into a "minaret" (38), the mixture of vaguely Egyptian ("mummies")

with Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean figures (“zombies”) marks much of her subsequent hybridized visions. Although the cockroach that emerges from the closet appears to G.H. as a “hieroglyphic” and “script of the Far East” (61), these gestures set the stage for the mural becoming something other than the hieroglyphic mass cultural script imagined by Adorno and Horkheimer: “In the rulers’ dream of the mummification of the world, mass culture serves as the priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those subjugated, not to be relished, but to be read” (“Schema” 80). If the narrator evinces a similarly hyperbolic judgment of the mural at first, the “writing” also confronts her with her own possible mummification. Moreover, after squashing the cockroach, her subsequent “possession” of and by the other performatively exceeds the notion of a prewritten script to be read. It leads instead to her “initial dehumanization” and a shedding of both her “mummy clothes” and her individual identity “G.H.” (74), a reverse metamorphosis that has her emerge from the chrysalis a “humid larva” (75). While G.H.’s dehumanization might include her subjugation or subjection, this subjective path also exceeds it.

Janair’s writing on the wall, in fact, confronts the bourgeois narrator for the first time with a gaze of someone “exterior” to her life (40). The result is an experience of the room as a “portrait of an empty stomach,” Lispector’s version of an aesthetics of hunger that disrupts the “beauty” and self-directed irony of G.H.’s penthouse apartment and identity (42). Unable to initially remember either the maid’s face or name, she begins to read the “hieratic design” as a manifestation of Janair’s “hatred” (40). The irony of this “indifferent hatred”—likened by G.H. to a “lack of pity”—is not simply that it seems more applicable to G.H.’s perception of her black maid, as her own thoughts subsequently entertain. For the indifferent hatred also affects the narrator’s first attempt to apprehend herself in the mural, when she experiences a brief identity of

human and animal often ignored in readings of G.H. as an existential abstraction of “man” or the “human genus” (“G.H.,” *gênero humano*): “I, the Man. And as for the dog—would this be the epithet she gave me?” While this contradiction will later be replaced by her identification with the woman on the wall, here the assumption of Janair’s “hatred” provokes the sudden recollection of the maid’s name and face. The “face” that suddenly takes the maid out of her status as “an invisible” displays the “traces of a queen” and Janair becomes “a representative of a silence, as if she represented a foreign country, the African queen... the stranger, the indifferent enemy” (43). This moment bears comparison to the situation Fanon figured as the transition from a “body schema” to a “racial epidermal” or “historical-racial schema,” a transition marked by the fixing of Janair into a “facial profile.”¹⁰⁰ In Fanon’s exemplary scene, the black individual “I” assuming recognition as an equal is suddenly faced with nausea and shame after repeated utterances of “Look, a Negro!” voiced by a fearful young French boy. As I have suggested above, the resulting shame comes from realizing that this body carries with it an accumulation of racial projections and axioms. In *A paixão*, though, Janair herself is not present in the scene, and G.H.’s essentialist gesture neither shames Janair nor erases the “traces of the other in her precarious Subject-ivity,”¹⁰¹ but instead fashions these “traces” into a sovereign other: “the African queen.” It is this overturning of the mistress-servant relationship that instigates the narrator’s desire to furiously scrub Janair’s “writing” from the wall and her subsequent declaration, “I wanted to kill something there” (44).

G.H.’s rage thus responds to the emergence of this other-stranger-enemy—the domestic servant—out of her previous social invisibility. Both grammatically and in G.H.’s thoughts, the “hatred” G.H. describes operates pre-individually: it cannot be clearly attributed to either Janair or G.H., but appears to oscillate between them. By transforming Janair into an “African queen,”

G.H. is placed in the position of being not just subjected to Janair but also “possessed” by her—in addition to G.H.’s association with the “mummies” or “zombies,” “Janair” seems to play on Janaína, one of the names of the deity Yemanjá in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, as Olga de Sá has noted (196). The only thing that impedes G.H. from proceeding to erase Janair’s writing on the wall is the sudden emergence of the cockroach. From here, the cockroach becomes the focus of G.H.’s anger, but her thoughts also begin to conflate the insect and the black maid.

The cockroach displaces the domestic animal in the mural with a more inhuman animality, confronting G.H. with a doubled “pre-historic past.” On the one hand, a species-related prehistory of the planet and a “peaceful resistance” that seemed both “obsolete and nonetheless actual”; and, on the other, a personal prehistory, since along with bedbugs and rats, cockroaches are linked metonymically to the specter of her own childhood poverty (48). The immediate result is the first of several sensations of nausea in the novel. As other critics have stressed, nausea in *A paixão* diverges from the explicit humanism of Sartrean nausea, not least because the later vomiting out of G.H.’s last “human remainders” provokes a desire for “other species” (94), a desire that culminates in her quasi-mystical ingestion of the cockroach mass.¹⁰² However, the parallel helps reveal what gets too easily passed over in these comparisons. In *Nausea*, Sartre’s protagonist Roquetin translates the sensation of nausea into a dawning awareness of “contingency” and the “absolute,” a feeling that those who really *exist* are “superfluous” and “free,” outside of any notion of “rights” (113). The existence of this autonomous and “free” human subject, however, doubles the condition of subjects already relegated to the borders of the human—that is, those who have been disregarded or deemed largely *inexistent* within the prevailing conception of “rights.” In *A paixão*, G.H.’s association of Janair and the cockroach

brings this contradiction into view. G.H.'s moment of nausea in front of the cockroach serves to then *localize* both this claim and G.H. in a specific place.

Elaborating on this link between nausea, localization, and place will help draw out the alterity shadowing the narrator's world. Contrary to what the emphasis on the local often implies, Lispector does not oppose "place" to the space of the "world" or the "local" to the "global." Although the initial moment of nausea provokes G.H.'s feeling of being "entirely free," an autonomy that echoes the Sartrean experience, she is at the same time restricted by the room's "true inhabitants" (48), Janair and the cockroach, now blurred into one. She specifically qualifies this then not as being "imprisoned" by them, which would suggest her heteronomous subjection to them. Instead, they have "localized" her: "it was as if they had fixed me there with the simple and unique gesture of pointing at me with the finger, pointing at me and a place" (49-50). On the one hand, this "gesture" localizing her does not negate her freedom, but suggest instead that Janair and the cockroach "knew" she would "stumble and fall" if she tried to leave the room (48). On the other, it points to an empirical local context that does not appear in opposition to a larger world. "Place" here is itself already abstract, for it corresponds to a dreamlike childhood consciousness of "lying down in a bed that found itself in a city, that found itself on the Earth, that found itself in the World" (50). Since then and now this worldly house of solitude had "invisible cockroaches," localization here brings the previously invisible and in-existent parts of this "place" into disturbingly concrete visibility and existence. What then opens up is the possibility of the shadowy alterity of this "World" becoming the condition of its alteration, as we will see when we turn to her vision in the desert.

The narrator initially responds, though, by reaffirming her already existing "World": she squashes the cockroach. The imagined gesture of Janair and the cockroach pointing at her

suggests an unarticulated shame. G.H. then reacts with a gesture of her own, directed toward the authority of the law: “I raised my hand as in an oath, and in a single blow I closed the door over the half emerged body of the cockroach— — — — —” (53). The act, replacing the initial nausea with an “extreme enjoyment” and “hatred” driven by fear, transforms G.H.’s unconscious material for the first time into a sovereign “I.” Paradoxically, the same moment she becomes, as she puts it, “mistress of my powers” (*dona de meus poderes*), her metaphorical “oath” invokes her adherence to an external law that authorizes her “delivery to what is evil.” What follows, then, is neither self-consciousness nor nausea, but distaste—the faint metallic “taste” (*sabor*) of herself as iron or a crushed green plant.

Significantly, it is in this moment of distaste that the second facializing moment indirectly links Janair to the body of the cockroach. G.H. finally gazes at the “face” of the cockroach and finds that “it looks like a dying mulatto woman” (56)—an association that simultaneously humanizes the insect and dehumanizes Janair. While Lispector’s novel does not explore the lived experience of the maid, G.H.’s “unconscious” association of the roach’s body with a mulatto woman’s face nonetheless *produces* a shameful body that partially coincides with the *experience* of the racialized subject in Fanon’s analysis. For Fanon, the transition from a “body schema” into a “racial-epidermal” or “racial-historical” schema inflected both Sartre and Lacan’s conceptions of “the Other” with colonialism and an imaginary body tied to the lived experience of race.¹⁰³ In Deleuze and Guattari’s implicit rewriting of Fanon’s drama, they conceive the “white wall/black hole system” as the Face or “faciality,” modifying the same thinkers that Fanon does: “In the literature of the face, Sartre’s text on the look and Lacan’s on the mirror make the error of appealing to a form of subjectivity or humanity reflected in a phenomenological field or split in a structural field. *The gaze is but secondary in relation to the*

gazeless eyes, to the black hole of faciality. The mirror is but secondary in relation to the white wall of faciality.”¹⁰⁴ This formulation replaces Fanon’s “white masks” with the “white wall” of signifi-ance, an organized signifying regime of signs,¹⁰⁵ and it links the “black hole” to a subjectivation that involves “consciousness and passion” (*Thousand* 167), as in Césaire, Fanon, and Lispector.

This reformulation of a “white wall/black hole system” proves both useful and limiting for reading *A paixão segundo G.H.* The linking of the face to this “system” remains useful because, like Lispector’s narrative text, it involves a different conceptual armature than general notions of “the Other” associated with thinkers like Sartre, Lacan, but also Fanon and Lévinas. Lispector also returns to the more primary figures of a “white wall” and “black hole” system subjacent to subjectivity and humanity: G.H.’s conceives her previous life as accommodation to a “system” (13), but her initial rupture also leads to “the discovery of an empire” (23). This is where Deleuze and Guattari’s useful concept of faciality becomes limiting. They move too quickly beyond the imperial and colonial dimensions implicit in their formulation. For them, the transition from a primitive “body-head system” to a modern “facial system” becomes the “generalized collapse” of the former, a “decoding” of the body and an “overcoding” by the face (*Thousand* 182). In this modern system, the abstract Face becomes “the semiotic of capitalism,” “White Man himself,” “Christ” (ibid. 171, 176, 182). This overcoming (“overcoding”) of the primitive system by a capitalist-colonial order not only renders the bodily image, “other,” and “stranger”—all at play in G.H.’s recognition of the formerly invisible Janair—anachronistic or obsolete.¹⁰⁶ It also establishes a generalized dualism between the “Christ-face” and “defacialization” as the new possible “destiny” of human beings.¹⁰⁷

Thinking this transition in Lispector's narrative text, I argue, requires returning to the mediations—transcoding, in Deleuze and Guattari's idiom, or transculturating, in Ángel Rama's—displaced by this presumption of a generalized “collapse.” On the one hand, the “look” or “gaze” (*olho*) that defines the narrator's *former* identity “G.H.” certainly bears comparison to the way a Sartrean or Lacanian notion of “the Other” shapes or forms the self. She describes her life as “more inside a mirror” and her former self appeared as the object of a “gaze” (*olho*) that could be called a variety of names: “truth,” “morality,” “human law,” “God,” “me” (28). Like the “look” in Sartre that reveals “the Other” as the source fashioning and in “possession” of the self,¹⁰⁸ the “look” for G.H. reveals the way she had not only fit into a “system” (13), but internalized it—the last name of the “gaze” in her list is “me.” This “life,” moreover, is identified with a mirror-like imaginary relation to others and to her self: her principal question was not “what am I” but “among whom am I” (28). G.H.'s initial glimpse of an inexpressive gaze, though, anticipates her discovery of the “inhuman” both before and beyond the self: “I glanced at the photographed face and, for a second, in that inexpressive face the also inexpressive world looked back at me” (*A paixão* 25). The gradual approach to the inexpressive and inhuman in the novel troubles the humanity assumed by both a conventional humanism and what Earl Fitz calls Lispector's “post-structural humanism”: a humanism conscious of the role that language plays in shaping or determining existence, yet capable of giving this role a “human face.”¹⁰⁹ In *A paixão*, the approach to the inhuman leads her to question “the face” as a “sensibilization of the body,” part of the false humanization that stands in the way of “another morality” dissociated from “beauty” (154, 155). At the same time, the narrator's desire for another inexpressive “face” figures a present without any recognizably human contours: “The present is the today face of God [*O presente é o face hoje do Deus*]” (148). The present as “the

today face of the God” or “the face today of the God” and the “face of reality” presents something other than either the expressive face of the Other as transcendence (Lévinas 24) or the crystallization of the Christ-face and the concept White-Man. This process is closer to what Lispector describes elsewhere as the painful process of defacement, of one’s mask shattering into a naked face, which requires instead “passing through Christ’s path” to reemerge from a state of non-being.¹¹⁰

Possession in the Desert: Empire, Exodus, and the Alter-World

We can now return to the path that leads from the “system” that defined G.H. to her discovery of an “empire.” Both this discovery and the other mode of “seeing”—“possessing the other”—have correlates in Brazilian *modernismo*. In *A paixão*, the path towards another present opens when the narrator hears a “silence” and a “destiny” that escaped her, turning her narrating “I” into a “hieroglyphic fragment of a dead or living empire” (24). Both the “hieroglyphic fragment” and this “empire” remain enigmatic: G.H. may form part of the priestly class in a *living* empire of the present; yet, her “possession” by the other (Janair’s mural and the cockroach as a “hieroglyphic” script) initially suggests a *dead* empire to which she is subjected. But the “empire of the present” she sees from the “minaret-room”—a desert composed of explicit references to Egypt, Africa, and the *favelas* of Rio, as well as implicit references to the myth of Jewish Exodus—effectively blurs the borders between the two. Her absorption into the mural makes her feel as if she were falling “centuries and centuries” into a mud that was being mixed with the “roots” of her identity (57). In her personal exodus, the escape from the “house of bondage” (*Official King James Bible*, Exodus 20.2) blurs her possession of the other with the other’s possession of her.

This sense of possession as subjectivation has an exemplary but largely unremarked precedence in Brazilian *modernismo*: Mário de Andrade's novel *Macunaíma* (1928). The seventh chapter, "Macumba," stages a version of modernist *abrasileiramento* ("Brazilianization)—the desire to bring the falsity of Europeanized lettered culture into contact with Brazilian popular culture and reality—through a scene of possession. This possession not only takes as its object the body of an Eastern European woman who, like G.H., is implicitly marked as Jewish. It also connects to another house of bondage and another "living or dead empire": the brothels of Rio de Janeiro and the fictional Amazon "empire" of Macunaíma, the novel's eponymous (anti)-hero.

The "Macumba" chapter stages a conflict between two contrasting figures of composite or hybrid national collectivity: one, represented by both the Afro-Brazilian "*macumba*" ceremony in Rio de Janeiro and Macunaíma himself; the other, by Macunaíma's principal antagonist, Venceslau Pietro Pietra, a Peruvian with an Italian last name and Slavic-derived first name, mythologized in the novel as Piaimã, "the giant eater of people." Macunaíma, "the little heart of others" (*o coraçãozinho dos outros*), appears as a kind of composite figure in the novel as a whole: born black within a mixed indigenous family in the Amazon, he also becomes white through the intervention of magic, one of his several fantastic metamorphoses that appear to remain permanent.¹¹¹ Pietro Pietra has become a wealthy and powerful landowner in São Paulo after appropriating the precious *muriquitã* talisman, given to Macunaíma by his deceased lover, Ci, Mother of the Jungle. As possessor of the stone, the wealthy "cannibal" landowner comes to represent an incorporation of Brazilian society that contends with the heterogeneous popular mixture staged in "Macumba."¹¹² Presided over by Tia Ciata, a well-known *candomblé* priestess at the time in Rio de Janeiro, the *macumba* ceremony represents a mixture of races, classes, and

occupations (many “public functionaries”!), all gathered in hopes of receiving one of the *orixás* or deities.¹¹³ Macunaíma goes to the ceremony seeking revenge against Pietro Pietra and the scene of ritual possession that takes place resembles both a correlate and reversal of the racial drama depicted by Fanon: white characters—including the whitened Macunaíma himself—who don a black mask.¹¹⁴

The revenge Macunaíma enacts on the giant cannibal occurs through the “possession” of a very specific other: a *polaca*, a term in Brazilian Portuguese associated with the primarily Jewish women brought from Poland to work as prostitutes. It is a young Polish initiate, “Ogã,” whom the irreverent *orixá* of communication, Exu, finally comes to possess. After Ogã begins to murmur Exu’s song and she designates Macunaíma the deity’s son, the hero enacts his revenge in a scene repeatedly described by the narrator as “horrific”: serving as a medium, Exu (Ogã) summons the absent giant cannibal into her body and then commands her son (Macunaíma) to beat “the I that was incarnated in the Polish body” (62). Macunaíma’s slapstick revenge against the “I”—the giant cannibal—thus takes the form of violence visited on the “body” of the Polish immigrant woman. But the subjectivation of the Eastern European other as “Brazilian” occurs through both her ritual possession by the Afro-Brazilian deity and the violent beating inflicted on her by the whitened Macunaíma.

Although the ritual of “possessing the other” is not reducible to either subjection or subjugation, these multiple meanings nonetheless also intersect in the other appearance of *polacas* in *Macunaíma*. In the parodic chapter IX, “Carta pras Icamiabas” (“Letter to the Icamiabas”), the reference to *polacas* more explicitly alludes to the Jewish-Polish women brought or coerced by the Jewish crime syndicate, Zwi Midgal, to work as prostitutes in the metropolises of Brazil and Argentina.¹¹⁵ Macunaíma’s letter is styled as an inversion of the

colonial chronicle written by the subject to his King or Queen: the “Emperor” Macunaíma writes to the women “subjects” of his Amazon tribe about a similar “clan of women” from Poland that lives in the metropolis of São Paulo and earns a living through sex. In a sardonic but also burlesque turn, Macunaíma recommends that a delegation from this “clan” be sent back to his Amazon Empire to teach the Amazon women “a more modern and profitable form of life” (76). However, the vision of Emperor Macunaíma becoming their *de facto* pimp is plagued by the worry that the Amazon women might also learn certain “abuses” from the other “clan”: after the brief specter of inter-species sex, Macunaíma imagines that the influence of the Polish “clan” may lead the Amazons to become, like Sappho’s companions on the island of Lesbos, lesbians (76). Although only a fleeting vision, this scene of same sex seduction momentarily dismantles both Macunaíma’s imaginary empire and the house of servitude for the *polacas* in the city.¹¹⁶

The scene of possession in *A paixão segundo G.H.* both includes and rewrites elements from these scenes, redirecting them to the border between human and animal. Unlike what transpires in *Macunaíma*, G.H.’s possession appears analogous, but not reducible, to religious subjection. The enigmatic “call” that subjectivizes the narrator, giving her “the dimension of she,” echoes an interpellation conceived along the lines of religious subjection: “It was the desert calling me like a monotonous and remote canticle calls” (60). The religious connotations of the “canticle,” though, provide an analogy rather than an origin. The source of the call continues to remain indeterminate: “what had called me: madness or reality?” (70). If the narrator associates cases of madness with “something that returned,” the question also leaves open the possibility that the call may just as well come from a previously ignored aspect of reality. Regardless of the source, the call leads her to a scene of double seduction between the human and non-human. This scene of seduction appears sexed, but not sexualized, as in *Macunaíma*: “the cockroach is pure

seduction. Lashes, winking lashes [*cilios*] that call. [...] I also have a thousands of lashes winking, and with my lashes I advance, protozoan I, pure protein” (60). While the cockroach body appears facialized here, the “I” of the experience also assumes an almost defacialized “protozoan” body. Indeed, both descriptions use the same word for “lashes,” *cilios*, rather than the more common and anthropomorphic *pestanas*, and the *cilios* of the “protozoan I” more clearly invoke the non-anthropomorphic “cilium.”

The scene of seduction, in this sense, stages an ambiguous state of becoming: an imaginary body where neither figure is simply a body or a face. The enunciation “I, neutral body of the cockroach” (65), presents the initial conjoining of these images. Later, when the narrator finally recognizes “the same eyelashes” (*as mesmas pestanas*) (96) on the cockroach, she does so after imagining that her own violent act genders the cockroach, “since what is squished by the waist is female” (93). This commonality comes with a memory scene of the narrator’s decision to have an abortion, when the retrospective image of herself as “thousands of protozoan cilium batting” amidst a window display of mannequins coincides with her already knowing the “brilliant gaze of a cockroach seized by the waist” (92). Her recognition of the “same eyelashes” seems to place the cockroach at the “primordial” point of things “aspiring to be human” (161). More importantly, though, it also conditions the claim that she and the cockroach were not before the law, but were now their “own ignored law,” and that from this point on, not following her “law” would amount to a new “original sin” (97). This new undefined but “irreducible” law opens up a “line of mystery and fire” within the interstices of “primordial material,” rather than affirm her bond to a primordial Oneness or Other. This “the surreptitious line” (*a linha sub-reptícia*) connotes its possible fraudulence, but also the clandestine or unauthorized status of the path that it opens up (98). The subject who abandons her “human organization” on this surreptitious line

becomes a kind of organ without attributes: “my living entrails” (*minhas entranhas vivas*), an interiority that suggests the raw materiality of the “intestinal system” or the “uterus,” but also the “seat of emotions.”

The surreptitious line marks a certain indistinction between the narrator’s personal exodus and her exodus from the person. It also suggests two ways of reading this line: one as a heretic transgression or apostasy from the perspective of Christianity or Jewish mysticism; and the other as a path of the deserter and desertion, terms that I flesh out in more detail below. This second line is not the “exit” of flight, which for Lispector’s narrator amounts to a reassertion of transcendence (85), but an “entrance” likened at various points to a passage through an Inferno. The narrator’s declaration, “I want the God in what is coming out of the cockroach’s belly” (89), locates this substantialized God (“the God”) within the cockroach mass. As Berta Waldman poignantly notes, by first identifying “the God” with the cockroach then staging a communion with cockroach mass in an “orgy of the Sabbath,” Lispector “commits a double transgression, one in relationship to Jewish tradition and one in relation to Christianity” (“Notes” 11). At the same time, however, this reading of transgression does not fully take into account the search in *A paixão* for an “other morality” (153) that must be “larger than guilt” (87) and does not seek to “transgress” (143). As a substantial line of criticism attests, it is possible to inscribe Lispector and especially *A paixão* into a tradition (or traditions) of “mysticism”—even, I would add, to bring this novel into proximity with a kind of apostasy that traverses Jewish messianic thought.¹¹⁷ The narrative eventually associates the cockroach with both the “unclean” (*imundo*) or prohibited animals of the Old Testament and the host that represents Christ’s body in the Eucharist.¹¹⁸ But while the act of eating the cockroach mass produces a “sensation of death,” the narrator does not consider the act a “sin,” what she refers to as an “easy purity,” but an “anti-sin”

(164). Moreover, the cockroach first appears linked to the specter of poverty and the racialized body of Janair—both “filthy” (*imundo*)—and then also increasingly to an alternative aesthetic and material construction of a new present. In following the narrator’s new “law” and the surreptitious line into her vision of the desert outside her window, we cannot ignore these other elements that compose the alterity of this place and the alter-world of *A paixão*.

Indeed, just before narrating her vision of the desert, the narrator poses the question of becoming a world: “If I am the world [*Se eu for o mundo*], I will not be afraid. If we are the world [*Se a gente é o mundo*], we are moved by a delicate radar that guides” (101). The future subjunctive (*Se eu for*) projects the possibility of her subjective vision as “the world.” The second conditional phrase suggests a kind of collective correlate—the colloquial “we” (*a gente*) that also connotes “people” (*gente*). But unlike the more unitary *povo* (“people”), *gente* can refer to a territorial group, humanity, and a more indeterminate or plural grouping. In *The Creation of the World*, Jean-Luc Nancy suggestively contrasts the possibility of “world forming” (*faire monde* and *mondialisation*) with “globalization” and the “un-world” (*immonde*) it produces: divided cities and exclusion as the other side of the accumulation of construction and exchange (33). In *A paixão* the narrator’s “visual meditation” (111) has less to do with identifiable people than with the *imundo*, the “un-world” of its imaginary. The world she reconstructs takes place precisely on the basis of an “un-world” (*imundo*) excluded previously by G.H., but also by the quintessentially modernist city in the Brazilian desert, as I show below by comparing it with Lispector’s contemporaneous imaginary chronicle of the newly inaugurated capital, Brasília. Rather than a creation *ex nihilo*, “without roots” and inimical to fabrication or production (Nancy *Creation* 51), the narrator’s desert exodus becomes the site for reconstructing an alternative production and agriculture that is not without roots.

The narrator's vision is preceded by an imagined "collapse" of both "humanity" and "civilization" along with the giant buildings now "buried" in front of her window, indicating a "design not yet indicated on a map" (105). This collapse of the ultramodern landscape reconnects to the myth that transforms her "minaret-room" into a house of servitude and the desert into a site of exodus. Her initial description of the high-rise apartment as an "Egyptian ruin" (36), which the workers who laid the pipes and sewers of the building had constructed without knowing, returns along with echoes of Janair as an African queen. The narrating subject has become "simple like a queen" in a city where the "kings, sphinxes, and lions," were all "extinct" and "today the ground is populated with diverse races" (106). This "empire of the present" (105) renders indistinct whether it is "Janair"—that is, her projected image of Janair—who "possesses" the narrator, or the narrator who possesses "Janair." Although the vision of Rio de Janeiro as a city with "six thousand beggars to the sun" appears closer to myth, the elements of Rio de Janeiro that compose this vision do not necessarily suggest a blindness towards urban poverty,¹¹⁹ for it is precisely the ultra-modern architecture and not the *favelas* that are erased from this uncertain landscape. The "*favela* on the hill" (105) that she initially gazes at now become "the semi-ruins of the *favela*" (108) that suggest the absent presence of a former city comparable to "Athens in its apogee." The visual meditation provides an answer to the question whether "hope" was a "temporization of the impossible" or a "deferral of what is already possible" (88): what she constructs in her desire for "today" or "the now" (*o já*), for a "present that has no promise," blurs the borders of what is possible and impossible (83, 88). Although this "actuality" may be without "a future that redeems it" and without "hope," it is not without futurity altogether. Actualizing hope makes a "new present," and living this vision becomes the "prehistory of a future" (107).

This appearance of futurity should not be totally dissociated from the temporalities of modernization and national developmentalism. However, the vision of an alternative construction in the desert contrasts sharply with Lispector's own vision of the newly inaugurated modernist city in the desert: Brasília. In the chronicle "Brasília: cinco dias" ("Brasília: Five Days"), contemporaneous with both the novel and the period of the military coup, Lispector also presents the ultramodern capital as an allegorical "ruin" (*A legião* 162). Significantly, in the dream-like "insomnia" that marks her vision of the capital, she compares its construction to both a "totalitarian State" and imperial Rome. The contrast with the "empire of the present" in the heterotopic vision of Rio—comparable to Athens, but composed of allusions to Egypt and the Sahara—could not be more revealing. In her imaginary history of Brasília as a "civilization" now defunct for several thousand years, the first inhabitants of the city were "really tall blond men and women" who were blind and sterile; after their passing, a band of "foragers" who were "smaller brown men and women" occupied the ruins; finally, even though it was constructed with no place for "rats," it was now being "invaded" by them (*A legião* 163). Lispector's "insomnia" presents a kind of allegory of the city's construction: the migrants and workers who built the city but ended up excluded from the egalitarian housing plan of Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, the communist architect and urban planner largely responsible for the design of the city. Although the city is not without a "startling beauty," it also appears "haunted" by the specter of poverty and exclusion—the *unworld*—associated with the "rats" (*A legião* 165), much as place is shadowed by cockroaches in *A paixão*.¹²⁰

In *A paixão*, the vision generated by the narrator's encounter with the cockroach is of aesthetic neutralization—the oasis-like lakes in the desert that exemplify a landscape of "neither beauty nor ugliness" (111). The partial collapse or disintegration of the modern city opens her

room not only to the “snakes, scorpions, tarantulas, and myriads of mosquitoes” (108) that will come to occupy it, but also onto a vision of alternative development that uses the Sahara desert as its analogy: she would need a “drilling machine” and “camels, goats, and sheep” to find the “humidity,” just as archaeologists had found remainders of agricultural life in the “subsoil” of the Sahara. Again, comparison is instructive. We have seen above how Fanon envisioned his analysis as a descent into the dried up source, a “true Hell” for the person of color, “a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline essentially stripped bare, from which an authentic appearance can originate” (*Black Skin* xii). Perhaps more pertinently, Maurice Blanchot’s rereading of Exodus presents the desert as a remainder of the Biblical story, a nomadic “space without place and a time without production” (80). To reiterate and add to what I have suggested above, the narrator’s desert vision in *A paixão* is *not without* elements of place, *not without* roots, and *not without* an alternative production and labor.¹²¹ The desert glimpsed from her minaret-room becomes the imagined site of both new agricultural cultivation (eucalyptus to anchor the dunes, rice, palm trees, peanuts, olives) and ceremony—like *macumbeiras*, the women practitioners of *macumba*, she would directly “pray things” rather than “pray for things” (111).

This visual meditation does not suggest the *telos* of exodus or the pure outside of nomadism, but something closer to what I have referred to in the introduction and above as the singularity of desertion and the deserter. While the narrator’s vision evokes the role of a shepherd in the desert, she appears on the verge of deserting this function, just as the animals themselves do not appear as a flock (*rebanho*) but as a herd (*gado*): “in working towards the open field, I would have to share my bed with the herd [*o gado*]” (108). In the short story “Os obedientes” (“The Obedient Ones” [1964]), Lispector used the “deserter” to figure what a reserved and dutiful

bourgeois couple *fails* to become: even though each senses that they would “live” more apart, their decorum and “reserve”—what the narrator refers to mockingly as “our military reserve”—keeps them together and at a measured distance from both the political and social changes in the world around them (*A legião* 103). The wife’s failure to desert her deadening relationship leads to another mode of escape: investing everything around her with a symbolic meaning and a light spirituality permitted by official Catholicism. She becomes so engrossed in superstition, however, that when she breaks her front tooth on an apple, the sight of her damaged and aged face in the mirror opens an uncontainable psychic fissure and she takes her own life. In *A paixão*, G.H.’s encounter with the maid’s mural and the cockroach forces her to desert her own obedient life, opening her to an inhuman life previously barred from her experience. Although one could point to autobiography parallels as well,¹²² Lispector develops a more relevant autobiographical use of “deserter” in the *crônica* “Pertencer” (“Belonging”), a concept largely ignored in the scholarship despite the frequent citation of this chronicle.

As I have outlined in the introduction, “Pertencer” retrospectively rewrites Lispector’s birth as an originary non-belonging. She relates how her mother, owing to a popular superstition, had conceived a third child (herself) in “love and hope” that having a child would cure the unnamed sickness from which she suffered (*A descoberta* 153). Because her birth did nothing and she, in effect, betrayed her parents’ “great hope,” she refuses to pardon herself despite their forgiveness: it was as if they had given her a “mission,” counting on her “in the trenches,” and she had “deserted.” In the projection of this originary non-belonging back onto (and as) her “birth,” Lispector belongs to her parents now only in the conditional tense—she “would have belonged” to them if she had fulfilled the “miracle”—and confesses a resulting shame: “I could not even confide in someone this kind of *solitude of not belonging* because, as a deserter, I had the secret

of the flight that, because of shame, could not be known.” The non-belonging of “the deserter” thus does not suggest a “war” with her parents, as Cixous asserts; but nor does it support an unproblematic inheritance of tradition and identity, as Vieira maintains.¹²³ The shame of her becoming a “deserter” can rather be most productively compared to the sense of “shame” that Adorno describes as “overcom[ing] the descendent in face of an earlier possibility that he [sic] has failed to bring to fruition” (*Minima* 93). Like what Benjamin called the “*weak* messianic power” that the present has when it’s attuned to the claims of the past, Adorno associates shame with an outdatedness in things that signal an historical failure: “Only what failed is outdated, the broken promise of a new beginning.”¹²⁴ Significantly, Lispector does not divulge this “secret” nor explain the resonance that these metaphoric “trenches” have with her parents’ flight from the Ukraine after the pogroms following the Russian revolution.¹²⁵ Thus while the “deserter” figures a certain relation of discontinuity with Lispector’s Jewish heritage, it also reestablishes an altered, quasi-messianic, relation to inheritance through the enigmatic metaphor of a “mission,” the affect of shame, and the site of the desert.

In Lispector’s writing, the desert emerges as a limit experience and interruption of previous constructions. In the earlier novel *A maçã no escuro* (1961), Martim flees his former life after an obscure crime and ends up on a ranch in the center of Brazil. His desire to be free, without vocation and beyond the demands of others, does not come about from deserting his wife but, as we learn at the end, almost killing her. Although he begins to question his crime only after he realizes that he cannot escape the call of others, he experiences the “desert” when a woman on the ranch who had fallen for him suddenly refuses his own pleas and love. This interrupts his “construction” and his sudden loss of desire causes him to experience his surroundings as rock-like resistance that “vibrated at the same level of actuality” (*A maçã* 154, 155). The unnamed

narrator of *Água viva* has an apposite experience when, in the midst of her lyrical narration, she “loses” herself and transforms into one of the gazeless statues that she sees on a desert landscape (68). She describes this moment as vibrating with a neutral materiality or thingness around her—an indescribable “it” rendered with the English word. This experience becomes the “real” that she only reaches in dreams, leading her to declare: “reality, I invent you.” This process resonates with the “real” that first interrupts the construction of G.H.’s former life and then becomes, in her vision, part of the new reality and world that she invents in the desert. In “Pertencer,” her final equation, “belonging is living” (152), also makes the desert the site of an experience where the loss of desire turns over into an intense hunger or thirst. Living is likened to the brief experience of someone in the desert who drinks the last drops of water from a canteen before both thirst and the desert reassert themselves.

There would seem to be considerable distance between this fleeting if not desperate moment of “living,” and the description of “living” in *A paixão segundo G.H.* as the “great force of construction” (12) that also animates the narrator’s heterotopic visual meditation in the desert. And yet, in “Pertencer” Lispector also refers to her “force” as what drives an “intense will to belong,” while belonging in turn is what might keep this force from being “useless” and even allow it to “fortify a person or thing” (*Descoberta* 152). As I have shown in the introduction, the chronicle connects this will to her being happy “to belong to Brazilian literature” (*pertencer à literatura brasileira*) and the intransitive “Happy just ‘to belong’” (*Feliz apenas por ‘fazer parte’*), a phrase that means “to belong” in this sense of “being a part,” but also more literally “doing (one’s) part” or “making (a) part,” without specifying that it is a part *of* a delimited whole. The principal difference between the two moments of “living” might then be an emphasis on “construction” versus an emphasis on “will.” Even if the terms mutually implicate

each other, a more utopic *construction* finds support in a general atmosphere of pre-revolutionary fervor and disorder, while *will* appears in a more dystopic period of increasing repression during the military dictatorship, shortly before the institutional acts that instated a definitive state of siege in Brazil.¹²⁶ The two texts converge, though, in their allusion to Jewish “roots.” While in “Belonging,” becoming a deserter configures a break from familial origins, shame maintains a link to both an abandoned “mission” and a failed “miracle,” registering the claim of what Adorno calls the “broken promise of a new beginning.” By returning to the hope invested in the “mission” (or the promise), the deserter may also alter the scene of shame, actualizing the hope in a different way, beginning again in a new present. Indeed, even though the concept of the “deserter” does not explicitly appear in *A paixão*, I argue that it is in this novel—the first of Lispector’s narrative texts to take up a first person narrator who is also the central character—where Lispector implicitly feels out and explores the various possibilities of this concept.

As we have seen, the exodus and desertion in *A paixão* blurs the distinction between the narrator possessing the other and the other possessing her. The projected construction, populated mostly with the nonhuman (animals and insects), not only returns us to Lispector’s claim that she contributes nothing human or social through writing. It also emphasizes the importance of the inhuman and what could correlatively be called, risking a neologism in English, the insocial. By “insocial” I mean to emphasize a partial negation of existing social partitions, without suggesting either a necessary hostility towards people (implied by anti-social or asocial) or a transcendent outside to the social (the insocial would also be “in-social,” on the border of the social). In this sense as well, her personal exodus has less to do with the idea of a “chosen people” (an idea Lispector seemed to sharply reject),¹²⁷ than with a singular actualization of possibilities that, according to the narrator, were both postponed and transcended by “hope.” Whereas in

“Pertencer,” Lispector’s becoming a “deserter” collectivizes her parents’ singular hope by making it part of a larger “mission,” in *A paixão* hope already appears in a more indeterminate, collective sense. This indeterminate sense of hope acquires a particular salience when we take into account the context and a social imaginary itself invested with expectations of democratic and even revolutionary transformation. For this reason, the narrator’s “dispensing with hope” (*dispensar com esperança*) [147], becomes all the more significant since it suggests both doing away with hope and distributing it. This dispensing with hope occurs in two stages: first with the “new present” of her visual meditation that inhabits the in-social limit of the social imaginary and makes the unworld the basis of an alter-world; then, with her desire not for the destruction of hope but a “dispensing with hope” that for the narrator “means action, and today” (147). This action takes the form of eating the other.

From Eating the Other to Ethico-Aesthetic Proximity: Auratic Irradiation and the Real

In the vision of the desert, the force of aesthetic construction avails itself of a “promise” but maintains a sense of futurity. The act of eating the other, the narrator asserts, avails itself of both the promise and the futurity still apparent in the vision. The cockroach “thing” that she eventually eats also contains a mixture of elements tied to the modernizing forces of the new social imaginary, and particularly to functionalist materials of construction. The “piece of thing” that she equates with a “treasure” and “everything” (136) actually appears as an unstable triangulation of things. Initially it appears as “a piece of iron, of grit, of glass”; next it becomes a “piece of metal,” “a piece of wall,” and “a piece of material made into a cockroach”; then, “a piece of iron, a cockroach antenna, chalk from the wall” (136, 137). In this triangulation of pieces, the industrial materials of construction and modern functionalism (iron and glass) are first

mixed with the material from the white wall. Second, the material opacity of the cockroach replaces the transparency of the glass, as if it mediates the narrator's perception of the outside. Third, the "cockroach antenna" replaces the cockroach and gives these thing-pieces an auratic appearance: "The most remote secret of the world, opaque but blinding me with the irradiation of its simple existence" (136-7). This "irradiation" resonates with Benjamin's principal definition of aura as "the unique apparition of a distance, however near [the object] may be" ("The Work of Art" 256). For the narrator also experiences a certain distance in proximity to the other: "My greatest possible approach [*aproximação*] stops a step away. What impedes this step from being taken? It is the opaque irradiation, simultaneously of the thing and me. Because of similarity, we repelled each other; because of similarity, we did not enter into each other" (137-8).

Lispector's narrator renders this experience as a new state that is both subjective and impersonal, a "me that are Thing and You [*Mim que és Coisa e Tu*]" (138). This state adds the "Thing" to an earlier apostrophe that had replaced the frequent appeals to the interlocutive "you" with a "You": "I am not you, but me are You [*Eu não sou Tu, mas mim és Tu*]" (131). The disjunctive syntax registers a "You" that cannot be "sensed directly" (131), and may be "God or whatever [You] Are called [*És chamado*]" (132). But the capitalized forms of both the "thing" and the "you" may also be read as their momentary excess, the narrator's experience of a "me" that is separate from the empirical "I" or self. For here, at the same time that the thing becomes animated as a process ("the material vibrates with attention, vibrates with process, vibrates with inherent actuality"), the narrating subject "me" becomes a thing-like element, the "unbreakable grain," rolling with the waves of what "exists" (139). This process enables what Jane Bennett, in her political ecology of "vibrant matter," calls a more horizontal experience of the "relationship between persons and other materialities" (10).

Both this experience and the narrator's act of "eating the other" suggest something other than destruction of the auratic "irradiation." The narrator's experience leads her to revalorize both the "inexpressive face" and nature's "vibrating inexpressive" (*inexpressivo vibrante*), a doubling of adjectives that might also be rendered as an "inexpressive vibrancy" (140). This revalorization comes with a new aesthetic judgment: "the worst art is expressive, that art which transgresses the piece of iron and piece of glass, and the smile and scream" (143). The addition of "the smile and scream" to the non-human, non-expressive elements of construction seems counterintuitive, one of Lispector's rhetorical paradoxes. Yet, along with several silent screams, the narrator's sensation of a "smile without actually smiling" (179) at the very end of the novel suggests that an inexpressive and non-transgressive art attunes itself to these otherwise inaudible or invisible states. In this sense, the inexpressive does not negate or destroy expression any more than "dispensing with hope" destroys hope or, as she assures her anonymous interlocutor, just as the inhuman does not "destroy" humanization (145). The "opaque irradiation" instead allows the narrator to see "humanization from the inside," to see the "inhuman truth" of humanization. Similarly, the inexpressive is part of the neutralization of the auratic experience of "irradiation" rather than the "destruction of aura" proclaimed in Benjamin's essay on technological reproducibility, the "stripping of the veil from the object."¹²⁸ But while Lispector's narrator similarly refers to an "enigma" behind the "covering" of the thing, the act of "eating the other" neither assimilates the thing nor destroys aura through a critical unveiling. It instead reproduces the enigmatic "irradiation": "I sense that the 'nonhuman' is a great reality, and that this does not mean 'dehuman', on the contrary: the nonhuman is the irradiating center of a neutral love in hertzian waves" (171). In Lispector's narrative text, the technological signals ("hertzian waves") transmit the mute message of a "neutral love" that has a nonhuman energy as its irradiating core.

Lispector's narrator discovers the "neutral" in both the act of eating the other and in her attempt to disavow what she has done. Its immediate effect, though, is to desacralize the cockroach mass and de-transcendentalize her narration of the act. When she finally reveals what she has done, the narrator worries that she has "transcended" her act by disowning her role and only alluding to what happened. This allusion to the act thus becomes "Like a transcendence" (166). But the homophony of *Como* in the ambiguous sentence fragment, *Como uma transcendência*, suggests both the simile "Like a transcendence" and the first person form of the verb *comer* ("to eat"), "I eat a transcendence." This is, in effect, what she does. The memory of her ingesting the mass makes her whole body "scream" and she recalls the nausea that made her spit out the "taste" of what she had eaten. This act is conveyed by the citation from *The Apocalypse According to Saint John*: "— — — — — 'because you are neither cold nor hot, because you are warm, I will vomit you from my mouth'" (167). The action of eating then vomiting out the cockroach mass condenses the problem of the text's partial inclusion or incorporation of alterity.¹²⁹ The possible biblical meaning is less important—the narrator does not remember it—than its figuration of the "insipidness" or "tastelessness" (*insosso*) of what she had eaten, the "taste of nothingness" that she identifies with the "taste of myself." The narrator ceases to spit out the neutral taste because, she declares, "I comprehended that I was denying myself again." What she comprehends, in this sense, is that vomiting out the other would also be denying the "taste of myself" as nothingness. The subjective "me" or "myself" not only differs from the self as "I," but, as we saw, it enters into the strange state of being with both "Thing and You." This de-transcendentalizing movement leads to a profane reinterpretation of her act: "I who had thought that the biggest transmutation of me into myself would be to put the mass of cockroach into my mouth. And this way I would approach the divine? What is real? The divine

for me is the real” (167). It is possible to interpret “the divine” as the religious or quasi-religious transcendental axis that remains in what Nunes refers to as the novel’s “trans-descendence” into immanence.¹³⁰ But it is also possible to read the adherence to immanence as a process of deserting “the divine” in the name of “the real.”

Two points of support for can be adduced for this second interpretation. The first is found in Lispector’s unusual elliptical punctuation; the second in the narrator’s rereading of the saint’s apposite act of kissing a leper. The elliptical lines that circumscribe both the act of squashing the cockroach and the act of spitting it out graphically figure her frequently cited aphorisms about writing and the *entrelinhas*—what is, in a literal sense, “between the lines.” In the ethical approach of her aesthetics, what is between the lines should be what one avoids “squash[ing] with words” (*A legião* 137). The *entrelinhas* also figure into Lispector’s often-cited aphorism on writing as “fishing for what is not the word,” by using the “word” as bait: “when this non-word bites the bait, something was written. Once the space between the lines [*a entrelinha*] has been fished, one could toss the word out with relief. But here the analogy ends: upon biting the word, the non-word incorporated it. What saves is reading ‘distractedly’” (*A legião* 143). In Lispector’s formulation, a conception of the *entrelinhas* allows what is not simply discourse or language (“the non-word”) to appear through language (“the word”). In this sense, the “non-word” occupies a similar place as the “unsayable” that Lispector’s narrator defends in *A paixão*: the “unsayable” appears when “the construction falters” and it registers the “failure” of language (or of existing language) to capture what she returns with (*A paixão* 176). Yet what results—“the word” incorporated by the “non-word”—is by no means an unmediated outside of language. In *A paixão*, the dying cockroach provides one version of this “word” used to fish the “between-the-lines.” As we have seen, it becomes an imaginary body of language composed of various

“inhuman” associations: poverty and the “unclean”; divine matter; constructive industrial and artistic materials; and a kind of neutral life. The passional narrating subject who eats the cockroach mass then becomes the last instance of the non-word that incorporates the word, blurring the boundaries between metaphor and metamorphosis, human and non-human, in the process.¹³¹

One of the principal, non-divine figures for this incorporated word emerges towards the end as an identity of opposites—star and cockroach. This figure appears as neither transcendent spirit nor immanent body, neither sublime nor abject: “the grandiose indifference of a star is the soul of the cockroach, the star is the proper exorbitance of the cockroach’s body” (122). By ingesting the cockroach mass, what she calls the “thick root of the stars,” the narrator effectively attempts to incarnate this imaginary body-soul. What the narrator refers to as a subjective “enlargement” (168) that results from this act ties together the two interpretive extremes of the incorporated word into a knot: if the word and metaphor are subsumed and transcended, the subject becomes a body of pure metamorphosis; if the subject and her corporeal metamorphosis are dissolved, the word and metaphor become pure discourse or tropes. It is, instead, the non-identity of word and non-word that impedes opting for one or the other. By reading “distractedly,” Lispector suggests, one might also “catch” this non-identity. Like Benjamin’s similar emphasis on distraction, this mode of apperception is more tactile and even gustatory than optical, but without being strictly opposed to the contemplative.¹³²

The narrator’s profane rereading of the saint’s apposite act—kissing a leper—provides a second example of how “the real” takes the place of the divine. Lispector’s narrator does not mention the name of the saint (Saint Francis of Assisi) or the provenance surrounding the act.¹³³ In her demystifying rereading, the saint simply kisses a leper first and foremost for his own

“benefit” and “salvation” (*A paixão* 168). Yet, at the same time, she wonders whether the saint’s desire for purification was not actually driven by “the need to love the neutral.” If so, the saint takes leave of “the good” and “the beautiful” to love what is not an “addition”; he effectively practices a “greater goodness” based on a presupposition of radical equality, since for the saint, “everything is equal.” Thus, although the saint loves his or her “enlargement,” “thousands of others are enlarged by his enlargement and live from it, and he loves the others as much as his terrible enlargement.” This profane rereading ends with a virtual allegory of the novel. The narrator now “understood” that “living is a great goodness for others,” but the same gesture that effaces the border between literature and life also reinstates it as the novel’s incommunicable message: “whomever lives their own enlargement is making a gift, even if their life happens inside the incommunicability of a cell.” The saint’s “love of the neutral” thus becomes part of the lesson that turns over into a “neutral love.” And, as we saw above, the “neutral love” can only be communicated from the “cell” as the silent irradiation of “hertzian waves.”

In this way, “eating the other” in *A paixão* finally suggests a rereading and alteration of the other *modernista* strategy that it inescapably invokes—Oswald de Andrade’s aesthetics of anthropophagy, already being revisited and actualized by the Brazilian avant-garde in the early 1960s. It is through Lispector’s modification of this strategy that we can return to the relation between Lispector’s cockroach mass and Kafka’s more famous inhuman insect. Taking up the inhuman cannibal figure, cultural anthropophagy proposed an absorption of foreign—and, above all, European—culture that also desacralized its value as tradition, making it available for other uses.¹³⁴ The manifesto comically conveys this in one of its central formulations: “the absorption of the sacred enemy,” rendered by Oswald de Andrade’s decolonial dating, “In Piratininga, in the 374th year of the deglutination of Bishop Sardinha” (18, 19). The pun on the name (“Sardine”)

adds relish to the already ironic reference: the alleged devoration of the Catholic Bishop by an anthropophagous tribe. Oswald de Andrade's desacralizing proposal was part description (the incomplete "catechism" and bourgeois modernity of Brazil) and part prescription (to irreverently transform all "taboos," especially those involving the sexual morality of the Catholic Church, into "totems"). The ingestion of the cockroach mass in *A paixão* performs a similar transformation. It makes what is a minor prohibition or "taboo" in Jewish law (eating animals deemed "unclean") into a kind of "totemic" meal. As we have seen, though, it is the black maid, Janair, who originally appears as the "stranger" and the "enemy," while the cockroach, the lowest of the animal order and the unworldly, acquires a quasi-sacred dimension in the course of the narrative.

If the becoming sacred of the dying cockroach has no immediate theological or religious precursor, it does have a literary and aesthetic one in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.¹³⁵ In Kafka's novella, Gregor Samsa transforms into a "monstrous vermin" (*ungeheuere Ungeziefer*) that, by definition, is both banned from the family and cannot be sacrificed.¹³⁶ However, this inhuman status does not keep him from becoming an almost sacrificial victim for the family by the end. As most readers will remember, Gregor's sister Grete cares for her metamorphosized brother by bringing food scraps, cleaning his room, and eventually clearing it out so he can explore his new nonhuman form. With Gregor no longer working, though, Grete and her parents are forced to take on jobs and rent part of their apartment to three boarders. Gregor, in turn, becomes progressively neglected and his room a depository for unused items. After two previous emergences from his room, each time meeting with a violent reaction from his father, Gregor emerges for a third and last time, lulled by the music his sister plays for the unappreciative boarders. His appearance shocks the three boarders, but when they demand to stay rent-free, the

father unites the family to drive them out. Gregor's death in an abject state later that night thus not only coincides with the reassertion of the Oedipal family triangle (mother, father, daughter).

In this way, the inhuman Gregor is included within the family only through his death—a death, moreover, that blurs the boundaries between neglect, exhaustion, and a volitional sacrificial act. Tellingly, the expulsion of the inhuman also conditions the emergence of his sister, Grete, from her metaphorical chrysalis at the end. As she stretches her wing-like arms, her parents project a future of marriage for Grete, rather than the life of art that Gregor had originally hoped to foster by sending her to music school. In *A paixão*, it is the female artist, G.H., whose encounter with the inhuman provokes a reverse metamorphosis into a “humid larva,” a metamorphosis that culminates in her act of eating what appears as the “taboo” other in Kafka's story: the reviled insect mass. In Lispector's novel, this mass no longer appears vulgar, abject, or disgusting, what a pure aesthetic taste ostensibly represses (Bourdieu *Distinction* 482-500), but tasteless, void, and “neutral,” what both a social and theological critique may misrecognize as a heretical transgression of the sacred. Altering Haroldo de Campos's theorization of the aesthetics of anthropophagy as the “critical devoration of the universal cultural legacy,” we might read Lispector's act as an ingestion of a “minor” cultural heritage, an act that establishes a relation of “neutral love.”¹³⁷

In this movement, both the “foreign” and “domestic” other are drawn into the same indifferent spiral of the narrative without ever simply becoming the same. At the end, the last negation in the narrator's depersonalization—“deheroization” (173)—follows both the faltering of language in “muteness” and a reassertion of the inhuman dimension of the human: “We will be inhumans, as the greatest conquest of man” (172). For the narrator, deheroization opens new “paths” instead of what she calls “additions,” including the addition of “I” (173). The defense of

an impersonal “living” as both “inhuman” and “an irradiating harsh indifference” also marks the culmination of the final aesthetic neutralization in *A paixão*: indifference. The “destiny in spiral” that results from the rediscovery of her own “inhumanity” leads the narrator directly into “the heart of indifferent love” (116, 121). This indifference, the narrator stresses, is not the same as “human indifference” (126). An “indifferent love” instead appears as an “interested-indifference,” an indifference that “fulfills itself” (*se cumpre*), a pronominal verb that can also mean “discharges itself” or even “comes true”; and as “an extremely energetic indifference,” one that produces a flash of “indifferent-pleasure” in the eyes of an otherwise silent face or results in a “terrible indifferent happiness” (125). This “terrible indifferent happiness” arguably conveys something of the “difficult happiness” that “C.L.,” in her note “To Possible Readers,” suggests the character G.H. has given her (9). And, following the interpretation above of Lispector’s neutralizing terms, indifference can similarly be understood as a certain neutralization of difference, not its destruction.

With the “heart of indifference” that the narrator is drawn into, Lispector draws her interlocutive “you”—and by extension, readers of *A paixão*—towards an egalitarian assertion that also animates the contemporary reimagining of politics. For an “indifference to differences” has been joined to both the philosophical task of “recognizing the Same,” against an ethics based on recognizing the other; and, alternatively, to an egalitarian political subject that stages an equivalence of the same and the other, a way of viewing conflict that dismisses inequalities and neutralizes oppositions.¹³⁸ What Emilia Amaral describes in *A paixão* as a “zone of indifferenciation between the same and the other” (33) aptly describes the final mode of seeing the other: “one simply being in a corner, and the other being there too” (*A paixão* 76). Although there is no direct translation of the novel’s signals of an indifferent or neutral love into a politics,

the latter nonetheless alters the relations of being together within this zone. The final mode of seeing also describes the relation of separation and proximity—between man and woman, human and animal—in Janair’s mural. The narrator’s final declaration of the novel, “And so I love [*Então adoro*].— — — — —” (179), graphically returns this intransitive neutral love to the first punctuated moment and the “searching” with which it begins. Rather than circular repetition, this spiraling path of desertion has altered the situation that conditions her initial response to alterity: the desire to erase Janair’s writing from the white wall and the subsequent act squashing the “half-emerged body of the cockroach— — — — —” (53). This belabored reversal that replaces the act of hatred with the declaration of love, I want to suggest, alters the human-inhuman relation itself. If in the beginning the narrator G.H. assumes the standpoint of the human and discovers the inhuman through her own violent act, now she approaches the inhuman both within and outside the human, proposing it as the site of a new ethical and aesthetic relation to others.

We thus return to the question posed at the outset: a writing that may not contribute to the given partitions of the human and the social. Just as the narrator’s adherence to the inhuman redefines “our greatest destiny” as *carência* or “need” (170), rather than some external limit or *telos* of the human, the indifferent or neutral love neutralizes the differences of the social, rather than suppressing them. This refusal to treat the human and the social as unalterable givens may be what the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia has in mind when, referring to Lispector among others, he asserts that the most “private language” of literature might nevertheless contain the “most living trace of social language.”¹³⁹ For Piglia, this is because a “state of language” dominated by economic discourse and technical or advertising uses also “impedes naming ample zones of social experience and leaves the reconstruction of collective memory outside

intelligibility” (37). It would not be a stretch to suggest that, for Lispector’s readers and critics, the very act the narrator says she must forget—eating the cockroach mass—forms the most indelible part of our collective memory. However, it has been much easier to forget the events that set in motion the process conditioning this act: not only the maid’s writing on the wall, which makes the social relations within this zone of literary space newly visible and initiates the narrator’s path of desertion; but also the vision of the desert outside her window, an imaginary counter to the newly inaugurated capital of Brasília and an alter-world that includes the unworldly life excluded from the modernizing city. By reconfiguring the partitions of the social and human, this alter-world presents a counterreality to a world already on the eve of being delimited and repartitioned in far more active ways by the military dictatorship. But the elliptical broken lines that close the novel also keep open up other possible imaginings in a space where the writing of both “domestic” and “foreign” others inhabit a zone of proximity.

Chapter 2

Negative Constellations: On The Delimitation of Ends and the Thousand Pointg Petition in *A hora da estrela*

A hora da estrela (*The Hour of the Star*) was published thirteen years after *A paixão segundo G.H.* and shortly before Lispector's own death in 1977. Unlike *A paixão*, written in the radical period that both preceded and provoked the coup, *A hora da estrela* has as its elliptical background a military dictatorship that had only begun a slow, uneven process of *distensão* ("release of tension") in the early 1970s, without the clearer signs of crisis at the end of the 1970s that would help provide the conditions for the *abertura* ("opening").¹⁴⁰ "The Author's Dedication" that precedes the narrative of *A hora* already alludes to a political context of repression before the narrative begins: "This story happens in a state of emergency and public calamity" (10). What the novella points to, however, is less a particular state of emergency delimited by the dictatorship, than a more generalized state of emergency lived by marginalized and subaltern populations.¹⁴¹

A hora da estrela centers on the life and death of Macabéa, a poor, semi-literate migrant girl from the rural Northeast of Brazil who works as a copyist in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The narrator, a writer named Rodrigo S.M., takes up the story of the migrant girl after only glimpsing her on the street. Neither starving nor healthy, Macabéa appears largely ignorant of her own precarious condition, the product, according to the writer, of both her poor upbringing and her unquestioning "happiness." Amidst his own metaliterary digressions and her mass mediated desires, Rodrigo begins to narrate Macabéa's minor flights from the routine of her everyday life

and the confused pleasures of her new experiences, both of which encounter cruel reactions from other characters or from the narrator himself. After almost being fired at the outset of her story, Macabéa falls for another migrant worker from the Northeast, Olímpico, a metallurgist who seems to offer companionship and the promise of employment. Following several frustrating encounters, however, Olímpico abandons Macabéa for her more seductive co-worker, Glória. To alleviate her abstract pain and lack of a secure place in the world, Macabéa seeks out representatives of scientific and esoteric authority: a doctor and a fortune-teller. The doctor diagnoses Macabéa with tuberculosis, a disease she does not understand, and treats the malnutrition from her largely junk-food diet as a neurotic eating disorder. The story's climax then comes when the fortune-teller suddenly shifts the forecast of Macabéa's future from a further spiral into misery to a Hollywood-style happy ending—a future marriage to a wealthy blond foreigner named “Hans” that the narrative fulfills through a cruelly ironic turn when she steps onto the street and is hit by a yellow Mercedes Benz. In his way, Rodrigo's ending constellates Macabéa's mass cultural desires—including her desire to “appear” like Marilyn Monroe—as a morbid stardom that makes her moment of recognized “existence” coincide with her anonymous death on the street.

Although *A hora da estrela*, as many critics have suggested, responds to criticism that her writing remained alienated from the actual “state of emergency” during the dictatorship period, making Rodrigo the voice of social critique appears much more ambiguous. Although his occupation as a writer links him to a previous group of first-person artist-narrators in Lispector's writing (the sculptor G.H. and the unnamed painter of *Água viva*), *A hora da estrela* also returns to the gendered pedagogical dynamic of *Uma aprendizagem, ou o livro dos prazeres* (*An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Pleasures* [1969]), a more conventional, somewhat utopian

depiction of the love affair between a philosophy professor and a secondary school teacher.¹⁴² *A hora* both repeats and widens the asymmetric gendered relation with Rodrigo, the yet-to-be-successful writer, and his principal character, Macabéa, the barely literate copyist who becomes the subject of his story. While Lispector depicts a similar tension between the unnamed male “Author” and his female character Ângela in *O sopro da vida*, the book of “pulsations” written concurrently but edited and only published posthumously by Olga Borelli, *A hora* adds a more recognizably class and regional component to this gendered relation.

Lispector’s novella establishes a twofold relation with the region of the Northeast: biographical on the one hand, literary on the other. First, like Lispector herself, both Rodrigo and Macabéa have relocated to Rio de Janeiro, part of the wealthier Southeast coast of the country, from the poorer region of the Northeast. Second, in *A hora da estrela*, Lispector takes up one of the paradigmatic subjects of the literature of the Northeast: the poor rural laborer on the margins of lettered culture and literacy. Yet unlike both the earlier social novels of the Northeast and a novel like Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande sertão: veredas*, set in the rural interior of Minas Gerais, Lispector places the poor migrant of *A hora da estrela* in the midst of a metropolitan environment defined by mass culture and consumerism. In this sense, Macabéa appears as a regional remainder of the exodus from the country to the city, closer to a sub-cosmopolitanism than the possibility of utopian overcoming projected in notions like “superregionalism.”¹⁴³ From the very beginning of the narrative, Macabéa is identified as one of thousands of “substitutable” Northeastern migrant girls in a “city made against her” (14), a precarious condition that has led critics to read her as a “collective character” or even a “symbol of the reserve army of the excluded.”¹⁴⁴ Rodrigo similarly takes on a denunciatory role that both he and the *romance-reportagem* of the 1970s inherit from earlier social novels,¹⁴⁵ while his

ambiguous self-description as a “marginalized” subject without “social class” (18) evokes other contemporary cultural movements—*cinema marginal* and *poesia marginal*—that distanced themselves from dominant publishing or distribution networks and the “cooptation” of artists by the state during the dictatorship.¹⁴⁶ The “Author’s Dedication,” moreover, interpellates a specifically collective reading subject, replacing the second person singular *tu* from Lispector’s previous first person narratives with the uncommon second person plural *vós*: “[This story] deals with an unfinished book because it lacks a response. This response that I hope someone in the world can give me. You? [*Vós*]” (10).

As I argue here, though, in the course of Lispector’s narrative, Rodrigo becomes both the explicit subject of a social critique and an implicit object of an aesthetic one. On the one hand, Rodrigo’s denunciation of Macabéa’s unrecognized misery exposes the social partitions that place her on the margins of both society and literature. On the other, he paradoxically reinforces these partitions in his attempt to both delimit Macabéa’s fate and capitalize on her death, revealing the false equivalence of their common marginality. *A hora da estrela* depicts this false equivalence as a cruel synthesis of high and mass culture that ultimately casts Rodrigo as a vampiric figure and Macabéa as a redundant victim in the social imaginary of the text. Yet as we will see, an alternate poetic constellation emerges through the cracks of Rodrigo’s discourse and interrupts his narration of Macabéa’s death, calling into question a series of delimited “ends” both within the novella and outside it: not only the end that decrees Macabéa’s fate, but also the end of modernism and its elliptical engagement with the social. By reconstellating the end in a tradition of committed experimental poetry that it implicitly cites, I argue that this aesthetic critique also serves to question a more diffuse authority that seeks to close the aesthetics or the politics of the recent past with a more compensatory present.

In the sections that follow, I first outline Rodrigo's multiple and conflicting reasons for why he is writing and what he is writing about. Drawing out his ambiguous relation to authority, I introduce two trajectories here: one where Rodrigo's authorship of *Macabéa* takes on a kind of vampiric role in the text as she increasingly becomes a victim; the other, involving Lispector's partial authorship of the text, troubles Rodrigo's claim to authority, his delimitation of the story, and his rendering of *Macabéa* as redundancy. From there, I turn to the way *Macabéa*'s hybridized character alludes to both her "Jewish" roots and the inscription of racially marginalized bodies into counter-cultural art. Next, I examine the five mirror scenes in the novella that not only reflect her inscription into the redundant role of melodramatic victim, but also bring into view the seemingly insignificant acts that do not correspond to this role. Finally, then, I tie this line of insignificant acts to an alternate poetic constellation that marks Lispector's—and *Macabéa*'s—interruption of the "end" delimited by Rodrigo and dialogues with a tradition of committed poetry in Brazil (Carlos Drummond de Andrade and João Cabral de Melo Neto).

“Between the Facts There Is a Murmuring”: Form, the Force of Law, and the Vampiric Economy of the Text

Rodrigo's metaliterary digressions at the start of the narrative provide several conflicting reasons for why he has chosen to write about a poor migrant girl from the Northeast whom he has never met. As in *A paixão segundo G.H.*, Rodrigo's writing responds to a kind of call from an other whose state of privation implicates him in some way. Although similarly posed in terms of visual culture, this call originally emerges from a glimpse of the other on the street, rather than her "writing" on the wall; it appears closer to a photograph *of* the other than a mural *by* her. Rodrigo asserts that because he "caught in the air a glimpse of the feeling of perdition in the face

of a Northeastern girl” (12), he feels obligated to write about her. This “feeling of perdition” both resembles and hyperbolizes the more neutral “inexpressive face” that appears in *A paixão* or suggests “misery” in *Água viva*.¹⁴⁷ For one, it suggests an expression of ruin or damnation that Macabéa’s monotonous, even pathetic life hardly merits. Macabéa subsists largely on hot dogs, coca-cola, and cold coffee, experiencing nausea from other foods that she considers too “rich”—an economic and gustatorial lesson taught to her by the cruel aunt who raised her after her parents’ death. At the same time, though, she also desires to consume mass cultural products in an aberrantly literal way, from her wish to ingest expensive face cream in order to fully capitalize on all of its promises, to her identification with film stars like Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe. These aberrant desires approach the more colloquial sense of the phrase *ser uma perdição*, as “being irresistible.” Even though she would hardly seem to merit this trait, Rodrigo’s interest in her betrays something of this fascination. These contradictory meanings, moreover, do not appear mutually exclusive. If this “glimpse of a feeling of perdition” gives her some greater importance, Rodrigo equivocates about several of these possibilities: whether he knows how the story will end or not; whether she, he, or perhaps both of them together represent this ruin; and whether her desires represent something that can be controlled or something that escapes him.

The narrator’s equivocations about Macabéa’s story also emerge in the differing accounts he gives of its literarity itself. In the period of just a few pages at the beginning, Rodrigo claims both the literary and non-literary construction of his story. He first reminds his readers, “don’t forget that in order to write, whatever the subject [*não-importa-o-quê*], my basic material is the word” (14). Shortly after this claim that the story and its “secret meaning” only emerges through literary construction, however, he warns that no one should expect “stars” in the story because he

is more considered with documenting “facts”: “nothing will sparkle, [the story] deals with opaque material, despicable to everyone by its very nature.... And it has facts. I suddenly fell in love with facts without literature—facts are hard stones and acting [*agir*] is interesting me more than thinking, from facts there is no escape [*de fatos não como fugir*]” (16). The aesthetic claim that writing and the word form the material of any story, regardless of who or what the subject is, cedes place to a representative claim that his poor subject requires a specific language and form—“facts without literature.” Asking, “is the fact an act?”, he goes on to contradict his earlier claim: “I swear that this book is made without words. It is a mute photograph.” The book as “mute photograph” reinforces both his claim to social documentary (“facts”) and the photographic framing of his initial “glimpse” of the anonymous girl on the street. She appears relegated to a world of “hard rocks” and social “facts” that permit no escape, but also possibly no action or act, as his own question suggests. Several pages later he returns to ask, “does action exceed the word?”, and then goes on to assert that in his story, “the word is fruit of the word” (19, 20). Even though he asserts that this word should not be “adorned,” the idea that words generate organically only from other words does not just conflict with the previous statement. For this literarity of the composition also allows the writer to imagine escape from the “facts” of the migrant girl’s impoverished condition, while tying him to her in other ways. “The facts are sonorous,” he asserts soon after, “but between the facts there is a murmuring. The murmuring is what startles me [*me impressiona*]” (24). The murmuring that startles provides one figure for what disrupts Rodrigo’s discourse of antecedent “facts.”

A similar tension appears in Rodrigo’s oscillation between claiming the anonymous girl as his motive for writing and appealing to some larger literary or political purpose. Rodrigo’s claim about being feeling “accused” by the girl virtually repeats the gesture that occurs in *A paixão*

segundo G.H. when G.H. feels pointed at after unconsciously associating the black maid Janair with the cockroach: “I must write about this girl from the Northeast otherwise I shall choke. She points an accusing finger and I can only defend myself by writing about her” (17). Rodrigo’s response, though, is quite different from the shame and humility that drew G.H. into a new world of “need.” As he puts it a little later, he feels “guilty” (*culpa*) not only for imagining he could have been born her, but also for his own “flight” from this thought (38). If it remains unclear at this point whether this writing in defense of himself will be an act of ingesting her or of vomiting her out, the narrative solution will turn out to be both: her life is consumed and her unconsumable body is discarded in a vampiric economy of the text.

His second approach to the question of why he writes helps bring this trajectory into view. His responses to the rhetorical question, “Why do I write?”, already subsumes the girl within larger literary and political concerns. The first response to the question why he writes is literary: “First and foremost because I captured the spirit of the language [*língua*], and sometimes the form makes content” (18). This “capture” suggests more than just the drama of language, the play of the signifier, or even a predetermined content of the form. On the one hand, the statement appears to confirm the novel’s self-referentiality, its anti-mimetic undermining not only of pre-existing content, but also of the competing claims that the novel represents a reality and a set of “facts” anterior to the text. On the other hand, though, the pretension that he has “captured the spirit of language” mimics the power of form to “make” its content. This “making” contrasts with the barely literate Macabéa who copies out letter-by-letter and repeats what she hears on the vacuous programming of Rádio Rélogio (Clock Radio), from random factoids to words that she does not fully understand. However, if Macabéa’s inquisitive search to understand these words more closely resembles what Lispector elsewhere terms the struggle

of “content trying to form itself,”¹⁴⁸ Rodrigo’s dictum on the capture of language largely parallels the declaration about his authorship of, and love for, Macabéa: “Only I, her author, love her” (*Só eu, seu autor, a amo*) [27]. While the declaration seems to separate him from other characters, this sense of possessive love also differs significantly from the intransitive love declared at the end of *A paixão*: “So, I love [*adoro*]— — —.” Rodrigo collapses love and authorship with an authoritarian tone only reinforced by the play on *amo*, the first-person present tense of the verb *amar* but also the noun meaning “boss.” At the same time, the feminine direct object that stands in for Macabéa in the sentence, *a*, interrupts the cadence that links the exclusive claim to authorship in the first two phrases (*Só eu, seu autor*) with the connotations of masculine authority in the third (*a amo*). In this way, I want to suggest, *a amo* provides a figure for Rodrigo’s partial authorship of the novella as well as the possible interruption of the feminine letter. As I will show, just as Rodrigo’s claims to have captured the “*spirit* of language” are belied by the letter, so too does this feminine *a* threaten to disturb his rules and role in the narrative text.

The second reason provided by Rodrigo presents a similar ambiguity and association with authority. Immediately following his dictum on form making content, Rodrigo cites more political concerns, posed in terms of the law and its suspension: “I write, moreover, not because of the Northeastern girl, but for the more serious motive of ‘force majeure’ [*força maior*], as they say in the official petitions [*requerimentos*], for ‘force of law’” (18). Both terms refer to extraordinary conditions that suspend the normal functioning of law, but they are not synonyms. The first term, *força maior*, refers to the suspension of contractual obligations in the wake of unforeseen natural disasters or major political events, like a riot, strike, or revolution. In this sense, appealing to this larger “force” appears to suggest a political motivation that coincides

with Rodrigo's self-identification as a marginal writer seeking distance from official culture and any intellectual contract with the State. This political motive could be read as a continuation of the "surreptitious line" in *A paixão*, a path of desertion that appears as "transgression" (or "sin") from the perspective of the law, but which can also be understood in terms of a new ethical law (an "anti-sin") in relation to the formerly invisible other. However, the more widely disseminated second term, "force of law," suggests a conflicting motive. It refers more technically, as Giorgio Agamben has argued, "not to the law but those decrees (which, as we indeed say, have the 'force of law') that the executive power can be authorized to issue in some situations, particularly in a state of exception" (38). In addition to the "state of emergency" as a context for the story, this identification with the "force of law" casts an ominous shadow over the narrative.

Yet, like the feminine *a* in the phrase *a amo* analyzed above, the framing of this motive also suggests another reading. Significantly, the "official document" that Rodrigo mentions is not a *decreto*, a decree, but a *requerimento*, a "petition" directed to an authority. This idea of a "petition" that frames the "force of law," I argue, carries an implicit critique of Rodrigo's identification with the authority to make decrees. Two trajectories thus emerge: one, the identification with the force of law, culminates in the killing off of Macabéa as part of a vampiric economy of the text; the other, the "petition" that tracks this identification, opens up the question of Rodrigo's partial authorship of the text and the interruptions of his discourse from within.

First, in *A hora da estrela*, both Rodrigo's sense of possessive love and his identification with the force of law eventually converge in a vampiric role for the writer. The inhuman otherness of the vampire both recalls and departs from the initial scenario analyzed previously in *A paixão segundo G.H.* There G.H. reads the figures her maid Janair has inscribed on the wall of her room

as undead “mummies” or “zombies,” but the narrator’s own possession by the mural and cockroach are part of her “demummification,” opening her to the experience of a more neutral “inhuman” dimension discovered in her encounter with the cockroach. *A hora* replaces the automatism of the mummies or zombies with the more animated undead figure of the vampire. Although Rodrigo first identifies Macabéa with this figure, implausibly turning him into the victim and her into the aggressor, he appears to take on this role at several key points. This association emerges at the beginning and very end of Macabéa’s story: the former frames the moment after his initial metaliterary digressions when he initially places Macabéa in front of the mirror, the first of five similar mirror scenes in the narrative; the latter frames the scene just before Rodrigo effectively kills Macabéa off when the fortune-teller and *macumbera* priestess, Madame Carlota, forecasts a “life sentence” for the girl that becomes, a moment later, her ironic death sentence. As I show in more detail later, Rodrigo uses the fortune-teller as a kind of mask to decide Macabéa’s fate—a decision that specifically adopts the language of “decrees” but also rehearses the role of the white man who dons a “black” mask, since the text plays here on Madame Carlota’s association with Afro-Brazilian *macumba*. Moreover, just as Macabéa only becomes the object of a sacrifice once she has been separated from the techniques of literature and the technology of modern industry, Rodrigo only takes on a vampiric role when he reinscribes Macabéa’s small flights from her given place into the role of melodramatic victim. As we will see, the allusions to Rodrigo’s vampiric role give a figure to this consumption of Macabéa’s life, unexpectedly approaching Marx’s use of the vampire metaphor to characterize the role and rule of accumulated “dead labor” (capital) over the sensuousness of “living labor.”¹⁴⁹

The Delimitation of Ends: Partial Authorship, Authority, and Redundant Subjects

Let us return to the beginning then to draw out the tension of what I am calling Rodrigo's partial authorship of *A hora da estrela*. Both the "Author's Dedication" and the vertical list of thirteen alternate titles on the title page prefigure a tension that recurs in the narrative text itself. In the "Author's Dedication," all of the adjectives attached to the grammatical subject are masculine. We might conclude then that the "author" is male, in correlation to Rodrigo S.M.'s self-introduction at the beginning of his narrative. Yet the parenthetical qualification, *Dedicatória do autor (na verdade Clarice Lispector)*, suggests something different than his exclusive authorship or Rodrigo as an "alias" for Lispector.¹⁵⁰ The author is "actually" Clarice Lispector, or more literally still, "in truth, Clarice Lispector." Lispector, that is, may be the actual author supposed by the name on the cover, but she is not the author in any straightforward way within the fiction, as many of Lispector's critics have assumed. Her authorship "in truth" neither places her absent presence clearly inside the fiction (as an identity between Lispector and Rodrigo), nor completely outside it (as a higher truth external to the narrative text). The "Dedication" implies that Rodrigo has *partial* authorship of the fiction, that he is the supposed author of the fiction. Here, I would suggest, this travesty of gender and authorship establishes a subtle intertextual dialogue with the prefaces to the trilogy of urban novels by the nineteenth century romantic writer José de Alencar. *Lucíola* (1862), *Diva* (1864), and *Senhora* (1875) not only center on women characters, but the prefaces to the first two establish the pseudonymous female G.M. in a kind of editorial role, the receiver of stories from Paulo, the narrator of *Lucíola* and the confidant who sends G.M. the story of *Diva*, a romance narrated to him by an intimate male friend. The note to readers in *Senhora*, however, qualifies the role of the "writer" in the

previous novels now as only the “supposed author” or actually “editor,” without clarifying whether this latter designated the now unnamed G.M., Paulo, or “J de A1,” the initials at the end of the note (9). Alencar removes the temporary feminine mask of “G.M.”—initials that now seem to invoke *gênero masculino*, or “masculine gender”—only to reveal another (“J de A1”), while authorship now oscillates ambiguously between the latter and the other man, Paulo.¹⁵¹

In her reversal of this gendered travesty, Lispector implicitly assumes a kind of editorial role that, in several decisive moments, undermines and interrupts Rodrigo’s partial authorship of the story. This interruption is already prefigured by the written signature “Clarice Lispector” on the title page, inscribed in the middle of thirteen alternate titles that run from top to bottom. All are phrases or versions of phrases that appear within the body of the narrative text and, in the narrative, Rodrigo often comments on them. While the conjunction “or” joins these different phrases into a vertical series, “The Hour of the Star” has in effect been elevated to *the* title. It appears both within and above the list as a transcendental axis measuring who or what appears in the literary world of *A hora*, and, to a certain extent, *how* they do. For this reason, both Lispector’s mute signature and its specific placement within this list of titles takes on a heightened significance. If the signature, as Jacques Derrida maintains, generally introduces a tension between the singularity of its inscription as “event” and the repetition of its form (*Margins* 307), it also has a more specific function in *A hora da estrela*. Its initial inscription is necessary, I argue, because Rodrigo’s metaliterary digressions and stylistic ties represent a repetition or imitation of Lispector, a particular concern of the writer after her popularity increased through the 1970s.¹⁵² Thinking Rodrigo’s style as an *imitation* of Lispector’s offers a critical leverage point for avoiding two partial readings of *A hora da estrela*: on the hand, the tendency to identify Lispector with her male narrator, an affirmationist reading that misses the

critical exposure that this contradictory “imitation” affords; and, on the other, the tendency to separate this male narrator completely from “Lispector,” a negationist reading that misses the resonance between the two.

In the vertical list of alternate titles, Lispector’s signature appears in the middle of the page, between “the right to scream” and “.as for the future.,” a phrase delimited by a period at both the beginning and end.¹⁵³ Rodrigo shows no compunction about claiming the raw “scream” of subjectivity in the narrative and even makes her the vessel for his voice: “There’s a right to scream. So I scream” (13); “through this young girl I offer my scream at the horror of life. At this life that I love so much” (33). Rodrigo differs here from G.H., whose silent bodily scream came with the proviso that women without title who claim this right run the risk of being treated as insane. More importantly here, though, he differs considerably from Macabéa, who does not overtly protest her condition. According to Rodrigo, Macabéa projects a sense of happiness that impedes her from recognizing her suffering. Rodrigo’s restitution of this right, after effectively killing her off at the end, remains characteristically ambiguous: “she belonged to a stubborn dwarf race that one day will maybe claim the right to scream” (80). Although Lispector’s signature falls just below the “right to scream” and just above “.as for the future.,” it does not represent this scream. Rather, her signature instead prefigures the silent interruption of the future that Rodrigo scripts for Macabéa at the end of *A hora da estrela*—another star, counterposed to Macabéa’s stardom as the melodramatic victim. This other star constellates several intertextual references to an engaged politics of modernist poetics and Lispector’s original appearance in Brazilian literary space, an “event” that literary criticism has often represented in stellar terms.¹⁵⁴ This alternate constellation, much closer to the statement in *Água viva* that “the only future is an

invention of the present” (80), casts a more critical light on how Rodrigo effectively repartitions the social imaginary and separates the marginalized writer from his marginalized subject.

For this reason, Rodrigo’s explanation of the phrase, “.as for the future.”, provides a telling justification for his need to delimit the end. His placement of a period both before and after the phrase—what he refers to as the “necessity of the delimited”—is given the following proviso: “If instead of a period the title [‘.as for the future.’] were followed by elliptical dots (*reticências*), it would remain open to your possible imaginings, maybe even morbid or pitiless ones. Well, it’s true I don’t have pity for my principal character, the Northeastern girl: I want a cold plot. But I, not you, have the right to be painfully cold” (13). Rodrigo’s aesthetic dictum anticipates an argument that the writer and critic Silviano Santiago put forward only several years after Lispector’s death in an article delimiting the “end” (*acabamento*) and “closure” (*fechamento*) of Brazilian modernism.¹⁵⁵ Santiago proposed a new “popular aesthetics” that would abandon the predominant stylistic technique of modernism, the enigmatic “ellipses,” in favor of a “redundancy” used in the earlier mass cultural *feuilleton* novels and newer *telenovelas* (89). Rodrigo S.M.’s repeated references to melodramatic tones and genres like the *cordel* are examples of this kind of redundancy. But if the conventions of the *feuilleton* and melodrama help structure Rodrigo’s central plot and character typology, as Arnaldo Franco Júnior has convincingly argued,¹⁵⁶ they only crystallize into melodramatic villain and victim at the end.

In this sense, though, Rodrigo’s delimitation draws out more negative consequences to this particular “end” of modernism. If his justification for abandoning the modernist technique of “ellipses” seems to presume that it will limit the possibility of negative feelings in the reader, the need for delimitation also betrays a more authoritarian limitation placed on both readers’ and Macabéa’s “possible imaginings.” These “possible imaginings” might not correspond either to

Rodrigo's "masculine" coldness or to the "feminine" sentimentality that Rodrigo attributes to women writers in his glaringly ironic claim that someone else could write this story: "Another writer [*escritor*], yes, but it would have to be a man because a woman writer [*escritora mulher*] would shed sappy tears" (14). This claim is contradicted, of course, by the "actual" author. But without discounting the interruptive force of the feminine *a* (*escritor-a*), we might nonetheless hesitate before simply identifying Lispector with the place of the *escritora mulher*.¹⁵⁷ If, as Vilma Areas poignantly argues, Rodrigo's delimited phrase "alludes to the lack of exit of the Macabéas" (87), then the attempt to coldly delimit "possible imaginings" also implicates Rodrigo in this impasse. For the apparent lack of exit connects Macabéa's fate to another more negative sense of "redundancy": a new normality of unemployment and the production of so-called "redundant" subjects.¹⁵⁸

Between Redundancy and Survival: Macabéa, Disposable Technologies, and Melodramatic Hybridities

This sense of redundancy emerges most clearly in Rodrigo's depiction of Macabéa's brief relationship with the fellow Northeastern migrant and metallurgist, Olímpico, an episode that reads as an allegory of Macabéa's disqualification. Rodrigo allegorizes her redundancy as a failure to be incorporated into industrial production and formal wage labor. Although as copyist and metallurgist, the two Northeastern migrants form what Rodrigo calls a "class couple" (45), what stands out are their diverging trajectories. Unlike Macabéa, Olímpico's character has a creative and critical agency that sets him up for political ascension: Olímpico's hobby carving figurines of the Child Jesus make him an "artist" without knowing it; his "ridiculous caricatures" of people in power allow him to take revenge on the powerful; and he confidently asserts, "I am

going to be a senator [...], appealing to and ordering [*pedindo e ordenando*] the rights of man” (46). Rodrigo’s anticipatory projection of Olímpico into a future present of reading (“In the future, which I don’t discuss in this story, didn’t he actually end up a senator?”) bears comparison to the political ascension of another metallurgist and migrant from the Northeast, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, who rose from union leader during the strikes at the end of the 1970s to eventually win the Presidency of Brazil at the beginning of the new millennium. By making this comparison, however, I am not suggesting that the literary figure should be collapsed into the historical one. But nor should the overlap of trajectories be dismissed outright. Macabéa’s own disqualification in the novel anticipates a larger separation of declassified and marginalized subjects from what Roberto Schwarz has called the “bloc of modern authority.”¹⁵⁹ For the sociologist Francisco de Oliveira, one of the founders along with Lula of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (The Workers’ Party), the core of the party itself has now been integrated into this bloc. Even if we do not accept this argument in full, this changing configuration of authority after the dictatorship gives the text as a “petition” a greater resonance. For the latter would logically include a new financial regime that at best compensates for need or privation without transforming the conditions that reproduce it.

In the novella, Rodrigo also renders Macabéa’s disqualification in terms of her separation from both literary technique and technology. As Rodrigo claims, Macabéa does not know that she is only a “disposable screw” in “technical society” (32). However, Rodrigo’s paradoxical claims that the narrative does not have “technique or style” (39) and that Macabéa “was not technical; she was only herself” (46) do not so much reflect Macabéa’s dissociation from technique and technology. Instead, both the melodramatic and metaliterary techniques that Rodrigo deploys actively work to produce this dissociation as her redundancy—especially ironic

given Macabéa's precarious job as a copyist and her connection to the typewriter, a writing technology thematized throughout Lispector's literary corpus. Almost all of the conversations between Olímpico and Macabéa then turn colloquial expressions into poignant tragic-comic expressions of Macabéa's redundancy. Olímpico's irritated, "you're impossible!" becomes her revelatory question, "What can I do to manage to be possible?" (48), an existential dilemma that echoes her statements, "I don't know what it's in my name. I only know that I was never important..."; and the odd, "I'm not really people" (*não sou muito gente*) [56].¹⁶⁰ In *Água viva*, Lispector's anonymous narrator utters a version of this latter phrase, "I have not been people for a long time" (*Há muito já não sou gente*) when she declares herself a "typewriter," "an object that creates other objects and the machine creates us all" (79). If Macabéa appears cut off from becoming this object that, for the narrator of *Água viva*, both "creates" and "screams," she also remains subject to this more abstract "machine." As I have indicated above, Olímpico's promise to give Macabéa a "future," arranging employment for her as metallurgist when she is fired as a copyist, also disintegrates when he leaves her for Glória. Nonetheless, Rodrigo delivers the more ominous conclusion: for Macabéa, he claims, "to have a future was a luxury" (58), and "luxuries" increasingly appear as the name for what Macabéa cannot consume.

At the same time, Macabéa's composite name hints at the doubled sense of redundancy *and* survival, marginality *and* resistance that later manifests itself in the interruption of Rodrigo's delimited "end." Critics have noted Macabéa's homophonic resemblance to the family of Maccabees from the Old Testament, the Jewish leaders who resisted the Hellenization of the Jews (Waldman "Duas maçãs" 233; Vieira "Clarice Lispector" 140-6). The Maccabiah, moreover, is the name given to the Jewish athletic games that correspond to the Olympics alluded to in Olímpico's name. After Macabéa's projected marriage to a blond "Hans," her

cruelly ironic death by a yellow Mercedes capitalizes on a cheap double allusion to both the predations of semi-peripheral capitalism (she is killed by a foreign man and car) and the Shoah (both are “German”). These various allusions again appear to say without saying something directly about Macabéa’s Jewish “roots.” But, despite her formal resemblance to the figure of the “deserter,” Macabéa would seem to lose the charged messianic relation to Jewish culture and tradition that her name alludes to. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the deserter figures a break from the monotony of bourgeois daily life, personal identity, or constrictive familial and romantic relationships. *A paixão* takes this sense of desertion to its radical inhuman limit with G.H.’s personal exodus (and her exodus from the person) in the desert, the site of a new alter-world. Lispector’s self-description as a “deserter” continues these concerns: she was a “deserter” from the obscure “mission” associated with her Jewish parents; but, while this condition made her birth an originary “non-belonging,” the resulting “shame” of her secret opens up a relation with the past as the “broken promise of a new beginning.”¹⁶¹ The past, in this way, retains a kind of claim on what Benjamin calls the “weak messianic power” of the present.¹⁶²

While Macabéa does not appear aware of any claim by the past or of “what’s in” her name, Rodrigo seems at times directly concerned with this temporality. Early on, he proclaims that he writes because he wants “what I might have been but wasn’t” (21). Although he subsequently flees from the thought of identifying Macabéa’s past as his own, a flight that makes him feel guilty, a similar temporality reappears later when he recounts her childhood games. Without money for toys, she would nonetheless imagine holding a doll and kicking a non-existent ball as she ran down the halls laughing: “the laughter was terrifying because it happened in the past and only a maleficent imagination brought it to the present, longing [*saudade*] for what could have been but wasn’t (I warned that it was *cordel* literature, although I refuse to have any pity)” (33).

The concern with “what could have been”—opened up by shame (or here, terrifying laughter and the popular genre of *cordel* literature from the Northeast)—cedes to a coldness that reproduces the dominant dialectic of guilt and compensation, as we will see in more detail below. Rodrigo’s own claims here that he is “not a deserter” (32) take on a more negative cast. Not only does his partial depersonalization never reach the more radical limit of desertion and anonymity as the artist-narrator’s in *A paixão segundo G.H.* and *Água viva*, but his failure to become a “deserter” also coincides with his increasingly vampiric role and a need to decide Macabéa’s fate.

If “Macabéa” evokes a connection to Jewish culture, her name and fate also resonate, as Lidia Santos has provocatively argued, with another semi-anonymous, semi-famous marginal subject inscribed into Brazilian cultural production during the period of the dictatorship: Lindonéia, the subject of a painting by Rubén Gerchman and subsequently a song by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil from the iconic album *Trópicália* (Santos 159-162). In both, the death of the poor woman of color serves as an implicit critique of the everyday violence suffered by the poor. Lindonéia’s death represents one of two principal ways the marginal subject was inscribed within Brazilian art and *tropicalista* counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s. The first was the *marginal* as urban criminal or dangerous lumpen proletariat, a sense emblemized in the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica’s banner from the same period, “*Seja marginal seja herói*” (“Be marginal, be a hero”): under the inscription was a silk-screened picture of the criminal Cara de Cavalo’s dead body after he was killed by a police death squad in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁶³ The corpse of the *marginal* was also the subject of Lispector’s earlier *crônica*, “Mineirinho,” which reread the police assassination of the criminal Mineirinho as a case for imagining an “insane” justice: this justice would be capable of intervening before the inhuman “gram of radium” that could irradiate love, hope, and trust turned instead to hatred, destruction, and the “inarticulate scream”

that manifested in Mineirinho's own crimes of passion.¹⁶⁴ Ruben Gerchman's painting *Lindonéia: a Giaconda dos subúrbios* (1966) presented a gendered correlate to this representation: the marginalized poor woman of color as the victim of domestic violence, a fate suggested both by bruise-like shades on half of her face and the phrase "impossible love" (Gerchman 59). As Santos shows, both Gerchman's painting and the song "Lindonéia" that Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil composed for the album, *Tropicália* (1969), incorporated melodramatic genres and tones to depict Lindonéia's death—popular press in the painting, and the Cuban bolero in the song.¹⁶⁵ But the lament in the song does not specify her death, associating it instead with a general context of repression.¹⁶⁶

Not unlike the mirrored glass surface on which Gerchman's "Lindonéia" appears, Lispector uses multiple scenes in front of the mirror to reflect Macabéa's changing appearance. These scenes, five in total, reflect the repeated defacing of Macabéa. However, they also associate the melodramatic inscription of the marginal victim with a vampiric economy of the text. In so doing, these scenes reveal a more contradictory double movement: Macabéa's small flights from her given place, and the vampiric role that the narrator takes on as he reinscribes her into the role of melodramatic victim. The melodramatic conventions both portray violence against the marginalized in a negative light and capitalize on this subject, much in the sense of Marx's metaphor for the accumulated "dead labor" that feeds off of "living labor."

The Vampiric Mirror: Race, Defacement, and Furtive Acts of Disobedience

Although the logic of the scenes, as I show below, associate Rodrigo with this vampiric role, he at first projects it on to Macabéa, symptomatically turning himself into her victim, a situation that he resolves through a cruel dialectic of guilt and compensation. In recounting the story that

Macabéa's sadistic aunt told her about a "vampire-man," Rodrigo suggests that Macabéa might even identify with the role rather than fear it, since the blood would enliven the "off-white of her face" (*amarelado do rosto*), its "yellowish" color (25, 26). Rodrigo then turns to reflect on the difficulty of writing about her and suddenly claims that she had "drained me empty," a shift accompanied by anger and a question: "How do I avenge myself? Or better, how do I compensate myself?" (26). She appears guilty here of making him uncomfortable by her *lack* of demands. His attempt to "compensate" for this perceived passive aggression transforms, though, into a soft form of revenge. He compensates, he says, "by loving my dog that has more food than the girl does" (26). This compensation not only reveals the subtle cruelty of his perceived return to equilibrium. It also continues, despite itself, to refer to Macabéa's need:

malnourishment and hunger. The sudden shift from inhuman aggressor to a position just beneath the domestic dog reinforces the dubiousness of identifying Macabéa with vampiric qualities.

The first two scenes with Macabéa at the mirror more clearly implicate Rodrigo in the role of "vampire-man": in the first scene, only Rodrigo's face appears in the mirror; and in the second, although Macabéa eventually appears, neither Rodrigo's nor Macabéa's face appear at first. Lispector's play on popular lore—vampires do not have reflections—positions Rodrigo as the one who appears then disappears from the reflection, prefiguring the more explicit role of "vampire-man" he takes on when he writes Macabéa's death at the end. When Rodrigo first places Macabéa in front of the mirror and only his ragged, bearded face appears, this momentary inability to imagine the Northeastern girl suggests an initial effacement of alterity. Rodrigo's early prescription for readers to recognize that we are "one and the same person" (11) seems to project a goal, but it might more plausibly be read as the condition for Macabéa's initial nonappearance.

This possibility becomes clearer when Rodrigo places Macabéa in front of the mirror the second time. While neither Rodrigo nor Macabéa initially appear, the eventual appearance of Macabéa's distorted face reflects a cruel image of her precarious existence. This second mirror scene immediately follows the official beginning of Macabéa's story: her boss fires her, subsequently feels sorry, and then lets her stay on indefinitely. What Rodrigo calls the "brutality" of her dismissal is registered with the first of many parenthetical "explosions" that appear to register minor shocks to Macabéa. Rodrigo's subsequent description of her in the bathroom, though, only seems to extend the brutality from the previous scene, since she appears at the "filthy hand basin that was badly cracked and full of hairs: the image of her own existence" (24). The image carries traces of his own previously bearded face, now shaven in his attempt to become "other." But the initial nonappearance of her face in the "dark, tarnished mirror" provokes him to wonder if "her physical existence had vanished" until the passing of this "illusion" reveals a reflection of her "deformed" face (25). This particular exaggerated deformation—her "enormous" nose is compared to the "cardboard nose" of a clown—may index the popular world of the circus that, according to Vilma Areas, Lispector uses to cast Macabéa in the tragicomic role of a clown.¹⁶⁷ Rodrigo's subsequent projection of the "man-vampire" onto Macabéa gives the image a more sadistic cast, more resonant with the negative, anti-Semitic discourse that marked Bram Stoker's foundational gothic vampire text, *Dracula*.¹⁶⁸ But, as we have seen above, her minimal existence hardly merits association with the inhuman power of the vampire figure. She instead embodies the negative characteristics of the figure, while Rodrigo retains the power of the hidden "vampire-man."

Macabéa's third scene in front of the mirror registers the same ambiguously racialized terms that Rodrigo uses to express his revulsion at something that threatens to contaminate or spread:

poverty and “unclean” life. Before first introducing Macabéa, Rodrigo had related the parable of an old man who refused to get off the back of a young man helping him cross a river. Rodrigo’s unsubtle parallel of the old man with the Northeastern girl “stuck” to his skin “like sticky molasses or black mud [*lama negra*]” (21) associates Macabéa, in Fanon’s terms, with a “racial epidermal” otherness. This association is echoed by Olímpico after Macabéa introduces herself, the first time that we as readers also learn her name: “Maca what? [...] Excuse me but that seems like a skin disease” (43). The racial epidermal aspects of the parable also return in Rodrigo’s visceral reaction to the industrial port where Macabéa lives, when he claims to have “no shame in being terrified of the brown piece of filthy life [*o pardo pedaço da vida imunda*]” (30). Again, the word Rodrigo uses for “brown” is not the more neutral *marrom*, but *parado*, a term that functions in racial discourse as a synonym for brown-skinned or *mulato*. Together with the “rats” that infest the port, this image of “filthy” or “unclean life” evokes a racialized poverty that we have already seen in *A paixão* and elsewhere in Lispector’s writing. Macabéa’s uncomfortable proximity to this “brownness”—apparent in descriptions of her as an “off-white” (*amarelada*) or “yellowish Northeastern girl” (57)—explicitly marks the third moment in front of a mirror. This moment finds Macabéa examining the skin condition that gives her white blotches on her face: “She hid her blotches [*panos*] with a thick layer of white powder and if she ended up half whitewashed [*meio caiada*] it was better than brownish [*pardacento*]” (27). The act of covering up fashions a superficial mask of whiteness that also dissociates her from a racialized identity. What Rodrigo adds to this description, though, partially undermines the degrading judgment he delivers. Even though she lacked anything “iridescent” about her, the skin between the blotches on her face had the “subtle glow of opal” (27). Opal, of course, can range from white or colorless to black, and its more valuable forms include iridescent-colored varieties, a

connotation that returns in the depiction of Macabéa's death. But if the opal-like glow is covered over here by both Macabéa's white mask and a more general epidermalized otherness, the subsequent scenes in front of the mirror suggest a different form of containment.

The fourth and fifth mirror scenes reflect a twofold movement: Rodrigo's growing discomfort with Macabéa's burgeoning awareness of "other ways of feeling," however insignificant they may appear; and his consequent attempt to reinscribe Macabéa in the role of melodramatic victim. The fourth mirror scene is set with Macabéa diverging from her monotonous daily habits—she takes the day off, lying to her boss that she has to have a tooth removed at the dentist. At home, she asks her landlord for instant coffee and boiling water, then drinks it all in front of the mirror, taking advantage of her other roommates' absence to dance by herself. Although this slight alteration of her daily existence introduces her to "the luxury of having tedium" (42), her self-encounter in the mirror here produces a feeling of contentedness mixed with pain, rather than the "surprise" sought after in Lispector's writing. At the same time, though, this seemingly insignificant "luxury" resembles "a certain luxury of the soul" that Rodrigo reads in her teary response to an Italian aria, "Una Furtiva Lacrima." Insofar as this "luxury of the soul" begins to intimate "other ways of feeling" (51), it also approaches the "surprisingly unexpected zones" awakened by various classical composers and modern electric music hailed in the "Author's Dedication" (9).

Macabéa's attempt to refashion her face into a cinematic mask marks the fifth mirror scene and this attempt significantly ends with her defacement. This defacement is already prefigured by Olímpico's response to Macabéa's desire to be a cinema artist like the "rose-colored" Marilyn Monroe: Macabéa was "dirty-colored" (*cor-de-suja*) and thus doomed since cinematic stardom was "all in the face" (53). After Olímpico dumps Macabéa for Glória, Macabéa applies a "living

red” lipstick outside the contours of her lips, her attempt to reproduce that “strange thing of Marilyn Monroe’s lips” (62). Her appearance in the mirror at work, though, reflects a grotesque image of violence: “instead of lipstick it seemed that thick blood had gushed out of the lips from a jab to the mouth, leaving broken teeth and torn flesh (small explosion).” While the gratuitous narration of violence in this image prefigures the blow she will receive at the end, it also works to confirm her cinematic role as victim. As we are told, she has a masochistic preference for musicals and horror films, especially ones with “women stabbed or shot in the heart” (58). At the same time, the “shocked” figure in the mirror does not fully correspond to the narrative role that is being written for her. When Glória mocks her appearance (“Excuse me for asking, but does it hurt to be ugly?”) Macabéa fires back, “I never thought about that, I think it hurts a little. But I ask you who are ugly if you feel pain.” Although Glória does not immediately respond, shortly afterwards she silently disavows any connection with Macabéa (“I have nothing to do with her” [64]) then completes Macabéa’s figurative defacement, asking, in an affected Portuguese accent, “Oh woman, don’t you have a face [*não tens cara*]?” (65).

These minor, furtive acts of disobedience represent a counterforce to the role that is being written for Macabéa. Rodrigo first overreacts to her newfound ability to “ask for favors” (42) with harsh incredulity. It is thus quite significant that another implied act of disobedience interrupts Rodrigo’s story immediately after Macabéa skips work to dance in her apartment: his cook happens to throw out the part of his story depicting how Macabéa meets Olímpico, forcing him to rewrite it. At this point in the narrative, however, Rodrigo has already begun to repartition the social imaginary in the novel by translating her minor intimations of “other ways of feeling” into “luxuries,” and these “luxuries” into things that her body is not capable of incorporating.

White Face, Black Masks: Unconsumable Bodies and the Force of Form

As a correlate to this incapacity to consume “luxuries,” Macabéa herself appears as an unconsumable object even before her attempt to “appear” like Marilyn Monroe. While Macabéa figuratively transforms Olímpico into her favorite treat, “guava-preserve and cheese” (28), when they first meet, Olímpico repeatedly associates Macabéa’s undesirability with a bad taste. Soon after meeting, he tells Macabéa that she “has the face of someone who ate something they didn’t like” and despite assuring him that she’s nonetheless happy, he responds, “see to it that you change ‘expression’” (52). Macabéa does, in fact, change her expression when she attempts to mimic Marilyn Monroe’s lips, but Olímpico transfers the appearance of bad taste to Macabéa herself: “You, Macabéa, are a hair in the soup; you make someone not want to eat” (60). This cruel dismissal echoes Rodrigo’s own description of Macabéa as “cold coffee” (27), but adds to it an insulting sexual innuendo (the play in Brazilian Portuguese of *comer* as both “to eat” and “to have sex”). In this doubled sense, Macabéa’s distaste presents a striking contrast with Glória. While Macabéa appears as a “subproduct” without the “force of race” (*força de raça*), Olímpico is drawn to Glória’s “class,” a status linked to both “her belonging to the ambitious clan of the country’s south” and her consumable attributes: “Glória possessed a good Portuguese wine in the blood and she was also affected in the sway of her walk because of hidden African blood. Despite being white, she had the force of mulataness [*força de mulatice*]” (59). Glória represents a successful incorporation and appropriation of race, but as a kind of parody of Gilberto Freyre’s “luso-tropical” colonial subject who primarily embodies the affirmative affects attributed to miscegenation. To return to Fanon’s terms, Macabéa’s body remains inscribed by the negative axioms of a “racial-historical” or “racial-epidermal schema”; Glória, on the other hand,

reincorporates and sublimates the affirmative racial-historical axioms, giving them a white face with hair bleached “egg-yellow” blond.¹⁶⁹

As we have seen above, Macabéa responds to both her loss and her undesirable status with an attempt to reproduce the expression of another white face: Marilyn Monroe’s. The failure of this attempt to escape her epidermalized otherness, though, sets the stage for Macabéa’s subjectivation as a melodramatic victim. In this sense, Macabéa’s question as to whether others feel pain is a pertinent one. Glória—like Rodrigo, the doctor and the fortuneteller—registers Macabéa’s pain in the text’s dominant economy of guilt and compensation. If compensation, as I have argued above, recognizes a lack that implies privation or need, it also suppresses this lack by forcing a return to equilibrium. Glória wants to “compensate” (65) for wronging Macabéa by inviting Macabéa over and feeding her sweets. This form of compensation makes Macabéa realize that “there was no place for her in the world exactly because Glória was giving her so much” (66). Macabéa’s response, similar to other servants in Lispector’s fiction and *crônicas*, is another furtive act of disobedience—she steals an extra cookie.

The implicit cruelty of the way Glória compensates for Macabéa’s “pain” becomes more explicitly cruel in the episodes with the doctor and the fortuneteller. The doctor, who views the poor he primarily treats as the “dross” of the upper classes (68), reacts excessively and irrationally to Macabéa’s precarious existence. After implying that she has an eating disorder, he calls her diet of hotdogs “neurosis,” tells her to see a psychoanalyst, and recommends that she eat spaghetti, a food she has never heard of (67). The fortuneteller, Madame Carlota, furthers the incongruity of precarious condition and ridiculous compensation in the future she decrees. Madame Carlota—a former prostitute and brothel madam, but now fortuneteller and practitioner of *macumba*—finally fulfills Rodrigo’s desire to make Macabéa aware of her misery. When

Madame Carlota reverses Macabéa's fortune midway through the session, first confirming Macabéa's further spiral downward into precarity then suddenly predicting her ascension through a Hollywood fairy tale ending, she unveils the misery that Macabéa's dull happiness had covered over: "she had decreed," as Rodrigo puts it, "a life sentence" (*a sentença de vida*) [79]. However, this "life sentence" foretells the cruelly ironic fate that merges the birth of Macabéa's new life with a death sentence, a perverse humanization rendered by the grotesque image of her as an aborted fetus (84).¹⁷⁰ The fortuneteller, in this sense, carries out a particular narrative function. She becomes a kind of mask that allows Rodrigo to disavow responsibility for what happens, while also implicating him in the racial drama of the white man who adopts a "black" mask.

Rodrigo sets the stage for Macabéa's death through several references to a scene of *macumba* in which Macabéa takes on the role of sacrificial victim and the figure of the vampire implicitly reappears. The first allusion to *macumba* appears in Rodrigo's desire "to be pig and hen and then kill them and drink their blood," an example of his sudden urge for "baseness" (*baixeza*) [70]. "Baseness," at this point, manifests itself in Rodrigo's sudden fixation on Macabéa's "vagina" (*sexo*), which becomes in turn "the only vehement mark of her existence." This indulgence in the vulgar presents a parody of depersonalization: it consists of first taking himself off "like someone who takes off their clothes," then falling asleep. These superficial acts anticipate Rodrigo's sadistic libidinal investment in Macabéa's death. His desire for sacrificial metamorphosis reemerges immediately after when Glória tells Macabéa how Madame Carlota, who is also Glória's fortuneteller, dispelled a curse—she performed a *macumba* ritual where they "bled a black pig and seven hens over me and ripped my already bloodied clothes" (71).

Rodrigo's professed desire to be not only the sacrificial animals, but also the *macumbera* who drinks their blood, takes on a doubly vampiric cast in his narration of Macabéa's death. It is vampiric, in the first sense, because, as the one who drinks the blood of the sacrifice, he now appears to embody the "vampire-man" that he first identified with Macabéa. Yet, as another use of a "black" mask by a white man, Rodrigo also vampirizes the ritual of *macumba*: he uses its sacrificial practice and blood in a more instrumentally racist way to represent the "baseness" of his own desires. Like the physical violence against the "Jewish" *polaca* in the *macumba* episode of *Macunaíma* or the discursive violence against the "Jewish" Lispector herself in Henfil's satirical comic "O cabôco mamador," the "Jewish" Macabéa is subjected to both a physical and discursive violence when the white man dons a "black" mask. While this chain of allusions ultimately identifies Rodrigo with Madame Carlota, the fortuneteller who scripts Macabéa's ironic fate, several references link Macabéa to the sacrificial hen. Glória earlier tells Macabéa that the habit of swallowing pain pills to alleviate her enigmatic suffering will one day lead to her choking and "running around here like a chicken with her head half cut off" (63). The allusions to sacrifice then reappear when Rodrigo writes Macabéa's death. He compares her suffering to "a hen that runs terrified with its neck badly cut and oozing blood. Except that the hen flees—as one flees from pain—in panic-stricken clucking. And Macabéa struggled mute" (81). Rodrigo's comparison of Macabéa to a half-decapitated hen adds further sadistic connotations to her death. Macabéa appears beneath sacrificial animal life since, unlike the hen, she neither flees nor voices pain. This racial drama reveals the real falsity of their common identification as marginalized subjects. Rodrigo's own claim to cultural marginality at the end, "I'm innocent! Don't consume me! I'm not for sale!" (85), ironically appeals to the same qualities negatively associated with Macabéa.

Between the Stones: Negative Constellations and the End(s) of Engagement

Yet, from the beginning of this scene to its end, Macabéa is linked to a more poetical register that emerges within the cracks of Rodrigo's discourse. In contrast to Rodrigo's various references to "facts" that are "hard stones," Macabéa's attention to the insignificant turns more specifically to the grass growing in between the stones of the street. Both the grass and the stones establish an intertextual link to the politics of engaged modernist poetry. The "tender human hope" of the "gutter grass" echoes the "minimal hope" of the ugly, petal-less flower that emerges from the asphalt street in Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem, "A flor e a nausea" ("The Flower and the Nausea" [28]).¹⁷¹ This poem from the book *Rosa do povo* (*Rose of the People* [1945]), widely considered Drummond's most politically engaged phase, provides the first of two poetic intertexts; the second, from João Cabral de Melo Neto's *Educação pela pedra* (*Education by Stone* [1965]), will triangulate this constellation between the end of the Second World War, the transition to the dictatorship, and the late dictatorship period.

To begin with, Rodrigo significantly reverses the movement of hope in Drummond's poem. In "A flor e a nausea," the lyrical subject initially wonders, in Sartrean fashion, if he should increase his "nausea" or "tedium" [*enjôo*] triggered by the "melancholic" commodities staring at him from the shop windows in the street: "Can I, without arms, revolt?" (27). However, the lyrical subject becomes animated by the ugly and anonymous flower instead of augmenting his "crimes" or his "hatred," the very passion that allows him to give "a minimal hope to a few." The poet declares in the final verse of the poem that the flower "[p]ierced the asphalt, the tedium, the nausea, and the hatred" (28), announcing the stir of something more sublime. In Rodrigo's prose, though, first the almost insignificant persistence of the grass appears overpowered by the sublime Rodrigo evokes; and, second, Macabéa's nausea displaces her more precarious

alternative constellation. Rodrigo claims that the “gutter grass” is the only nature Macabéa can handle. Repeating Kant’s schema of the sublime, he places Macabéa in the position of Kant’s peasant who reacts with terror at the powerful “dominion” of nature rather than the superiority of reason that overcomes the initial powerlessness of experiencing nature’s “might.”¹⁷² Macabéa, though, is again worse off than the figure of comparison. In Rodrigo’s view, if she were to witness the sublime scenes of raw nature (mountain peaks or the vast ocean), she would be violently torn to pieces like a “wax doll” (80). Since Madame Carlota is herself described as a “large half-broken porcelain doll” (72) in the kitsch interior of her apartment, the image of this violent destruction does double work. It distances Rodrigo from both Macabéa and Madame Carlota, the mask he uses to decree Macabéa’s fate. But it also identifies Rodrigo with the power and implicit domination of “sublime” nature.

Rodrigo reconfirms this identification with nature’s sublime power in his exultation at Macabéa’s death: after a nauseous Macabéa vomits a pool of blood, Rodrigo proclaims “victory!” and naturalizes her fate with the phrase “life eats life” (85). However, although Macabéa’s preceding desire for a “luminous thought” is negated by this morbid reduction to bodily immanence, it is nonetheless also maintained in negation. When Macabéa utters the delimited phrase “as for the future.” Rodrigo relates the altered constellation she had wanted to vomit out: “a thousand point star” (*estrela de mil pontas*) [85]. If the vomited blood represents the way Macabéa incarnates the fantasies of the culture industry in *A hora da estrela*, this figuration of the title—the hour of her “thousand point star”—also interrupts Rodrigo’s delimitation of grammatical rules and proper roles in the text. Like the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto’s cactus with a “hundred spines” (*cem espinhos*) that it resembles,¹⁷³ Lispector’s “thousand point star” interrupts the finality of Rodrigo’s delimitation: neither Rodrigo’s “final stop” (*ponto*

final) nor the “elliptical dots” (*reticências*) that he refused, it exceeds them both, for the feminine *a* now explodes the masculine period (*ponto*) into a thousand points (*pontas*).

In João Cabral’s two, almost identical, poems entitled “The Country of the Houyhnhnms,” the “points” (*pontas*) of the spiny cactus figure a gesture of refusal in response to an impending massacre: the poem doubles the “final plans” awaiting the Yahoos in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* with the fate of the poor *sertanejos* and peasants from Northeastern Brazil—Macabéa’s “bad antecedents” (*A hora* 27). Delivered in the anti-lyrical style of a lesson, the poem interjects the image of the spiny cactus within an alternative “silence” that accompanies the discussion of the *Yahoos* fate:

or to hear in the complete silence, in the points
of the spiny cactus, so rugged;
to prescribe and activate, beneath the silence,
the cactus that sleeps in any *no*;
to rouse the hundred spines in the silence
with what can wake the cactus *no*.

[*ou ouvir no silêncio todo em pontas
do cacto espinhento, bem agrestino;
aviar e ativar, debaixo do silêncio,
o cacto que dorme em qualquer não;
avivar no silêncio os cem espinhos
com que pode despertar o cacto não.* (49-50)]

Hearing in the “points / of the spiny cactus” becomes first an activity of “prescribing and activating” (*aviar e ativar*) the potential gesture of refusal and negation, the cactus that “sleeps” in a faintly heard *no*. Second, in a semantic fusion of these two actions (*aviar e ativar*), the poem performs the “rousing” or “intensifying” (*avivar*) of a “hundred spines” within the silence, a gesture that might wake the prickly “cactus *no*” or “*no* cactus.” The puncturing effect of this negation thus appears meant to rouse resistance among the *Yahoos*; among those who are calmly discussing the “final plans” without any dissent (the *Houyhnhnms* only signaled at by the title,

but also those like Gulliver, who occupy a place in-between authoritarian power and redundant life); or among both groups. In the second version of the poem, the intensified rousing adds a new lesson about the words: “and more than pronounced or written, let them be thrown, as one throws stones” (59). Although the poet-teacher sides with satire, irony, and the “smile of mockery” in face of the imminent massacre, he also recognizes that the “point” [*ponta*] of the puncturing phrase can cut in several directions, including towards himself.¹⁷⁴ The urgency of this lesson coincides with the precise dating of the collection (1962-1965)—the period of intense politicization, especially in the Northeast, followed by the direct repression of the military coup.

Lispector’s figuration follows in the wake of this disaster and repression. But it also interrupts Rodrigo’s contradictory claims that Macabéa’s encounter with “Destiny” (79) is ultimately “only a collision [*atropelamento*] that did not even signify a disaster” (84). For the “thousand point star” similarly oscillates between activating a refusal and rousing other possible imaginings denied by the melodramatic scripting of its victim. As Moacyr Scliar suggests, Macabéa’s “hour of the star” may allude to the three-pointed star of the Mercedes that kills her or to the six-pointed Star of David that her name evokes (26). But the “thousand point star” appears in clear excess of both. Within the narrative it recalls one of Macabéa’s few pleasurable memories of the Northeast: the first fireworks she watched as a child in Maceió.¹⁷⁵ This memory had led Rodrigo to assert that he would not be capable of producing “the multiplying bursts,” an incapacity prefaced by a more telling assumption: “for it is true, when one extends a helping hand, the rabble [*gentinha*] wants everything else; the man on the street dreams about everything” (35). In *A hora da estrela*, Lispector’s interruption of Rodrigo’s desire to delimit the end does not so much make the part of those without a part in making literature. Nor does it fix her part in the drama. Rather, like the charged messianic figure of the deserter, Macabéa’s “star

with a thousand points” deserts the place and role that both literature and mass culture have scripted for her.

Chapter 3

The Stages of World Literature or “A Taste of the Planet”? An Aesthetics of Place Between Collective Cannibalism and the Desert in *El entenado*

In *El río sin orillas* (1991), Juan José Saer’s “imaginary treatise” on the Río de la Plata region and the subject of the next chapter, the Argentine writer makes what would seem to be a direct criticism of his earlier novel *El entenado* (1982). “Cannibalism,” Saer argues, has replaced the privileged trope of incest, becoming a kind of “rhetorical automatism” that claims to represent “the negative and obscure, and the aggressive tendencies of social behavior” (*El río* 53). The myth and trope of cannibalism figures prominently in *El entenado*, Saer’s novel about the first colonial encounter in the littoral region of the Río de la Plata, the place at the center of virtually all of his narrative fiction and poetry. In *El entenado*, the unnamed narrator returns in old age to write about his life among a cannibal tribe in the New World. Having arrived as a cabin boy on one of the first European ships to land on the region’s shores, the narrator becomes a captive after a tribe kills the rest of the landing crew. Taken further up river to witness the ritual devoration of the crew and the orgies that follow, the narrator then ends up living among the Indians for another ten years until the Spanish ships return, prompting the tribe to send him unexpectedly back down the river. The same ships that discover him, though, also proceed up river to massacre the “inhuman” cannibal tribe, leaving a trail of bodies that emerge from the mouth of the river as the narrator departs for Europe. After a *testimonio*-style report given to the sympathetic priest who educates him, then a *comedia* that the narrator abandons at the height of its international success, he returns again to write his memoirs and reflect on this life among the

tribe, the cannibal ritual, and his role in representing both to the outside world after their disappearance.

In these reflections, however, we see that cannibalism in *El entenado* already appears as a “automatism” embodied in and by the collective tribe: each year the tribe returns with a captive to witness the cannibal devoration and orgiastic rituals; each year, they return the captive to the outside world before completely forgetting their acts until the following year when the ritual begins again. As he comes to realize, the cannibal ritual already appears oriented towards its reproduction in the exterior. The writing then allows what the previous representations did not: an interrogation not only of the ritual, but also of his role in reproducing it after the apparent annihilation of the tribe. Thus, rather than a critique of *El entenado*, Saer’s comment in *El río sin orillas* registers a critical and speculative impetus at work in the earlier novel, one that turns on the myth of cannibalism as a collective figure and trope after the “boom” of Latin American Literature, in the wake of regional military dictatorships and the waning of socialist political alternatives at the end of the last century.

Consideration of these political and aesthetic contexts have been somewhat obscured by a focus on the novel as a historical representation of the Conquest. Criticism of Saer’s novel has restored the historical references that the novel has virtually erased: the fate of the captain and crew doubles that of Juan Díaz de Solís, who captained the first ship to arrive in the region of present day Río de la Plata; and the unnamed narrator has his historical correlate in the semi-anonymous Francisco del Puerto, the cabin boy who was discovered by Sebastián Gaboto ten years after the massacre of Juan Díaz de Solís’s crew.¹⁷⁶ This historical anecdote and setting has provoked a range of readings of *El entenado* as a historical novel. Critics have focused on the way *El entenado* renders history as fiction or marks the absence of the other, enabling a rewriting

open to the inclusion of alternate voices and histories.¹⁷⁷ Others, however, have criticized Saer for inventing a worldview for a tribe that once existed, the Colastiné, and for accepting the official history of this encounter as a cannibalist feast.¹⁷⁸ Rather than “subvert” dominant history or comprehend the tribe as an inaccessible alterity, Saer’s novel would instead serve to perpetuate Western representations and stereotypes of the Other.¹⁷⁹ Saer’s own often-cited definition of fiction as a “speculative anthropology”—echoed in his description of cannibalism as a trope for the negative, obscure, and aggressive aspects of the social—does not mitigate this critique.¹⁸⁰ But his own interventions have consistently objected to the “historical novel” as a category and dismissed the pretension that literature can reconstitute the past. This objection approaches arguments about the impossibility of the historical novel from a different direction. *El entenado* does not so much perpetuate as *stage* the cannibal collective becoming a “pastiche of the stereotypical past,” or an “art language of the simulacrum,” as Frederic Jameson defines the dominant historical mode in postmodern artifacts that reproduce the “random cannibalization” of past styles.¹⁸¹ Saer’s concern here turns less on the loss of literature’s relation to History than its search for a “new present in which experience is reborn.”¹⁸² Accordingly for Saer, writing and reading always take the “present of writing” as their point of departure, and what he calls the “path of fiction” marks an exit from history in the direction of “myth.”¹⁸³

In this chapter, I retrace the two trajectories that the path of fiction takes in *El entenado*, Saer’s reencounter with the cannibalist myth: from the narrator’s capture by the imaginary Colastiné to the cannibal *comedia* performed across Europe after the massacre of the tribe; and from the abandonment of this staged spectacle to the bare room in an “white city” where he writes his memoirs shortly before his own death. The trajectory of his story that culminates in

the pantomimed version of the *comedia*, a kind of proto-industrial mass spectacle, stages a critical allegory of the “boom” of Latin American literature and of contemporary transatlantic figurations of the cannibal collective. In Saer’s present of writing, this collective had taken on a variety of forms within a largely left imaginary, from the resistance of Latin American writing to the horizon of planetary world literature, from a society against the State to the inhuman violence of State communism. Saer, however, stages this representation of the cannibal collective in *El entenado* as an impasse for a poetics of negativity that attempts to subvert the mass spectacle from within: a cynical pose of modernist negation confronts the cannibal *comedia* with the perception of the world as a totally deserted place, but only by continuing to reproduce the imaginary of annihilation. The narrator’s heterogeneous memories, however, introduce a different kind of mimetic affinity with the tribe that emerges through the interruption and interrogation of the ritual and his representative role. In these speculations, the cannibal theater emerges not only as a precarious world of appearance invested with obsessive desire and desperate hope, but also as a part that harbored “the real.” What the narrator calls a “taste of the planet” in the memory of his life, I argue, offers up neither a fusion with the cannibal collective nor a critical liquidation of the myth. Instead, by dissolving the certainty of meaning attached to their acts and roles, it presents the poetic constellation of an uncertain eclipse of the collective that takes the place of the more definitive narratives of “collapse” that mark the end of the last century.

In what follows, I first offer a provisional outline of other contemporary transatlantic returns to anthropophagy and the cannibal collective in Latin American and French thought, drawing out its association with a generally left political and aesthetic imaginary. Second, I move to reconsider how the original traumatic encounter with the tribe, the cannibal ritual itself, and the

aftermath of the massacre introduces a perception absent from the more comic appropriations of the cannibalist trope: the world as a deserted place and threat of annihilation. From here, the third section focuses on the juxtaposition of the anthropophagi and the desert as a mythical repetition of violence, connecting the Conquest to the period of the dictatorship. Fourth, I show how the two previous genres, the *testimonio*-style *Relación* and the cannibal *comedia*, confirm rather question this trajectory by staging a certain end of avant-garde rupture and negation. The fifth section then charts a different trajectory by closely examining several scenes that interrupt narration and dissolve into the scene of writing, allowing critical interrogations of his “commerce with the world” and a different kind of mimetic affinity with its subjects and objects. From there, I show how what the narrator calls a “taste of the planet” offers an alternative experience with the absent collective inseparable from their precarious world. Finally, I turn to the narrator’s rereadings of both the ritual and his contradictory role, before analyzing the sequence of memories that culminate in the poetic constellation that briefly flashes up after the eclipse.

Speculative Anthropologies: Transatlantic Anthropophagy and the Cannibal Collective

In Latin American thought, the most well-known and influential precursor to Saer’s return to the cannibal collective is *Caliban*. In the essay *Caliban: apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América* (1971), the Cuban poet and critic Roberto Fernández Retamar’s appropriated the figure of Caliban from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* as the proper “symbol” of Latin American culture in an age of decolonization and post-revolutionary socialist liberation. The argument of *Caliban* stages a two-fold movement: from the present back to the colonial Conquest and from the latter back to the literary modernity of Spanish American *modernismo* where Caliban emerges as a political alternative to the contemporary “boom” of Latin American literature.

Reading Shakespeare's play as the "mythification" of a Caribbean island, Retamar resituated Caliban, the slave deprived of his sovereign right to Prospero's island, within European colonial discourses of the "good" and "bad savage," figures that corresponded respectively to a utopian left and reactionary right imaginary. Although the play drew from the more utopian line (Montaigne's "Des Cannibales"), it nonetheless cast Caliban as a "deformed and savage slave," confirming his association with the *canibal* and the further distortion of island *caribes* (Caribs): *caniba* was Columbus's initial mistranslation of *caribe*, the aggressive and reputedly anthropophagic tribe who resisted European incursions (Retamar *Caliban* 13-16). While the attribution of anthropophagy served to justify Carib enslavement and extermination, Retamar argued, this did little to explain the annihilation of the Taíno Arawak, the tribe that occupied the place of the "good" or "noble savage" in the European imaginary. As Peter Hulme summarizes this larger critical skepticism in cultural and anthropological theory, the imagery of cannibalism has often functioned to deny the violence of colonizing relations by projecting this violence solely onto its victim ("Introduction" 34). For Retamar, though, this problem also haunted the very conditions of writing. *Caliban* emerged, in part, as a response to Latin American "Boom" writers and European intellectuals whose former support had turned to open criticism of the Cuban regime after the "Padilla affair."¹⁸⁴ *Caliban* implicitly warns that this "utopian" left risked serving the interests of the "reactionary" right: the implication that the revolution was beginning to devour its internal dissidents further endangered a contemporary "Caliban" already threatened with annihilation by the imperial power of the U.S.

While the attribution of an inhuman "cannibalism" hangs over the past and present of Caliban, the figure itself serves to symbolically incorporate both artist-intellectuals and the subaltern masses. Following other contemporary Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean

returns to *The Tempest*, Retamar assigns Ariel, the other slave of Prospero, the role of the intellectual who vacillates between adherence to Prospero's Eurocentric colonial values and solidarity with the exploited and racially subjugated Caliban.¹⁸⁵ In this way, *Caliban* displaces the argument of the earlier Uruguayan *modernista* José Enrique Rodó, whose essay *Ariel* (1900) proposed an aesthetic identification with Ariel, the "spiritual" creature of the air. *Caliban* stages this displacement as the solution to a particular interregional problem for a "Latin American" imaginary: the identification, especially in the Río de la Plata region (metropolitan Uruguay and Argentina), not only with the position of Ariel, but also with the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism, from Domingo F. Sarmiento to Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁸⁶ At the end of *Caliban*, Retamar recalls the exemplary Arielist intellectual—embodied by the recently assassinated Argentine militant Ernesto Che Guevara—who descended and asked for a place within the ranks of the Caliban collective. The figure of Caliban acquires its specifically political value through the common incorporation of both committed artist-intellectuals and the historico-anthropological notion of a "genuine" culture "gestated by our *mestizo* people" (65). Against the "boom" authors who argued for an aesthetic autonomy from revolutionary developments in Latin America, Retamar prescribed a more heteronomous literature, functionally if not instrumentally tied to the "symbol" of a collective Caliban and to the importance of "ancillary" genres like essays, memoirs, and *testimonio*.¹⁸⁷

If Retamar rejects the attribution of cannibalism to Caliban, the same cannot be said of the contemporary Brazilian return to this myth and trope. As I have suggested in the introduction and previous chapters, the Brazilian avant-garde had already begun in the early 1960s to reactualize the *modernista* trope of *antropofagia* from the late 1920s. Although this reappropriation took different aesthetic forms during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-

1985), it reached a certain theoretical culmination in Haroldo de Campos' proposal for an anthropophagic world literature, contemporary with Saer's novel. As de Campos argued, Oswald de Andrade's *antropofagia* adopted the position of the "bad savage," the "devourer of whites," whose strategy was to absorb what was needed from the European "enemy" in the creation of something new ("Da razão" 11). This was conceived as an "aggression" against the model, as in Silviano Santiago's readings of Borges and Cortázar ("O entre-lugar"), or a "critical devoration" enabled by an interconnected world of mass communication, as in de Campos' proposal. But in both an anthropophagic Latin American literature already made possible a de-hierarchized world or "universal" literature, opening an era in which Europe would also increasingly need to "redevour" the difference embodied by the "new planetary barbarians" ("Da razão 11-12). Although this proposal to recannibalize the cannibals thus reemerges as a Brazilian contribution to theorizing Latin American literature after the "boom," *antropofagia* served others as a corrective to the politics of *Caliban*. For the Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal, one of Retamar's principal antagonists, Brazilian *antropofagia* enabled a truly "autochthonous" Latin American identity: in place of the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean contributions to Retamar's symbol, which made visible Caliban's racial subjectivation, the "comic" or carnivalesque cannibalism of the Brazilian *modernistas* Oswald de Andrade and Mário de Andrade ensured "the true image of Caliban."¹⁸⁸ By identifying with Caliban's comic cannibalism, rather than his embodiment of the exploited masses, Brazilian and Spanish American writing could share a common aesthetic role and Latin American identity on the stages of world literature. This prescription, as I've argued in the introduction to this dissertation, performs an aesthetic politics of pastiche that reverses Fanon's drama: "white face, barbarian masks."

On the other side of the Atlantic, Saer's place of residence in France, a similar contrast accompanied the trope and myth of cannibalism in political anthropology and philosophy: on the one hand, Pierre and H el ene Clastre's anthropological work, especially the former's *La Soci et e contre l' Etat* (*Society Against the State* [1974]), which links anthropophagy to a society against the State; and Andr e Glucksmann's *La Cuisini ere le Mangeur d'Hommes* (*The Cook and the Man-Eater* [1975]), which uses the cannibal trope to denounce the violent excesses of State communism. In the Clastres' political anthropology, the "primitive society" of the lowlands Amerindian tribes—including the Guarani and the Tupi appropriated in Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto antrop fago"—had warded off the consolidation of State power through their practices and beliefs: the chief occupied an empty and precarious place of power; society was oriented around war and not unifying institutions; and a prophetic religion directed the tribe towards a "land without evil."¹⁸⁹ Glucksmann's *La Cuisini ere* developed Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's testimonial account of the Soviet Gulag as a cannibalism fostered by the communist State, the association that Retamar sought to ward off in *Caliban*. Written by a former French Maoist, *La Cuisini ere* was one of the inaugural texts of the *nouveaux philosophes* ("new philosophers"), part of an emerging critique of Marxism and philosophy that championed the perpetual resistance of the "plebs" to all forms of oppression. While, like the Clastres' work, *La Cuisini ere* theorizes a form of collectivity opposed to the State, cannibalism appears here as a kind of heresy, implicated in the catastrophe of actually existing socialism rather than an alternative line of flight from it.¹⁹⁰

Significantly, in the same essay that Saer proposes the concept of fiction as a "speculative anthropology," he criticizes literary partisans of both "the true" and "the false," using respectively as his examples Solzhenitsyn and Umberto Eco. The object of Saer's critique is not

the Soviet dissident's work documenting the violence of State concentration camps (*The Gulag Archipelago*), but the use of his fiction for an already predetermined ideological end: an appeal to the certainty of "truth" *formally* indistinct from the dominant aesthetics of socialist realism.¹⁹¹ What Saer does not hesitate in calling "great fictions" necessarily involve "a critical intercrossing of truth and falsity" ("El concepto" 16). For this reason, Eco's partisanship of "the false" proves equally problematic. It undermines the ambiguity and uncertainty of fiction from the other end, turning it into an artifice and entertainment that does not need to be believed. In contrast to the "great revelation," Saer argues, Eco represents the view that "there is nothing new under the sun" (14). While, like other concepts in his critical texts, "speculative anthropology" does not reappear again, it reiterates some of Saer's repeated claims that fiction neither produces ethnographical or sociological information nor adopts a pure aestheticism disconnected from the world. This holds for cannibalism—as trope or myth—in *El entenado* as well. If the return to a cannibal collective in the examples above remains associated with both a Latin American and a left imaginary, cannibalism itself takes on different roles: from anti-colonial or anti-state resistance to the practice of an apparently de-centered world literature, from the conjuration that legitimates European colonialism and imperialism to the real truth of communism. Returning now to Saer, we will see how the figure of a cannibal collective in *El entenado* avoids clear affiliation with the predetermined ends of either the politics of a Latin American aesthetics or the aesthetics of political denunciation and resistance.

Uncertain Affiliations: *El entenado* and the Cannibal Collective

The problem of predetermined filiations in *El entenado*, including its relation to Saer's previous cycle of fiction in "the zone," appears inscribed within the title itself. The word *entenado* is an archaic Spanish word for "stepson" and the novel plays on both the etymological

and poetic connotations of the term. Derived from *ante natus*, literally “before birth,” *entenado* also signifies a “bastard” child born out of wedlock. The narrator repeatedly refers to how he came “from nothing”: an orphan who grew among sailors and prostitutes on the docks, he came to look skeptically on family as simply an “appearance of company” (35). More poetically, the *ente-nado* suggests an “entity” or “being” (*ente*) identified with “nothingness” (*nada*) and a “being” that affirms, “I swim,” if we read *nado* as the first person form of the verb *nadar*. In this sense, it appears to respond to the title of Saer’s previous novel, *Nadie nada nunca* (1980), a triple negative (*Nobody Nothing Never*) that can also be rendered, “Nobody ever swims,” again reading *nada* as the third person form of *nadar*. The second meaning turns the triple negative into an ironically exaggerated existentialism with a more chilling aftereffect: as readers learn in *Glosa* (1986), two central characters in *Nadie*, Gato Garay and Elisa, were “disappeared” by the military, an atmosphere invoked in the earlier novel by a string of serial horse killings that include the police chief, “El Caballo” (“The Horse”). Both titles then implicitly dialog with a version of the fragment from Heraclitus that Saer will explicitly return to and rewrite in *El río sin orillas*: “Nobody ever swims twice in the same river.”¹⁹² As a response to the previous narrative text, this sense of *ente-nado* seems to support a point that many critics have emphasized: *El entenado* introduces a shift in Saer’s corpus away from the circularity and repetition of his previous narrative texts towards a seemingly more linear or legible narrative form. This shift, while not incorrect, nonetheless risks eliding the non-linearity of the narrative text. It does not follow the life of the biological individual, “classical” narrative structure (exposition-climax-resolution), or an epic that overcomes myth (*mythos*) through the triumph of reason (*logos*). The unnamed narrator’s memoirs instead focus primarily on his initial encounter with the tribe and their ritual, largely eliding the ten years during which he becomes habituated to the ritual. From

there, the narrative turns on the significance of both the anthropophagic act and his role representing the tribe after their massacre. The narrator is the being that survives the massacre, that swims after the others have sunk.

In *El entenado*, the initial encounter with the tribe appears as a violent and contingent “birth.” The narrator depicts their initial voyage to the supposedly “empty coasts” (25) of the New World as a return to “primeval banks” and “an illusion of originary life” (27). But the “birth” that he describes immediately after the massacre of his companions presents a radically different sense of natality. Recalling the memory of himself crying on the sand, the narrator reflects on both the uncertainty of the scene and the contingency of this birth: “memory of a true event or an instantaneous image, without past or future, freshly forged by a calm delirium, this creature that cries in an unknown world watches, without knowing it, its own birth. One never knows when one is born [*cuándo se nace*]: birth [*el parto*] is a simple convention” (41). This reflection on a non-biological sense of “birth” includes the possibility of one going through life being not born, born badly (“aborted”), or born multiple times. In the narrator’s recollections of his pre- and post-natal condition, the river and its smell remain constant but the kind of birth they condition changes. Before narrating the encounter, he associates the water’s “smell of origin, of humid and laborious formation, of growth” (26) with a discourse of New World exuberance and Biblical genesis. After the massacre of the crew, the narrator associates the “uterine smell” [*olor matricinal*] of the rivers and the sharp background voices of the tribe with the bloody emergence of his younger self from “the obscure night that is his mother’s womb [*vientre*]” (41). The phrase does double work, associating this birth with the “obscure night” and obscurity with the “mother’s womb.”

These associations of orphanhood and adoption, nothingness and natality, also more generally prefigure the unstable status of paternity and paternal authority in *El entenado*. Skeptical of biological filiations, the narrator nonetheless identifies several alternative paternal figures both before and after his life with the tribe. He attaches the first instance of surrogate paternity to sailors aboard the ship that first brings him to the New World. On the voyage, he becomes the reluctant if not forced sexual partner of some of his shipmates. They become, in turn, “something of a father” for the orphan, a double relation that afforded him, he admits, both protection and some pleasure (16). The second example only comes much later, after the massacre of the tribe and the narrator’s return to Europe, when he is taken in by the sympathetic priest, Padre Quesada, other than the tribe of Colastiné, the only character with a proper name. Padre Quesada becomes like a more literal “father” (*padre*) not just because he gave him a humanistic education (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the sciences), but also because learning to read and write had retrospectively made possible “the only act that could justify my life” (120). In addition to a literary affiliation (Quesada is mentioned as another possible surname of Cervantes’ Don Quixote), the priest’s inclusion of the Indians within the human connects this affiliation to a critical line of colonial thought inaugurated by figures like Bartolomé de las Casas, a point I return to in more detail below. These alternative paternal attachments differ from the narrator’s relation with both the tribe and the principal figure of colonial authority in the novel: the captain of the ship. Psychoanalytic readings have tended to identify the tribe’s devoration of the captain with one of Saer’s intertexts, Freud’s Oedipal myth of cannibalism in *Totem and Taboo*: the “primal” father is killed and eaten by the jealous sons in an act of contradictory “identification” with the father’s power; and their subsequent guilt for this crime then helps provide the foundation for subsequent society, law, and religion.¹⁹³ This direct connection, however,

overlooks both the narrator's lack of identification with the captain and the tribe's lack of identification with the Spanish explorers. If simply applied to the colonial encounter, Freud's Oedipal myth of cannibalism would also serve to naturalize the society, law, and religion that European colonization violently imposed from outside—an imposition that often justified the enslavement, repression, or outright extermination of tribes identified as “anthropophagi” or “cannibals,” as is the case with the Colastiné in *El entenado*.

El entenado appears, in this specific sense, closer to the adaptation of *Totem and Taboo* in Oswald de Andrade's “Manifesto antropófago” (1928). The Brazilian avant-garde appropriation of Freud's myth emphasized the disjuncture between the Iberian-European “father” and the anthropophagic Amerindians. For Oswaldian *antropofagia*, the desire to transform all taboos into totems meant both identifying with the anthropophagic act attributed to groups like the Tupi or Caribs and repeating this act as a comic cultural trope and practice. To return to the emblematic example cited in chapter one, the closing date of the manifesto, “On the 374th Year of the Deglutination of Bishop Sardinha,” provides both a primal scene of resistance to the “sacred enemy” and a literary joke: in the context of the manifesto, the anthropophagic tribe's devoration of the bishop further exemplifies how European society, law, and religion have been only partially incorporated in Brazil; the cultural anthropophagite, relishing in this meal of the Catholic “Sardine,” makes anthropophagy the inauguration of an apparently decolonial New World, replacing the transcendental axis of colonial patriarchy with the “matriarchy of Pindorama” (a Tupi word meaning “the land of palm trees”).¹⁹⁴ In *El río sin orillas*, Saer invokes apposite positions in *rioplatense* literati who “opt for somewhat childish pride—‘we are the descendents of those who ate [Juan Díaz de] Solís’—or for the joke, as in this verse of Borges [...]: *where Juan Díaz fasted and the Indians ate*” (52).¹⁹⁵ *El entenado*, does not adopt

either form of mimetic identification with the cannibal tribe, but instead takes Borges' joke in a more serious direction. On the one hand, rather than figure himself a "descendent" of the Colastiné, the narrator instead increasingly queries the meaning of his role representing the tribe to the outside world. On the other, while *El entenado* does not refrain from subtle dramatic ironies, especially at the captain's expense, it also questions comedy and the comic as a response to the narrator's encounter with the tribe and the tribe's subsequent annihilation.

The questioning of a comic or carnivalesque cannibalism diverges from Oswaldian *antropofagia* and its prescription as an aesthetics or epistemology of Latin American literature, as in Monegal's rewriting of Caliban or de Campos reading of world literature. This questioning takes center stage when the narrator discusses his response to the internationally successful *comedia* based on his story, as we will see in more detail below. But Saer's divergence from this stylistics and genre already appear in the initial narration of the cannibal ritual; the treatment of Padre Quesada; and the attempt to account for the tribe's fate. The narrator recounts the violence of the cannibal ritual in a distant and almost detached tone, while the melancholic automatism of the act troubles any triumphant "pride" in its appropriation. Padre Quesada appears as a kind of "sacred enemy" not to the anthropophagic tribe but to other church clergy back in Spain: his unwavering "ironic smile" contributes to the animosity of his enemies, who persistently mock him, while he plays along both to mitigate their hatred and because his enemies could have him sent to "the fire" (121). Irony at the captain's expense, moreover, does little to mitigate the violent revenge of the conquistadors who return ten years later to massacre the tribe. This expulsion of the anthropophagic tribe from the land adds another space and time absent from comic cannibalism: the desert. Before turning to the two previous versions of the narrator's story, the *testimonio*-like report and the *comedia*, we must first look closer at the initial

encounter with the tribe and its aftermath. For in this way, Saer's narrative text sets up the juxtaposition of the anthropophagi and the desert as a recurring scene of mythical law-making violence.¹⁹⁶

El entenado presents the initial encounter between the Spanish explorers and Colastiné as an interruption of the foundational act and order. As the narrator recounts, shortly after the crew landed on the banks of the river the captain had begun to utter the phrase, "This land is without...—" (*Tierra esta es sin...—*), when an arrow pierces his throat and interrupts the declaration, turning it into a peculiar double negative (30). The dash that typographically mimics the arrow both silences the captain and suspends his "demonstrative gesture" (*ademán probatorio*), directly contradicting the likely predicate: this land is without *inhabitants*.¹⁹⁷ The irony here is twofold. The very subjects presumed absent literally cut off his speech act. But Saer's narrative also subtly plays on the irony that the Spanish captain, echoing the historical figure Juan Díaz de Solís, had previously denominated the mouth of the river *el mar dulce* ("fresh water" or literally "sweat sea")—in effect flavoring the meal the captain and landing crew becomes shortly afterwards. The captain's aesthetic denomination of the region is all that remains of a clear historical reference in the novel, just as the reference to the "father of rivers" (the usual translation of the Guarani "Paraná" River) and the name of the tribe, the Colastiné, are all that appears to mark the sense of place central to Saer's work: the "zone," the cluster of spaces and landscapes around Santa Fé, which include the rural Colastiné Norte, where Saer lived before his voluntary exile in France.

However, if the tribe's interruption of the founding gesture suspends, to use Carl Schmitt's formulation, "land appropriation as the primeval act of founding law" (*Nomos* 45), *El entenado*

does not secure the Colastiné as an alternative *nomos* or law of the land (like the “matriarchy of Pindorama” in Oswald de Andrade’s manifesto). Significantly, the narrator first refers to the tribe’s name, Colastiné, only when the Spanish return ten years later and massacre the tribe—it appears only after their apparent disappearance. But in his ten years with the tribe, he lives under the unwritten law that seems to direct the perennial repetition of the ritual and his own peculiar role in its reproduction. After they carry him away back to the village, the members of the tribe repeatedly hail him with gestures and the word “*def-ghi*,” his designation for the duration of his stay. This arbitrary fragment of alphabetic writing presents an ironic inscription of orality: this half-joking allusion to the Eurocentric translation of another semiotic system into an alphabetic one also gestures at the cannibal ritual as a form of writing or “literarity,” understood also in the terms adopted previously, as “the radical democracy of the letter that anyone can grab hold of it” (Rancière *The Politics of Literature* 13). Each year the tribe brings back one captive *def-ghi* from their ritual hunt to witness the devoration of the others before they return them to the exterior, presumably to recount in their own language what they have seen.

The descriptive narrative of what he witnesses in his initial encounter of the ritual, though, departs from either a moral critique or triumphant account of the cannibal collective. In the general euphoria focused on the cooking meat, the cooks remain the only part of the tribe that does not succumb to the intense desire and delirium. While their role reinforces the impression that the tribe submits to a heteronomous power or law, they do not stand in for figures of evil or authority (as, for example, in Glucksmann’s *La Cuisinière* where the “cook” signifies Stalin, but also the academic heirs of Marx). For Saer’s narrator, the role of the cooks suggests a “force” in the tribe capable of keeping them “sheltered from the indistinct” (77), the material magma they both fall into and rise out of every year during the ritual. The general automatism of the feast,

however, appears to negate any pleasure or enjoyment in the act. This negation made the devourers seem “more the victim than their piece of meat,” “as if guilt, taking the appearance of desire, had been in them contemporaneous with the sin” (57). This speculative opinion—that the lack of enjoyment in the act betrayed a certain guilt—also finds further support in the period both during and after the violent orgies, when the tribe seems to forget the cannibal ritual all together. During the orgies all sexual taboos regarding sex, family, or age disappear, but the narrator focuses more on the performance of the violence than the breaking of law. In abandoning themselves to the “animal delirium” (48), some sustain serious injuries; others die. As the narrator recounts, even in their dying moments they still direct gestures his way, hailing “*def-ghi*,” as if trying to secure the memory of their individual and collective actions. No one in the tribe, though, seems to bear any sign of remembering the origin of their scars. Nor do they discuss missing members. As the narrator later learns, they also show disgust towards other tribes who find “honor” in being eaten and never refer to the act of anthropophagy themselves, a silence that suggests little “pride” in the practice (155). Thus, although this “theatrical ostentation” (92) appears oriented towards its reproduction in the exterior, the cannibal collective in *El entenado* already troubles the conventional messages it might bear on the world stage—neither honor in being devoured nor pride in devouring.

What gives the narrator a different perspective on his role is the contingency of his extended stay and the second massacre that follows it. When the tribe suddenly sends him back down the river ten years after his arrival, they do not expel him; they simply return him to the people from whom he came: the Spanish. Rediscovered by the returning ships, he no longer can speak his mother tongue but refers to the tribe by name and confirms the gestures of the Spaniards: they had no gold, only bows and arrows; and yes, they eat men (111). As the ship set sail for Europe

the next day, the narrator witnesses the trail of mostly Colastiné bodies that emerge from the “mouth” (*desembocadura*) of the river. In this way, *El entenado* configures the massacre of the Colastiné as a version of what Lévi-Strauss named *anthropoemia*: the “modern” West’s anthropoemic expulsion of the other (from *poemia*, to vomit out) as a reverse of “primitive” societies’ anthropophagic incorporation of the other.¹⁹⁸ The image of the expelled bodies then not only adds a silent reprobation of distaste to the aesthetic *nomos*, “the sweet sea,” that the ship now crosses on route towards what the sailors proudly call “our fatherland” (*nuestra patria*) [115]. It also alludes to Saer’s present of writing—the Argentine State’s “dirty war” against subversives and the fate of many of the “disappeared” whose bodies were dropped into the sea.

The captain’s double negative thus takes on another connotation following the massacre, since the ellipses and dash in the phrase, “This land is without...—,” also serves to mark the absence of the tribe as a violent erasure. In *El entenado*, this second massacre introduces another more subjective perception of place as a desert wasteland. Because, to the priests back in Spain, the narrator appears not only “contaminated by the exterior” (113) but also possessed by a “demon” (124), they send him to the convent run by Padre Quesada. Padre Quesada’s reading of the narrator’s condition appears both less explicitly theological and more historically non-verisimilar, oriented around two “classes of suffering”: “in the first, one knows that one suffers and while one suffers, a better life, whose taste [*gusto*] still persists in the memory, is concealed [*escamoteada*]; in the other, one does not know, but the whole world, up to the most modest of presences, presents itself, for he who crosses it, as a deserted and scorched place [*un lugar desierto y calcinado*]” (127). Padre Quesada, the narrator thinks, glimpsed the second, unacknowledged suffering in his eyes after the massacre of the tribe and his return to Europe. For the priest, this unacknowledged or ignored suffering—the perception of the world as a

“deserted and scorched place”—could neither be exorcized nor erased without “annihilating the world” along with it. Although framed in seemingly individual aesthetic terms of taste and perception, this suffering thus also suggests an unacknowledged relation to the massacre and a present defined by the possibility of annihilation. We are closer here to Adorno, for whom the sine qua non of art was the expression of a suffering recalcitrant to the order of knowledge and irreducible to an imitation of individual impulses.¹⁹⁹ But the reduction of the world to a desert or wasteland connects to several other interrelated invocations of the desert in Saer’s narrative: in the epigraph from Herodotus on the anthropophagous other; the narrator’s memory in the opening scene of the narrative; and the narrator’s description of the “known world” as a “desert.” Read together, these invocations suggest less a history than a mythic repetition of this violence against “savagery.” But, in rereading and rewriting these terms through the narrative, Saer also alters this repetition, making the desert both part of the cosmic situation of *El entenado*’s world and an always ambiguous state of perception.

The Cannibal Horde and the Total Desert: Demythification as Annihilation

The desert first appears in the novel’s epigraph from Herodotus: “...further on are the Anthropophagi, a separate people, and after them comes the total desert...” (... *más allá están los Andrófagos, un pueblo aparte, y después viene el desierto total...*) [11]. The fragment connects *El entenado* to a much longer duration of Western thought that has used the practice of anthropophagy to delimit the space and identity of the “savage” barbarian other.²⁰⁰ Separated from its context in *The History*,²⁰¹ this descriptive fragment also takes on an additional narrative connotation in the colonial conquest that provides the historical backdrop for *El entenado*. On the one hand, the epigraph describes a spatial relation between the Andropophagi, the people

who live “beyond” (*más alla*) or “apart” (*aparte*) from the others, and the “total desert” (*desierto total*) that simply “comes after” (*después viene*) them, located further still on the horizon. On the other hand, the “total desert” that “comes after” the Andropophagi can also be read temporally, as a narrative description of an event and not just a spatial structure. The coming of the “total desert” thus suggests a more ominous fate for the peoples, like the Colastiné, designated as “anthropophagi” and “cannibals”: subjugation or extermination. In this reading, Saer’s narrative text neither fully contradicts the Herodotus quote by “populating the desert” (Díaz-Quiñones 12) nor simply takes the ideological *topos* of “the desert” in nineteenth Argentine literature back to an “a-topical past” (Riera *Littoral* 81). Rather, the pairing of the anthropophagi and the desert becomes a recurring imaginary condition and narrative possibility: the anthropophagi as a “beyond” located on the borders of the desert; the desert as the wasteland that comes after the anthropophagi. The myth of cannibalism and its violent overcoming or disenchantment.

Both of these dimensions accompany the invention of the term “cannibal” that largely replaces “anthropophagi” after the Conquest of the New World. Taking up the same critique as Retamar in *Caliban*, Peter Hulme has persuasively argued that the term “cannibal” emerges from Columbus’ journals precisely at the contradictory intersection of a discourse of savagery derived from Herodotus and a discourse of Orientalism derived from Marco Polo: Columbus’ reference to the *Caniba* (the “Carib”) beyond the immediate contact zone as *gente de Can* (“people of Khan”) seems to place this people in the deserts of Eastern Mongolian ruled by the Great Khan; the references to these *Caniba* as an aggressive and anthropophagous tribe, though, combines Herodotus with accounts of the Carib given by their Taíno Arawak native informants, the position that the non-native narrator occupies in *El entenado*.²⁰² Another invocation of the desert, though, emerges as a contemporaneous theological critique of the Conquest and the

discourse of savagery. For Enrique Dussel, the theological response first preached by the Dominican friar Antón de Montesinos then fully embodied by Bartolomé de las Casas, enounces an ethical critique of the new imperial and colonial world: *Ego vox clamatis in deserto*, “I am the voice crying out in the desert,” the accusation that the sin, tyranny, and cruelty of the conquerors had turned the islands of the New World into a moral wasteland while the rest of the colonists remained as if dreaming in a deep sleep.²⁰³

The relation between cannibal savagery and the topology of the desert, however, also has a more specific historical resonance in nineteenth century Río de la Plata, where “the desert” changes critical valence without losing its theological connotations. In the beginning of *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* (1845), Domingo F. Sarmiento evokes the threatening “savage horde” on the “uncertain horizon” of the desert outside Buenos Aires and identifies “poetry” with the task of traversing these waking “dreams” on the border between civilization and barbarism.²⁰⁴ This uncertain horizon converges with the dictum of Saer’s narrator shortly before he recounts his capture by the tribe: “The unknown is an abstraction; the known, a desert; but the half-known, or the glimpsed, is the perfect place to make desire and hallucination ripple” (12). The half-known, like the “savage hordes” and poetry for Sarmiento, exists on the border between the unknown and the known, between abstraction and the desert. In *Facundo*, though, the “savage hordes” never directly appear and the “desert” names the immense uninhabited space to be populated by European immigration. The arrival of the other sense of the desert, the “total desert,” would come after Sarmiento’s own Presidency (1868-1874) in the late 1870s, with the brutal “Conquest of the Desert,” the military campaign to exterminate hostile tribes in the South.²⁰⁵ Although this campaign marks a culminating point of State violence, the metaphorical emptying of the “plains” (*llanos*) and the *pampas* surrounding Buenos Aires into an image of

“the Desert” (*El desierto*) has a distinctly nineteenth century provenance: increasingly prevalent during the first campaigns against Amerindian tribes in the 1830s, as Efraín Kristal argues, the *desierto* represents an “adaptation” of the Anglo-American “wilderness,” a space where indigenous peoples are not incorporated into the Christian community but become the object of systematic extermination.²⁰⁶

Through the juxtaposition of the anthropophagi-cannibals and the desert, *El entenado* thus obliquely connects the Conquest, the Conquest of the Desert, and Saer’s present of writing, shadowed by the “dirty war” and the *Proceso de la reorganización nacional* (the Process of National Reorganization). This does not mean that *El entenado* is “about” the Process (or, alternatively, that it is strictly “about” the Conquest). If *El entenado* returns to the violent origins of both the region and the “zone” at the center of Saer’s fiction, the incorporation of cannibalism also takes place within a larger Latin American and transatlantic imaginary that returned to the myth, trope, and figure. Considering again the association of the cannibal collective with a generally left anti-colonial or anti-statist configuration of this imaginary (or more negatively, as the revolutionary State that has begun to eat itself), the annihilation of the Colastiné also encompasses a more widespread landscape of repression and disaster.

This sense of disaster contributes to the significance of the cosmic situation in the opening lines of the narrative text. Immediately following his recollection of the “abundance of the sky,” the narrator recounts the feeling of a common diminishment of human life: “on the yellow shore, we were like ants in the center of the desert” (11). Saer’s original draft of the narrative placed the narrator alone on the beach of an “empty universe,” extending his hand as if he could cradle the blue sky (*El entenado/Glosa* 540). In addition to the collective “we,” the final version of *El entenado* replaces the “empty universe” with a common metaphorical (and metaphysical)

condition shared by the narrator and the tribe: “like ants in the center of the desert.” The gesture of the hand, however, also remains, marking a shift from day to night and from the desert to a more poetic constellation. Although he now lives in cities because they “dissimulate the sky,” making life “horizontal,” the narrator recalls the brightly constellated nights and the stars that seemed “at hand’s reach,” “as if the sky had been the besieged wall of an active volcano that allowed a glimpse of the internal incandescence through its orifices” (*El entenado* 11). The hand of a child reaching for the stars, a paradigmatic figure for a “utopian will” in Walter Benjamin’s terms,²⁰⁷ combines here with the sky as the wall of an active volcano, an image that, in the Latin American context, evokes Simón Bolívar’s figure for the subaltern classes still suppressed in the process of Independence.²⁰⁸ *El entenado* repeatedly replays the tension between the coming of the “total desert”—which, in the narrator’s terms, is still only a figure for “the known”—and a more poetic register that interrogates the “half-known”: the desire, hallucination, and “incandescence” that mark the appearance of the cannibal tribe. As we will see, the two previous versions of his story—Padre Quesada’s book *Relación de abandonado* and the *comedia*—contribute to the narrator’s dawning perception of the world as a “deserted and scorched place,” devoid of presences. Yet they also work to exclude the poetic interrogation of the narrator’s role in representing the both the tribe and a world defined by annihilation, rather than the possibility of alteration. The narration of the memoirs opens up both the critical questioning and the aesthetic possibilities foreclosed by the spectacular “boom” of his story among the tribe.

The *Testimonio*-Report, the Cannibal-*Comedia*, and the Impasses of Avant-Garde

Negativity

In the *Relación de abandonado*, transcribed shortly after the narrator's return to Spain, the still semi-illiterate narrator acts as the gone-native informant for the priest. The title invokes the historical genre of the *relación* as a report or account to the King, Queen, or in the implied period of Saer's narrative, Emperor. However, the subject of this account, an *abandonado*, suggests other ambiguities in the phrase. On the one hand, *abandonado* describes both the narrator's status as an orphan and as a subject "abandoned" by the law. But this more straightforward meaning coincides with another possible reading of the phrase—the "relation of" (*relación de*) the abandoned subject, not with the Empire and the Emperor, both of which remain unmentioned in the narrative, but with the tribe. This ambiguity plays out through the two other genres that the *Relación* moves between: ethnography and *testimonio*. Based on the questions of the priest, the account fulfills an ethnographic function for the colonial empire. Padre Quesada queries their forms of government, property, economy, music, and religion, as well as more mundane things like eating and defecating—ethnographic details that *El entenado*, in fact, largely elides. But they also present two different relations between the sensible and the knowledge imparted to the narrator (classical languages and the sciences): "for [Padre Quesada], they were like tongs destined to manipulate the incandescence of the sensible; for me, fascinated by the power of contingency, it was like going out to hunt a beast that had already devoured me" (120). Padre Quesada represents a more instrumental approach to the "incandescence of the sensible," the "beast" that has already "devoured" the narrator, making the more primitive hunt both belated and useless. In this way, the logic of the metaphor suggests that the narrator remains too engulfed by the intensity of his experience. Accordingly, combined with his respect for Padre Quesada and the recent occurrence of these events, the priest's questions in the report failed to evoke "so many essential things" (124).

Although the narrator does not specify, these missing “essential things” appear to include their different ways of accounting for the Indians’ humanity and the impact of the subsequent massacre on the narrator. Both of these dimensions bring the *Relación* closer to the “urgency” associated with the narration of the *testimonio*.²⁰⁹ In conversations with other clergy, Padre Quesada took the position that the Indians were “sons of Adam” (125), opposing the views that the Indians were “not men,” “not Christians,” or “not men because they were not Christians” (124). In the context of sixteenth century debates, Padre Quesada thus falls on the side of de las Casas against Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the theological jurist who debated the inherent inferiority of the Indians with the Dominican friar. Quesada similarly includes the Indians as unrecognized humanity (“they were men”), on condition of their future incorporation through catechization and conversion: they were “putative” (*putativos*) sons of Adam who logically must come to recognize this Christian filiation. In response, the narrator recalls the silent reprobation of his own belief “that there were not any more men on this earth [*no había más hombres sobre esta tierra*] than those Indians and that, since they day they had sent me back I had not encountered, apart from Padre Quesada, anything other than strange and problematic beings to which one could apply the word men only out of habit or convention” (125). The narrator thus does not simply maintain the inclusion of the inhuman tribe within the human. He also abandons the appeal to theological filiations while making the tribe the primary exemplar of the human as such. In this way, he brings the tribe closer to the semantics of *entendado* as stepson, bastard, or orphan, as well as to a *relación de abandonado*, the relation of those abandoned by the protections of the law yet subject to its force. If there were “no more men” or “no greater men” on the earth than the now decimated tribe, this inhuman present would also provide the logical

condition for the narrator's unrecognized suffering and his subsequent perception of the world as "a deserted and scorched place" (127).

The consequences of this belief become apparent when Padre Quesada dies and deprives the narrator's world of its last "human" support, transforming his sense of place into a desert. During these years of "shadow and ash," the narrator wanders "bloodless lands" with other "insubstantial detritus" that only retain a "vaguely human appearance" (128). This transition provides the context for Padre Quesada's dictum on two classes of suffering cited above. Up to this point, living had been "a source of bitter water" for the narrator, a kind of river whose waters nonetheless remained "uninterrupted and steady." This state resembles the known suffering that keeps concealed or steals away "a better life, whose taste still persists in the memory" (127). In this sense, bitterness keeps open the possibility of alteration but does nothing to make visible a "better life." After Padre Quesada's death, though, both living and being appear "obscure and superfluous," distanced from the narrator's experience altogether (128). In this state of "less than nothing," the narrator is beyond desire and beset by thoughts of "annihilation" (128, 129). The narrator's solution to what Padre Quesada called the unknown or ignored suffering thus coincides with the priests who could only exorcise this perception of a "deserted and scorched place" by "annihilating the world" (127). The only thing that saves the narrator from this fate is the traveling theater troupe who takes him in: even though he considered comedy an "infantile game," faced with the choice between the "theater or the rubbish heap," the narrator chooses the theater (129). When the narrator later reveals his story to the old man who heads the troupe, the latter sees the potential for riches and suggests that they stage it, with the man and his nephew as captain and crew, the women (the nephew's "cousins") as the Indians, and the narrator as

himself, the “authentic survivor” (138). This shift from the desert to the stage thus also entails a new form of representing the other, the massacred tribe, for a European audience.

If, like Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.*, the desert thus appears as a perception or border state, the shift from this void to representing the absent indigent other has a closer correlate in Pablo Neruda’s iconic poem “Las Alturas de Machu Picchu” (1944).²¹⁰ In Neruda’s poem, after several sections of lifeless horizontal drifting among “a cluster of faces or precipitous masks” (21), the poetic subject encounters the abstract urban world as a desert landscape at the edge of the void: “so I went from street to street and river to river, / city to city and bed to bed, / my briny mask [*mi máscara salobre*] traversed the desert, / and in the last humiliated homes, without light or fire, / without bread, without stone, without silence, alone, / I rolled on dying of my own death” (*Canto general* 22). The shift from this limit state bordering death occurs shortly after with the poetic subject’s vertical ascent-descent into the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. Desiring answers about how the servants who built Machu Picchu lived and suffered, the poet enounces his representative role in the last section of the poem. In the site of the ruins, where the stone statues displace the previous masks, the poet famously assumes the task of both ventriloquizing the dead (“I come to speak through your dead mouth” [30]) and serving as their medium (“Speak through my words and my blood” [31]). Recent returns to Neruda’s poem in Latin Americanist criticism have juxtaposed this representative role for the poet—who speaks *about* and *for* subaltern subjects—with the *testimonio*: in the latter, the intellectual would no longer serve as the literary voice of the voiceless but instead assume the role of transcriber or critic in solidarity with the subaltern narrators and communities threatened by State-sponsored violence or annihilation (civil or counterrevolutionary war, the ongoing oppression and resistance of indigenous peoples or subaltern groups).²¹¹ Although Saer’s narrator assumes a similar

representative role vis-à-vis the indigent other, and even conceives his role at points as a kind of “solidarity” (162), *El entenado* also questions the idea of representativeness in other ways. Unlike the *Relación*, where Padre Quesada acted as the questioner and transcriber of the narrator’s answers, the narrator writes the *comedia* with the old man who heads the theater troupe. But just as ethnography and Christian theology framed Padre Quesada’s account, the old man’s principal concern was with the “taste of the public” rather than the narrator’s “experience”; consequently, “every truth” that filtered into the narrator’s verses was erased (132). The result, the narrator remarks, was a story oriented around prosaic speech and action.

The reactions to the tremendous success of the *comedia* bring into focus the problems of representing the absent indigent or “autochthonous” collective—Colastiné, cannibal, Caliban—on the stages of Europe and of world literature more generally. The troupe, like a “fabulator,” only shows the “tolerable aspect of things” and they mistake their “triumph” on the stage as a proof of a “universal and just order” (132). The dramatic irony of this reaction is obvious: in avidly consuming the anthropophagic “cannibal” *comedia*, the European public forgets the actual evisceration of the tribe on which the story depends and thus also the anthropoemic violence of Western colonialism itself. In this way, the play disavows the narrator’s own role as *def-ghi*, the only undigested European and a survivor of this second massacre—his status as “authentic survivor,” like the contemporary story of the German captive Hans Staden, pertains to his surviving the inhuman cannibalist ritual. The critique then plays out in more Saerian terms, as a removal of doubt from his companions and the corresponding failure of the crowds to denounce the “imposture” of the play or question an immediate meaning that adhered to the preceding legend or the fame of its actors (133). Troubled by this “boom” of the *comedia*, the narrator adopts other tactics in an attempt to transgress the script of the play. Realizing that a

disapproving “silence” already resided in himself, he adds “empty or absurd periods” into his speech. Not only does he fail to provoke any change in the audiences’ reactions, though, but the *comedia* itself is subsequently reduced to silence: to facilitate its translation and performance across different linguistic regions, they turn the play into a pantomime, performed only with music against a colorful backdrop. In this way, the cannibal *comedia* appears as a kind of proto-industrial mass spectacle, opening this staging not only to a general tension between the culture industry and modernist art, but also to the particular problem of reducing Latin American literature to a representative theme, genre, or identity.

For this reason, the resulting constellation—the mass spectacle of the Latin Americanist text and the failure of the attempt to negate this script from within—takes on greater significance. In response to this staging, the narrator deploys a “poetics of negativity,” to borrow the productive—but also somewhat misleading—term that the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia has used to categorize Saer’s writing.²¹² For Piglia, this negative poetics, exemplified by writers like Samuel Beckett, refuses the stereotyped languages of the culture industry and tends toward silence. As we have just seen, the narrator rediscovers his own disapproving silence during the “boom” of the *comedia* and soon adopts the “bitter and slightly superior smile of one who possesses the advantage of experience” (132). Yet neither the narrator’s ironic detachment from the cannibal *comedia*’s “uncertain triumph” in Europe, nor the interjection of “empty and absurd periods” into his speech, produces the desired disapproval in the crowd. To the narrator, the crowd appears subject to a downward spiral that dematerializes their presence and reflects his own disdain: from “puppets” or “phantasmagorias” to “scarecrows,” “forms without substance,” and finally “phantasms” (132, 133). The more superior the narrator’s attitude becomes toward the “mechanical” crowd who consumes the play’s immediate meaning, the more the narrator’s

bitter smile rigidifies into an a similarly mechanical “grimace” of cynicism (134). The narrator’s two gestural reactions bear comparison to the sense of “gesture” deployed by Giorgio Agamben, especially since Agamben draws on the popular Italian theater later institutionalized as *commedia dell’arte*. In the first case, the narrator’s “empty and absurd periods” converge with the gesture as “gag,” understood in the double sense of something placed in one’s mouth to impede speech and an improvisation “meant to compensate loss of memory or an inability to speak.”²¹³ The narrator’s self-gagging, though, attempts to intentionally interject silences into the performance, as if these might obstruct the spectators’ forgetting of the massacre or the preconceived meaning attached to the script and its stars.

Along with the failure of these negative gestures to change the spectators’ response, the hardening of the narrator’s response into a cynical “grimace” presents a more limited pose of negation. For Agamben, the masks in the popular *commedia* had a radical negativity; they functioned as “gestures figured as type,” a “constellation of gestures” that destroys the identity of the actor and the role (*Means* 79). Agamben’s “gesture” essentially reformulates Benjamin’s argument about the potential of technological reproducibility in film to dispel the aura of both the actor and the role, in contrast to (bourgeois) theater, which relied on the actor’s presence in the “here and now” unmediated by an apparatus.²¹⁴ To rehearse the general outline of Benjamin’s argument again, the predominance of art’s “exhibition value” over its “cult value” opened up a new space for “play” that broke with art’s origins in “ritual,” allowing for its potential refoundation in “politics.” Benjamin used the mime to restage the “origin” of aura and beautiful semblance in mimesis, the “primal phenomenon of artistic activity”: the mime, working with only the gestures of body and lips (dance and language), presents their subject as semblance and, in this sense, *plays* their subject (“Work of Art” 127, n.22). Like his contemporary, the

Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, who figured the mime more specifically as the “origin of cinematographic art,” Benjamin perceived the actuality of this figure in the silent films of Charlie Chaplin.²¹⁵ Chaplin appears at the crossroads in Benjamin’s argument between, on the one hand, the “dispelled” aura of the filmic actor and role; and, on the other, the false re-enchantment of aura by the film industry in the “cult of the movie star” and corresponding “cult of the audience” (“Work of Art” 113). In *El entenado*, the popular *comedia* similarly depends on the aura of both the actor and his role as “authentic survivor,” while the gestures of negativity in the pantomimed performance do nothing to break the spectacle. With the “boom” of his story among the cannibal tribe, the narrator wonders whether both public and performers may simply play their proper roles in a story where “our vulgar falsities and acts without content were, in reality, essential truths” (131). In this way, the performance removes the ground from the narrator’s previous appeal to both the “essential things” missing from the *Relación* and to the “truths” erased from the *comedia*, replacing them with new “essential truths”—“vulgar falsities and acts without content.”

By staging both the cannibal *comedia* and the gestures of its negation as a part of the same script, though, *El entenado* does something other than confirm the final incorporation of a negative poetics into the culture industry. Formally, the staging resembles Néstor García Canclini’s critical judgment about the “failure” of avant-garde art as much as Benjamin’s hope for art’s refoundation in politics: “There is a moment when artist’s *gestures* of rupture, which are not able to become *acts* (effective interventions in social processes), become *rituals*” (23). In García Canclini’s account, the ritualization of these “gestures of rupture” ultimately coincides with the “ritualizations of the museum and the market” as art becomes the privileged symbolic field for enacting the “denied transgressions” of social transformation.²¹⁶ However, while

Agamben's staging makes the ritualizations of the market disappear from view, García Canclini's account makes the market's determination of ritual all there is to see. In *El entendido*, I have argued, the narrator's gestures of negativity on the stage rigidify into a pose of negation, as the "grimace" confronts an audience of "phantasms." But faced with this constellation of negative gestures, the narrator abandons performing the radically other on the stages of Europe and subtracts himself from the triumphant "boom" of his story about the cannibal tribe, leaving his identity and role to be assumed by another actor. In abandoning the stage, he also takes on a pedagogical role, becoming a kind of stepfather to the children in the troupe. After teaching them to read and write, he takes them in because, like him, they had no real father or mother: their mother, the youngest of the actresses, was killed by a jealous lover; and although the old man and nephew were likely involved in the fathering, they did nothing for the children other than employ them as "savages" in the play. Informally adopting the three, the narrator relocates to a "white city" somewhere along the Mediterranean coast where he invests in a small printing press and attempts to teach the children "something more real than poses and simulacra" (136).

It is in the almost bare room adjacent to the printing press where the narrator also writes his memoirs in old age. The ritual meal he partakes in every night before writing is not a ritual of rupture, but both a rupture and continuity with the cannibal ritual as well as the numerous feasts in Saer's fiction more generally. The repeated return to the same meal every night—bread, olives, and a glass of wine—provides him with an "aura of eternity" (138), a temporary and constructed experience of atemporality. This "aura" does nothing to stave off death but the moments that it produces nonetheless "sustain the hand that grips the quill, making it trace, in name of those who already were definitively lost, these signs that seek, uncertain, their endurance" (138-9). This narrative sequence from the staged spectacle to the writing room, from

miming the lost others to writing in their name, also presents both breaks and continuities between these two representational media.²¹⁷ Differently from Beckett's own pantomime plays (*Acts Without Words I and II*) or his short silent *Film* (1964), in which the famous silent film actor (Buster Keaton) flees into a room and covers everything in an attempt not to be perceived (and thus not "be"),²¹⁸ both the silent pantomime play and the bare room in *El entenado* involve more than just the self or even the otherness of the self. They also turn on the formal and representational problem of the lost others. This problem, moreover, includes how they are perceived by the exterior world and how they perceive themselves, since the role of the captive/witness centers on recalling and reproducing their easily recognizable gestures.

Objection to the Commerce of the World: Irreality, Autonomy, and a Taste of the Planet

In this way, the writing of the memoirs—that is, the writing of *El entenado* itself—marks a break because it allows narrative interruptions that the staged spectacle seemed to preclude or absorb. These interruptions in turn open up interrogations of both the representation of the cannibal collective's "ostentatious theater" and the narrator's role in reproducing it. I will focus closely several interconnected interruptions. The first connects the narrator's failed attempts at undermining the spectacle of the cannibal *comedia* to a more general experience of estrangement that the narrator interrogates in the present of writing. The second moves abruptly from the narration of the cannibal orgy to the scene of writing to interrogate the question of memory, autonomy, and "the lived." The hinge between both these scenes of interruption, I suggest, is the lesson provided by the tribe's precarious world and language, which turns on seeming and appearing, but also "objection." From there, I connect this notion of "the lived" with what the narrator calls a "taste of the planet," a precarious sense of collective life that bears comparison

with other recent turns to the planetary. Finally, I turn to another interruption spurred by the memory of his departure, when their desperate gazes reveal the “hope” otherwise concealed by their acts. This will then allow us to better see how the reinterpretations of both the cannibal ritual and his role in reproducing it emerge from the narrative reflections, his “speculative anthropology.”

In the first example, the narrator’s own objections to the *comedia* have retroactive effects in the narrative that exceed his superior and cynical pose, opening up a less dogmatic opposition to the mass spectacle. These objections no longer focus on either the crowd’s lack of critical reactions or on his own disdain for their acceptance of the spectacle, but instead on the narrator’s experience of seeing both himself and the cast “repeat words from which the true was absent” (152). He is reminded of this feeling in moments when things become temporarily distant and a familiar word reels into “pure noise,” when both the absence of meaning and the inertness of things invade the subject and produce “a taste of unreality that the days, with their weight of drowsiness, thin, leaving us with only an aftertaste, a vague reminiscence or shadow of objection that slightly disturbs our commerce with the world [*nuestro comercio con el mundo*]” (153). The fading of this “taste of unreality” into an “aftertaste,” the momentary interruption of reality that slowly dissipates into only a slight disturbance of “our commerce with the world,” does not guarantee any determinate effects. This “taste of unreality” corresponds to what Alberto Giordano, in an often-cited essay on Saer, calls an “unreality effect,” the “unreal” or the “other of reality” that remains concealed by the very reality that it also constitutes (17). For the narrator, “we continue to flicker, in an imperceptible way, after the stoking [*encandilamiento*], and, absolving the world, we prefer to attribute the causes of this estrangement exclusively to us in order to avoid the delirium” (153). Confronting the delirium initiated by the “taste of

unreality” thus also means confronting the possibility that the world can vacillate: the world is potentially subject to alteration. The estranging experience of “unreality,” though, is not the only thing that remains hidden by appearance in *El entenado*. What the narrator calls a “shadow of objection” links to a more specific series of references that also disturb “our commerce with the world,” not only in the economic sense of an exchange, but also in the bodily connotations of *comercio* as food or sexual intercourse.

The recollection of this experience of irreality, in fact, immediately follows an extended reflection on the tribe’s language and relation to the world, both of which turn on uncertainty and “objection.” In *El entenado*, the Indians have almost the reverse of “our” experience with the world: if we prefer to think that the world does not vacillate, they lived with a world permanently in flux (153). Although his initial impression of the Colastiné’s world was its solidity, he comes to think that they constantly had to actualize the world to keep it from vanishing: “It was not the not being possible [*el no ser posible*] of the other world that terrorized them, but rather the not being possible of this one” (141). The fear of the this world “not being possible” [*el no ser posible*] can also be translated as its “possible not being.” We can, of course, read all these signs as self-referential allegories of this fictional literary world, like the imaginary planet of Tlön in Borges’ well-known story, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940). Although invented by a secret and conspiratorial group of Enlightenment intellectuals, the idealist cosmovision of Tlön—objects do not exist, only heterogeneous acts—gradually gains adherents and infiltrates reality until it has “disintegrated this world” (Borges “Tlön” 424). In his postscript, Borges compares this new totalizing system to Nazism, Anti-Semitism, and Dialectical Materialism. With good reason, the Enlightenment conspiracy that creates the mythical “Tlön” has been interpreted as a deconstructive critique of anthropology as the hegemonic discourse for twentieth century Latin

American writing and identity (Echevarría 161-5), but also a lesson about the inherent falsity of any object of Latin American representation (Moreiras 136-7). In *El entenado*, however, it is not so much that objects do not exist. Rather, since the principal attribute of all things was their “precariousness,” a tree, for example, always lacked “a little bit of reality” (144). Its existence depended on them, but their existence also depended on it, in a metaphysical, and not just utilitarian sense. If it disappears, so might they.

In this sense, the self-referentiality of the Colastiné world in *El entenado* does not exhaust the possibilities of interpreting Saer’s “speculative anthropology.” For the narrator, the world of the Colastiné paradoxically represents both the position of “the real” and a language that reflects the permanent uncertainty of appearance. If their world was “more real,” this did not mean it was the only possible world, or the best of possible worlds (145). Or, as he affirms, although they were not “totally true,” “the real was in them, or it was not in any part” (*lo real estaba en ellos o en ninguna parte*) [153]. This “real,” in turn, is inseparable from the problem of their language. The tribe did not have words for *ser* or *estar*, the two Spanish forms of “to be,” but only *parecer*, a word that means “to seem” but also a noun that means “opinion” and a person’s “appearance.” For the narrator, the verb, *parecer*, implied “more objection than comparison” and situated things in the “field of inexistence” (148). “Seeming” thus does not operate primarily as metaphor. Rather than something seeming *like* a tree, the phrase “it seems tree” refers to the precarious existence of the object. To the narrator, a world and language of objection also suggests “a precarious edifice” that would crumble if any rock were out of place (151).

While “objection” explicitly constitutes their language, it also manifests implicitly itself in the narrator’s memories of the tribe, when gestures or gazes that don’t fit the previous script of the cannibal theater interrupt the semblance of representation, disturbing his “commerce” with the

world of the Colastiné. One of the most striking and significant examples of this narrative interruption comes earlier in *El entenado*. It involves both the sexual connotations of “commerce” and a sense of bodily autonomy that emerges from within the tribe’s heteronomous submission to the yearly cannibal feast and orgies. Like the later memory of his final moments with the tribe, this sequence opens onto an extended reflection on the labor of writing. The scene is one of several when the representation of the Colastiné’s world suddenly dissolves into the scene of writing in the bare room. Formally, this sudden shift resembles the cinematographic technique of the dissolve: an abrupt fade-out of the past with the tribe and fade-into the present of writing. But Saer’s use of this technique diverges sharply from “classic” Hollywood narrative, where it served to facilitate the story’s seamless advancement by “soften[ing] the spatial, graphic, and even temporal discontinuities” (Bordwell 47). Instead, Saer’s sharpening of these same discontinuities owes much more to the techniques of an avant-garde film tradition that extends back to the silent era.²¹⁹ In a departure from the more emblematic accounts of incest, the narrator recounts an episode of a woman engaged in an act of “Onanism” when a fully aroused man approaches her. Even after the man latches onto her, the woman remains transfixed on herself in an ecstatic state of self-play, drooling spittle and mucus. Then, in act of bodily objection, she repels him, deflating his pretensions and leaving him to wander back into the forest. The objection affects the narrator as well, causing him to reflect on her “uncertain” presence in his past and present thoughts alike. This uncertainty interrupts the graphic scene among the tribe with the dissolve into the scene of writing:

She had appeared, brusque and obscene, in front of my eyes, and having performed her unusual gestures in the transparency of day, she had disappeared disdainfully into the crowd. She seemed no less shadowy two or three minutes after her disappearance than now, sixty years later, as by the light of a candle, the fragile hand of an old man struggles to materialize with his quill the images that memory, autonomous, sends him, who knows how, whence, or why [*la mano frágil de un viejo, a la luz de una vela, se empeña en*

materializar, con la punta de la pluma, las imágenes que le manda, no se sabe cómo, ni de dónde, ni porqué, autónoma, la memoria]. (69)

Although the dissolve marks the discontinuity between the two scenes, what connects past and present, the “thick jungle of the real” and the space of the bare room, is the woman’s bodily desire and objection—what we might call her bodily autonomy. The scene of masturbatory play performs what the narrator calls the “ineffable excitation” (*excitación inenarrable*) awakened by the orgiastic cannibal ritual (54). Spurred by the woman’s objection, though, the sudden shift plays on the connotation of the desire as an “unnarratable excitation,” disturbing the narrator’s (and the reader’s) commerce with this world. At the level of the narrative, the interruption thus also dissolves the cannibalist ritual, impeding the myth from engendering the more dogmatic assertions about it, including the narrator’s earlier claim about the co-presence of desire and guilt in the act of eating human flesh.

At the level of the sentence, the multiple negative clauses slow down the rhythm of the prose to isolate the gesture of writing and the peculiar autonomy of this “involuntary memory,” to use the Proustian term it invokes. The hand determined to materialize these images on the page does not follow the autonomous will or choice of a transcendental subject. It instead appears to follow an *autonomous memory* or an *autonomously sent memory*: “the fragile hand of an old man struggles to materialize with his quill the images that memory, autonomous, sends him, who knows how, whence, or why [*la mano frágil de un viejo, a la luz de una vela, se empeña en materializar, con la punta de la pluma, las imágenes que le manda, no se sabe cómo, ni de dónde, ni porqué, autónoma, la memoria*].” The poetic syntax troubles affixing *autónoma* definitively as either an adjective of the subject (“memory”) or an adverb of the action (“sends”). In an acute gloss on Saer’s poetics, Maria Teresa Gramuglio has stressed how predicate forms “detain and at the same time expand the flow of the phrase, spilling the connotation of the

adjective over the subject and action” (“Filosofía” 36 n.3). If we read *autónoma* as an adjective, it imparts connotations of autonomy not only onto the grammatical subject “memory” and its action of “sending” in the secondary clause, but also onto “the fragile hand of an old man” that “struggles to materialize” images and, ultimately, onto the “unusual gestures” that accompany the appearance/disappearance of the anonymous woman. At the same time, *autónoma* can also be read as an adverb that imparts the action of “autonomously sending” onto the other subjects and actions of the sentence: memory, the hand of an old man that writes, the unusual gestures of the woman’s appearance-disappearance. As an adverb, *autónoma* contrasts with what Saer, citing Quevedo, calls *adverbios en mente*: adverbs ending in “-ly,” but literally “adverbs in mind” or adverbs already at hand, a play on words that makes adverbs without “-ly” (-*mente*) appear as an effect of the unconscious, blurring the boundaries between the willed and unwilled, the voluntary and the involuntary.²²⁰ In this way, the autonomy of the sending mimes the autonomy of the woman’s gestures; or vice versa, the autonomous gestures of the woman mime the autonomous memory. The result of this indeterminate mimesis, however, is both an affinity and difference between the two subjects and actions.

In this dissolve into the scene of writing, the narrator proposes “the lived” as a possible experience transferred through these imaginary bodies. The narrator here turns to reflect literally and metaphorically on the “white walls” and “the light of the candle that makes, each time it flickers, my shadow tremble on the wall” (69). It is helpful here, I want to suggest, to return to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a white wall/black hole system (re-inflected, as I have suggested in previous chapters, by Fanon’s analysis of colonialism and race). In *El entenado*, the shadows on the “white wall” (of the “white house” in the “white city”) provide a figure for the narrator’s subjectivation among the tribe, the result of his “birth.” As he affirms later, “I was

soft clay when I touched these coasts of delirium, and immutable rock when I left them” (145). We should read this material metaphor of his subjective formation, though, with his claim elsewhere that although a “decisive period” in his life was a “pure illusion,” it was nonetheless “a little thicker than the rest” (102). The material and immaterial metaphors come together in the figure of “the lived” that appears on the white wall after the scene analyzed above: “against this thick wall [*muro espeso*], what comes to crash, if it is not a quick and fragile daydream after dinner, is the lived [*lo vivido*]” (69). Referring to the scene of “Onanism” analyzed above, the narrator asserts that what memory sends may “succeed in cracking this thickness” and produce the sensation of being “between two worlds.” Just as the ink dries like “slag” (*escoria*) on the page, though, “the thick persistence of the present recomposes itself and again becomes mute and smooth, as if no image come from other places had crossed it” (70). The mute page of writing, in other words, does not guarantee a sense of “the lived” as anterior or posterior to the present of writing. On the one hand, the scene of writing calls attention to the construction of the narrative representation (the images that combine and thin the wall between the two worlds; a sense of “the lived” perhaps indistinguishable from a “daydream”). On the other, it also stresses the possibility of imparting this sensation of “the lived” and cracking the thick white wall of writing.

In this way, “the lived” both invokes and problematizes the monadic *self* of a self-referential gesture of the fiction. For, as the narrator later asserts, his “life” among the tribe also turns on what he calls a “taste of the planet,” a specifically planetary sense of aesthetic experience that implicitly returns in the closing pages of the novel. This experience of “life,” the narrator affirms, is inseparable from the tribe’s precarious language of “seeming” and “opinion” (*parecer*): “This life left me—and the language the Indians spoke was not alien to this sensation—a taste of the planet [*sabor a planeta*], of the human herd, of the unfinished rather

than infinite world, of confused and undifferentiated life, of blind material without plan, of mute firmament: as others say, of ash” (103). Defining this unfolding sensation as a “taste” (*sabor*) calls attention to its aesthetic dimension. In this sense, it differs, on the one hand, from the “planetary vanguard” that Retamar identified with Caliban, post-Revolutionary Cuba, and the hope invested in the spread of socialism; and, on the other, from the “planetary feeling” that Julio Cortázar, Saer’s fellow Argentinean in Paris exile, proposed as an ethical relation to political developments outside of Europe. Although Cortázar opposes his “European” perspective to the more limited scope of a “labor of ‘the zone’,” both of these appeals to the planetary operate through “totalities and syntheses.”²²¹ In this sense, *El entenado* appears closer to Gayatri Spivak’s ethical-aesthetic call for “planetarity,” an approach to the alterity of the planet that “imagines from precapitalist cultures” and the subaltern remainders of dominant political totalities and syntheses.²²² Saer’s “taste of the planet” figures a similarly ambiguous form of alterity and alteration—an experience that evokes both an unshepherded human collective and a scorched planetary desert. Somewhat different here as well from the unshepherded collective of inhuman life envisioned in the desert of Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.*, the desert in *El entenado* also continues to threaten the possibility of even imagining an alter-world.

At the same time, the metamorphosis that the object of this “taste” undergoes—planet, human herd, unfinished world, confused and undifferentiated life, blind material, mute firmament, ash—halts before confirming the “total desert,” and thus also in this associative network of references in *El entenado*, “the known.” The endpoint of this metamorphosis is only a taste of ash *for others*. Padre Quesada’s two classes of suffering again provide a useful heuristic this taste of collective life. The metamorphosis of taste does not conform exactly to the “ignored suffering,” in which any kind of presence is nullified and the whole world appears a “scorched and deserted

place” (111). The terminus here remains the experience of others. The metamorphosis instead continues to present something of the known suffering in which the “taste” of a “better life” still lingering in his memory is “concealed” or “whisked away” (*escamoteada*). The narrator’s “taste of the planet” evokes a “life” at the limit of its disappearance and annihilation, an ambiguity encompassed by the different meanings of “mute firmament”: a mute “vault of heaven,” but also a kind of mute “support” or “foundation.” This mute sky presents a version of what Benjamin identified as the “shinelessness” in Baudelaire’s poetry, the virtual absence of stars: for Benjamin, this condition was linked to the impossibility of the modern urban dweller experiencing the sublime, in Kant’s sense, as a correspondence between inner moral law and the starry sky; in Baudelaire, it corresponded more generally to an aesthetic that made the possibility of lyric poetry problematic and carried out the disintegration of aura, rendering unlikely the ability of the object to return the gaze.²²³ *El entenado*, though, represents this predicament less as a technologically determined stage than as a contingent disaster within an unfinished world that has no definite *telos*.

The narrator’s lingering taste of this “life” has as its correlate the association of the tribe’s rituals and their precarious world with a labor of “hope.” Although this association appears in one of the first descriptions of the cannibal ritual, it acquires a heightened intensity only towards the end when a memory of their gaze interrupts the narration, provoking another dissolve into the present of writing. For the narrator, the tribe circled around the cooking flesh demonstrated “the obstinate concentration of desire that, as I would learn later, envelops the object so they can abandon themselves more easily to the adoration of themselves, to their impossible constructions that, in their animal delirium, resemble hope” (50). This narcissistic desire, identified here with both their “impossible constructions” and “hope,” appears shortly afterwards as the “uneffable”

or “unnarratable excitement” accompanying a proliferation of nervous “gestures” (54, 55). These gestures present a less voluntary version of the gestures and poses constantly directed at the narrator, from his arrival to his unexpected departure when Europeans return and he is sent back down the river. When he turns to narrate his sudden departure from the tribe, he reads their gazes as containing the “last hope,” part of this “ineffable” or “unnarratable presence” (*presencia inenarrable*) betrayed by their eyes (105). This scene of memory suggests something more specific than the hidden irreality constitutive of reality, absolute otherness, or pure presentation.²²⁴ In this memory, a desperate hope appears as something congealed in, and concealed by, their “exaggerated poses.” But these poses were now belied by “their imploring and defeated eyes”: “These gazes, in which the last hope that was left to them seemed to accumulate, are the strongest image that they left me with and also the ultimate proof of the persistence of that which, with their such unnatural attitudes, they tried to defeat or dissimulate” (105). This perception of accumulated hope and finality cannot, of course, be separated from the annihilation of the tribe that immediately followed. The moment of the gaze being returned, though, reveals something otherwise concealed. For the narrator,

These are the gazes that demonstrate that compassion is justified but useless, these that dismantle, with their discreet terror, the luxury of appearance. In spite of their extinguished brilliance, clouded by what obsesses them, they are nevertheless, or because of it perhaps, meridian [*Pese a su brillo apagado, empañadas por lo que las obsede, son sin embargo, o a causa de ello talvez, meridianas*]. (105-6)

The same gazes that undo an elevated sense of aesthetic appearance and the overvalorization of compassion nonetheless also “help sustain the pen in the clear night” (105). Like the memory of the defiant woman masturbating (a figure of and for autonomy), the gesture of writing here remains linked to the congealed labor of the cannibal collective and ritual, a labor that the narrator interprets as “hope.” It is thus no accident that the narrator refers to the “meridian”

origins of the gazes as an unaccounted for “sense” in “the price of this world,” which helps make visible this congealed labor of hope.²²⁵ The “meridian” gazes, then, open up several interpretations that disturb any clear attribution of their origins: “meridian” as noonday, Southern, a line from North to South, and even residency in the South of France. Consequently, this “hope” cannot simply be translated as the precarious labor of the South. For it also opens up the perception of the desperate gaze as a transatlantic predicament, one that evokes both Saer’s French residency and a North-South intellectual investment in reading the “savage” or “primitive” of the New World under the sign of “hope” or “collapse.”

The Part of “The Real”: Collective Collapse or Eclipse?

In this way, *El entenado* troubles both the triumphant investment in cannibalism, which profits from its representation, and its critical liquidation or demythification, which reduces its representation to falsity or complicity with exploitation. The predicament provokes the narrator to reinterpret the hope invested in both the cannibal ritual and his own role in representing them. The narrator’s reinterpretation of the ritual turns on the tribe’s self-presentation as the “true men” at the center of the world. Their apparent plenitude, he thinks, must have emerged when they ceased to eat each other. This myth neither conforms to Freud’s Oedipal script of the primal father nor incorporates the cannibal collective as a new truth (society against the State or the war machine exterior to it; the barbarous reality of communism as State practice and idea; the restaging of world literature from Latin America). As he approaches his own return to “nothingness” or the “void” from which he came, the narrator begins to speculate that the tribe too “had experienced the weight of the void” before they began to eat the “untrue men” from the exterior; it was only when they stopped eating each other that they began to think of themselves

as the “true men,” located in the “center of the world, encompassed by the circular horizon” (157). The narrator attributes the “anxiety” discernible in their periodic repetition and forgetting of the cannibal ritual to an “archaic aftertaste [*regusto arcaico*] that their desire had, despite having changed its object” (158). Rather than their “desire to devour the inexistent,” it was the desire to eat each other that sent them out to the exterior horizon, the desire to reencounter this “ancient flavor” (*sabor antiguo*). In this way, he concludes, they themselves were the cause and the object of their ritual expeditions to the “uncertain horizon”: the devoration of those “untrue men” from the exterior was the sublimated form of an earlier time when they ate each other; and, only when they ate the exterior others did they become “true.”

This reconstruction of their becoming “true” adds another twist to the narrator’s affirmation, cited previously, that they may not have been “true,” but “the real was in them, or it was not in any part” (46). Rather than a dichotomy between truth and falsity, reality and fiction, the cannibal collective harbors the “real”—a part that constructs an alternate, seemingly autonomous, “center” based on their incorporation as the “true men,” those who do not devour each other, but only the “untrue men” from the outside. A “passion for the real,” Alain Badiou has argued, traversed twentieth century thought and practice, providing a source of “both horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously lethal and creative” (*The Century* 32). For Badiou, this passion centered on the making of a “new man” beyond good and evil, but it essentially took two principal forms: the restitution of an old corrupted “man,” exemplified by the return to authentic origins (associated with fascism); and the creation of something outside of historical antagonisms, exemplified by a man beyond classes and the state (associated with communism) [*The Century* 64-5]. Saer’s Colastiné, but perhaps also the cannibal collective more generally, does not fit squarely within either of these variants. Although the cannibal collective in *El*

entendido is readable as an embodiment of the perpetual dissatisfaction of desire, and thus of “humanity” (Montaldo “Una exploración” 759), it was also a figure implicated in a left aesthetic and political imaginary, as I’ve argued above. Located in Latin America, but traversing the North-South divide as trope and myth, Saer’s cannibal collective embodies a part of the real without a single corresponding whole.

For this reason, the narrator’s increasing rumination over his own contradictory role in representing and reproducing this other takes on greater significance, not least because it frustrates any unitary meaning or moral lesson. This rumination accordingly returns to the inscription of the narrator as “*def-ghi*.” Unlike the staged representation of his story, his narration allows the “contradictory and disparate meanings” of the word “*def-ghi*” to emerge (162), significantly complicating his role as the undigested European among the tribe. Like the many ways he conceives his role (prisoner, guest, witness, survivor, scout, spy, messenger), this apparent inscription of orality is both polysemic and highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the multiple meanings of the word include various senses of mimicry alongside the idea of a representative role for the narrator: someone absent or sleeping; those whom overstay their welcome; the domesticated parrot that repeats their words and makes them laugh; an object or a piece of food that stands in for someone absent at a gathering; the reflection of things in the water; the child who exaggeratedly performs for the other children, interpreting another person; someone who scouted or spied on the enemy; someone who spoke loudly as if only speaking to himself (162).

On the other hand, immediately after this list, the narrator then disavows the more contradictory meanings—including those that make the narrator’s role as *def-ghi* an object of humor and derision—to secure his role as a proxy for, and as a performer of, the collective other.

Although he thinks that they wanted him to share “some essence of solidarity” with all the meanings of *def-ghi*, he constructs a more unitary and affirmative definition of his solidarity: “they hoped that I would duplicate, like the water, the image that they gave of themselves, that I would repeat their gestures and words, that I would represent them in their absence and be able, when I return to my fellow man [*semejantes*], to act as a spy or a scout [*espía o adelantado*] who, having been witness of something that the rest of the tribe had not yet seen, could retrace my steps in order to recount the details to everyone” (162-3). It is a further irony that he subjectively projects himself in the role of “spy or scout” for the tribe, since he, of course, comes closer to performing this role for the European “enemy.”

The other interpretation of his role—that of “narrator”—attempts to take into account their annihilation. After the massacre, the final collapse of their precarious world would call forth “a witness or survivor” who served as their “narrator” (163). They were dependent on their “disdainful guest” for a recognizable image of them to be recollected and reproduced after they had been “erased.” This is a stance the narrator had earlier analyzed in his double: a “prisoner” from another tribe who knew his role and adopted an air of superiority and disdain, dissimulating whether he would consider the “petitions” (*pedidos*) or “entreaties of the plebs” in any of his future decisions (97). Towards the end, then, the narrator provides an implicit response to the earlier question whether “this excessive conduct was a trace of character or a style of interpretation” (98). In the narrator’s final iteration, the “witnesses” of the tribe would take their “signs of life” to the “enemy horizon” and become, as the “last embers of the incandescence that consumed [the tribe],” “messengers of this collapse [*hundimiento*]” (164). For some of Saer’s critics, this message of “collapse” remains the most important lesson not only in *El entenado*, but also for reading his fiction in general.²²⁶ The image of this “collapse” or “sinking” in *El*

entendido is just that—an image or rumor, a point we are reminded of when the narrator stresses how the pen point scratching on the surface of the paper leaves “no more than the trace of this murmur [*rumor*] that comes to me, from I don’t know where, through the years of silence and disregard.” That the narrator mentions the smell of “lime and honeysuckle” coming from the open window alludes to both the erasure of alterity from the white walls (*cal* means both lime and whitewash) and the nonidentity of the natural world (the honeysuckle), just as *rumor* evokes both the “murmur” of the printing press in the adjacent room and the uncertain “rumor” that serves as the novel’s pretext.

Although the final three memories do not directly contradict this “collapse” or “sinking,” they do present both a loosening of its logic and a slight difference that subtracts from its finality. The key image of this difference is the “eclipse,” a word that designates both the disappearance of something as well as a cyclically recurring event. The memories turn on the games played by the children, the death of an individual during the ritual, and the lunar eclipse experienced by the collective tribe. The memory of the games closely corresponds to a previous account early in the narrative: the children would line up on after the other with hands on each other’s shoulders, form a line, then fall to the ground “as if dead or asleep” (45), before the first person would run to the back of the line and begin again; at times, the line would form a circle, but unlike the inward-directed circle of desire around the fire, the circle would gyrate into a spiral. Some of the most perceptive critics of Saer, such as Gramuglio and Stern, have pointed to the importance of these kinds of games as a cipher for writing or fiction in Saer’s narrative texts. Stern has described how Saer’s narration “inscribes itself in a circular and progressive movement that, in a momentary shift, drifts from the legality of the spiral, abruptly circling around its originary axis to reflect on it through the rewriting” (“Juan José Saer” 17). The slight difference in this

memory, though, is that the narrator has omitted one of the meanings of *def-ghi*, since the making and remaking of these figures also included a moment when one of the children would break away from the group and parody some character in exaggerated gestures, provoking the laughter of others. What the memory drifts from or subtracts is the role of representing someone or something else. If the game seems to both enact the tribe's collapse and question its definitiveness, mocking the pathos of the *def-ghi* role in the process, the memory loosens the logic and ontology of collapse. The figure is reduced to geometric lines in the narrator's memory that generate "some obscure sign of the world," before it becomes embodied again when the children break it into discontinuous points. Some of them now drop—now as if only "sleeping" (168)—before the line gyrated into a spiral again. Without abandoning the narrative of collapse, the memory presents a slight difference from its finality.

A similar loosening of determination occurs in the second memory of an Indian who the narrator remembers precisely because he did not conform to the stereotypical gestures and poses of the tribe. The memory begins by recounting the man's death during the cannibal ritual when, after a ferocious act of devouring that seemed to demonstrate the unsuccessful attempt to eat the "whole world" (173) the flesh contained, the man remained immobile for hours before succumbing to the darkness of the night. This ferocious devoration, however, also contrasted with the man's "slight difference" from the others: he neither bothered to direct "sweet habitual smiles" at the narrator, nor attempted to create a "lasting impression" in the narrator's memory through easily reproducible images. Reflecting on the man's "almost imperceptible indolence," the narrator questions whether either the "impossibility" of the things, language, and flesh of the tribe were not so absolute as it seemed, or if the man simply "reserved the freedom to challenge the rigid laws of the world and to live a different life." Even the man's immobility is

reinterpreted—as if resonating with the narrator’s own distance from the ritual—not as an attempt to remain at the margin of the chaos but “an absurd challenge, a form of delirium and excess” (178). Like the “objection” of the woman registered in the memory earlier, the memory of immobility effectively blurs the boundaries between the autonomy or “freedom” to challenge the otherwise rigid laws of this mythic world and the faint emergence of possibilities within the “impossibility” that defines the precarious inexistence of the tribe.

In the last memory, the finality of the collapse is restaged as the event of a lunar eclipse. The scene forms a constellation with several earlier moments in the narrative text. The memory begins with the recollection that the brightness of the moon had erased the stars but cast a light on the Colastiné, whose bodies “seemed to emit a firm and cold fire” (184). In this way, the memory restages the scenes on the opening page: the narrator and the tribe on the beach at day, under the sun and immense blue sky, “like ants in the desert”; and the narrator reaching for the moon at night, with a sparkling constellation of stars that made the sky seem as if it was “the wall of an active volcano” (11). The memory of the eclipse places them all under the moon, the part of “this place” that played a mediating role between the remote and the familiar, between the obscurity of the “unfinished” whole, and all of “us”; unlike the “disdainful sun,” it seemed to support the promise of a “less blind annihilation” (185). In this way, the eclipse also replays what the narrator called a “taste of the planet, the human herd, an unfinished rather than infinite world, an undifferentiated and confused life, blind material without plan, a mute firmament: what other says, of ash” (103). On the one hand, the scene detranscendentalizes the starry sublime of the opening pages and replaces it with a more immanent, terrestrial constellation of bodies illuminated by the moon, returning us to an image of both the “human herd” and an “unfinished world.” But the “life” that it represents moves towards a “less blind annihilation” and a more

transitory experience of a “mute firmament.” For the narrator, the memory of the moonlight’s intense “clarity” just before the sudden darkness of the eclipse came to give everything an “additional strangeness,” provoking the confused feeling: “that maybe we were not where we thought nor were we how we thought we were and that this unusual light was going to show us, with its unknown shine, our true condition” (186). However, the moment of anticipated illumination cedes to the common experience of the eclipse and its “clarity” only takes on meaning in contrast to the ensuing darkness. The strangeness takes place at this limit. It reintroduces the possibility of alteration without a determinate plan.

The darkness that ensues, though, also provides a dissonant counterpoint to the earlier conceit voiced by the Spanish mariners after the massacre of the tribe. With a trail of dead bodies emerging from the mouth of the river into the “sweet sea”—clearly another “taste of the planet” as I’ve discussed it here—the mariners proudly hailed the ship’s return to “our fatherland” (*nuestra patria*). In the memory of the eclipse, the narrator denominates its complete darkness “the true colors of our fatherland [*patria*]” (188). The last lines of the novel then repeat the earlier scene of planetary anthropoemia that not only expelled the bodies from the land but also deposited him in the barely lit room. Here, taste and sight now cede to a stream of sound: “the noise of oceans, cities, human pulsations, whose current, like an archaic river that had swept away the debris of the visible, left me in a white room, in the light of the almost consumed candles, murmuring about a casual encounter between, and, to be sure, also with the stars” (189). The indeterminate place of this precarious constellation—“between, and to be sure [*a ciencia cierta*], also with the stars”—emerges out of the mute firmament, between the profane immanence of the collective on the shores of the river and the transcendental sublime of the starry sky. It gives this image, to be sure, no more assurance than the narrator’s murmuring of

the tale. The narrator's place "between" but also "with" this constellated collective only briefly flashes up again at the end in the restaging of a total darkness, a return to the void. However, if the eclipse repeats their "collapse" or "sinking," it also alters the image of finality and certitude associated with this defeat. As a result, *El entenado* offers both a somber reflection on a Latin Americanist investment in the cannibalist trope, and a certain solidarity with the precarious collectivity that it figures—as "the real" part not just of a regional imaginary, but of a world at large. By refusing to turn the cannibal ritual and collective into either a heresy of existing dogmas or a new dogma itself, Saer's narrative text holds onto something of this myth and its hopes through the staging of its disappearance.

Chapter 4

Incorporative Violence and a Right to Leisure: Myth, Awakening, and Alteration in the World of

El río sin orillas

“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”—this is the famous line from Joyce’s *Ulysses* that Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* (1980) inverted in the context of the last Argentine dictatorship.²²⁷ For Piglia’s amateur historian Marcelo Maggi, history provides a refuge from the nightmare of the present, but only a precarious one, for it does not save him from likely becoming one of the “disappeared.” Intervening at a conference of Argentine writers in the mid 1990s on history and politics in Argentine fiction, Saer returned to Stephen Dedalus’ original utterance to illustrate his more general claim about fiction and the “value of myth”: fiction’s proximity to myth more than history, or its path of exit from history towards myth (“El valor” 78). Even if Saer does not mention Piglia’s earlier inversion, his proposed reading of this desire to “awake” closely corresponds to the final section of *El río sin orillas* (1991), the writer’s “imaginary treatise” on the region of the Río de la Plata, where the possibility of awakening takes place in a distinctly post-dictatorship present, as an exiting from the recent nightmare. If Stephen’s utterance could be read, Saer suggests, as a desire to simply forget history or to forget a history full of violence, injustice, and mistakes in order to move towards “contemporary history,” a “more radical reading” suggested the desire for a “profound contemplation of reality as a whole” (“El valor de mito” 77). This contemplation is spurred by the experience—an “epiphany” in Joyce’s lexicon—of forming a whole with “I and the universe” or, as it is formulated in *El río sin orillas*, the sensation of “forming a single body with the world” (208).

Within Saer’s larger corpus of narrative texts, however, *El río sin orillas* would certainly appear to fall to other side of his polemical thesis—closer to history and non-fiction. In the

introduction, Saer clarifies that *El río sin orillas* is the result of an editor's inquest to write about the region at the center of his fiction. The focus, as Saer notes, brings it closer to "non-fiction" and this may partly explain why, in comparison to his other work, *El río sin orillas* has received relatively little critical attention, even among specialist studies that appeal to its more concrete historical references but seldom treat it as a narrative text in its own right.²²⁸ At the same time, while Saer affirms the absence of what calls "voluntary fiction," he also distances himself from the pretensions of "non-fictional" genres that treat narration as "the vehicle of the most unequivocal reality and the most scrupulous truth," seldom interrupting the flow of immediate experience to interrogate the concepts of "truth" and "reality" (17). Instead, the writer categorizes his "imaginary treatise" as a "hybrid without defined genre," part of what he interprets as a constant tradition in Argentine literature, retrospectively initiated by "unclassifiable" texts like Sarmiento's *Facundo* and José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*.²²⁹

El río sin orillas, Saer asserts in the introduction, combines elements of autobiography, reportage, and academic study, without following an order proper to any of these genres. The four sections that follow the long introduction, each titled with a season, suggest both a mythic-cyclical and historical-progressive movement from the colonial past to the writer's present. "Summer," begins with the first the colonial encounters and ends in the extermination of Indians at the end of the nineteenth century, a period that coincided with the new "opacity" that mass migration introduced into the patriarchal system of the planes. "Autumn," focused on the an "intercrossing of primarily foreign texts that have forged images of the region," moves from the writing of travelers during the period of independence to the European intellectuals displaced by fascism and World War II. "Winter" then centers on a "tradition of violence" in the region that appears to culminate with the "dirty war" carried out by the last military dictatorship during the

Process of National Reorganization. “Spring” finally situates itself squarely in the postdictatorship present and the postindustrial landscape of Santa Fe, the regional “zone” of Saer’s youth and the center of his literary world. Saer’s reconsideration of the ends of literature becomes a part of his affirmative response to the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz and the last dictatorship. Similarly, the recounted experience on the edges of the river fulfills a version of the title: a sensation of the “river without banks” that reawakens the possibility of “happiness” after the nightmare of recent history.

The ambiguity of the subtitle “imaginary treatise,” though, also corresponds to a dual sense of myth in the narrative text: an *imaginary* treatise; and, a treatise *on* an imaginary that appears both regional and a part of the world. As Saer notes on the opening page, a specific “myth” drove the now yearly “ritual” return to the region from his Paris residence began in 1982, during the decline of military power: “the myth of reencountering the affects and places of infancy and youth” (12). This personal “myth” significantly begins just before *El entenado* was published. For, besides returning to the cannibal episode in the first section, *El río sin orillas* also replaces the myth of cannibalism with other mythological figures, adapting the episodes with Scylla and Charybdis from *The Odyssey* as part of the structure of the narrative text. Versions of these mythological figures already appear in the introduction when Saer narrates how his first trip to the river fails to generate an experience and set the text in motion. While this failure demonstrates the insufficiency of “direct experience” and emphasizes the “imaginary character” of what follows, as Dalmaroni and Merbilhaá rightly argue, the resulting narrative suggests something much different than a “capricious selection” of events (328). Both in the remaining introduction and the narrative as whole, Saer creates a series of allusions to the episodes from book twelve of *The Odyssey*, from the passage between Scylla and Charybdis to the loss of

Odysseus's ship and the punishment of his crew, when they are swallowed up by the ocean. In *El río sin orillas*, I argue, Saer adapts these episodes to figure a recurring mythical violence and oligarchic incorporation of the region. Within Saer's imaginary treatise, the subjects swallowed up by this incorporative violence are those relegated to the border of the human, from the black descendents of Africans ("Summer") and Indians in the "Conquest of the Desert" ("Autumn"), to those disappeared and exiled by the "machine of annihilation" during the last dictatorship ("Winter"). "Winter" both represents when the myths become dogma and performs a kind of heretical critique of the epic incorporation of the region as "Western and Christian civilization," to use a central ideologeme of the period.²³⁰ "Spring," however, dissolves the finality and determinations of the violence by restaging a return of the formerly suppressed elements, recomposing them in a new imaginary "body with the world."

Saer's adaptation of these episodes and mythological figures inscribes his imaginary treatise within a series of previous returns to *The Odyssey* in modern literature and theory. The use of this sequence of episodes charts a path between the singular allegorical reading of the Sirens episode in Adorno and Horkheimer or Kafka, and Joyce's adoption of the entire epic framework for *Ulysses*. But the adaptation of these mythological figures and this sequence also has a specific precursor in the Río de la Plata: Esteban Echeverría's short story, "El matadero," where race, the oligarchy, and dictatorship form part of what both Echeverría and Sarmiento refer to as an "intestinal" struggle between stomachs and consciences. Saer rewrites this struggle, I argue, as the recurring incorporative violence and a right to leisure. As I show, Saer's parodic adaptation of the episodes with Scylla and Charybdis alters the more rigid division of industrial labor and art allegorized in Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of the Sirens episode. It supplements this division with a pre- and post-industrial right to leisure that does not appear

solely the provenance of an exceptional art, disconnected from the world. The end of Saer's imaginary treatise stages a world in alteration—where sameness may emerge from otherness, or autonomy from heteronomy, and vice versa—that connects to *El entenado*, but can also be reconstellated, I will suggest, with the alter-world of Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.* Without ignoring the discontinuities, I argue that these continuities present an alternative to mapping literature more directly onto either economic or political narratives of an “epochal” shift at the end of the last century.

In what follows, I return first to the spiral of myth that Saer introduces as a kind of heuristic device for reading the dual sense of myth in the imaginary treatise. Second, I examine the first two approaches to the river and the introduction of the mythological figures that both accompany the failure of the first trip and ironically structure the second. After laying out Saer's initial adaptation of the episodes with Scylla and Charybdis, I turn to analyze Adorno and Horkheimer's allegorical interpretation of the Sirens episode and Echeverría's earlier story. Focusing on how Saer adapts, extends and modifies this series, I then return to the four season-sections and examine each one more closely. In each of these sections, I show how on a macro-level the imaginary treatise turns the historical reference towards these mythological figures and allusions. But I also demonstrate on a micro-level how Saer's personal myth both converges with and diverges from this larger narrative, confirming its logic at times and interrogating its premises, concepts, and appearances at others.

Recuperating Myth and the Traces of History: On the Banks of the River

In introducing his ritual flights from Paris back to Buenos Aires and his province of Santa Fe, Saer provides a spiral of “myth” that not only plays out in the first micro-level series of narrative memories. It also provides, I argue, a useful heuristic for interrogating the macro-level account of the mythological figures and sequence of episodes. Saer caustically depicts his own flight home on commercial airlines as taking part in a commodified “culture of leisure” defined by its “petit-bourgeois rules of modern taste” and support for a “system that preserves individual initiative,” both of which contribute to the “obsessive rigidity of ritual” that this “habit” of return has taken on (11). In a seemingly throwaway comment, Saer asserts, “[i]t is known that myth engenders repetition and that repetition engenders habit, and that habit engenders ritual and that ritual engenders dogma; and that dogma, finally, heresy” (12). In the ironic anecdote that follows, though, this spiral appears to play out. Recounting the flight from Paris to Buenos Aires via Rio de Janeiro, he mentions the excessive “enthusiasm” of “these colorful Brazilian” passengers who applaud the pilot upon landing in Rio and the “more skeptical and apprehensive Argentineans,” who look at each with “dissimulated worry,” wondering if the pilots will react like celebrated artists and take a bow (12-13).

This scene of “modernity and obscurantism” (13) ironically restages the tension between a mass cultural public and an intellectual poetics of negativity in *El entenado*, giving it an interregional cast. As we saw in the previous chapter, after the *comedia* about his life among the cannibal tribe becomes an international success on the stages of Europe, the narrator attempts to undermine the play from within. But the principal result is that his ironic grimace hardens into a cynical pose as his disdain for the audience’s unreflective consumption of the spectacle reduces them to “phantasms.” In this opening scene of *El río sin orillas*, the cheering Brazilian

passengers take on the role of accommodating to this “culture of leisure,” as if they represented the “dogma” engendered by the ritual flights and the Argentine skepticism about this spectacle its “heresy.” As with the cannibal *comedia* in *El entonado*, though, the scene also stages a predictable opposition of poses that risks turning modernist negation into a dogmatic response to mass culture.

What interrupts this rigidity, however, is a memory that recomposes the elements of the previous scene into a less antagonistic relation between “mass” and “high” culture. Saer recalls a return flight a decade before when, drifting off with the sound of the engines and the familiar intonations of conversation, he also remembers an unfruitful attempt to compose a poem using the title from a Mendelssohn composition, *Calma y viaje dichoso* (*Calm and Prosperous Voyage*). The title of the unsuccessful poem invokes the two reactions in the previous scene, and it sets off a chain of associations. He imagines the muffled conversations as the sound of adult voices that child hear from bed and compares the sensation to Freud’s “wolfing hour, in which the unconscious, letting down its vigilance of repression, flowers [*aflora*] and dismantles our reserve, the hour of unexpected associations, occult emotions, and the archaic” (13). In this moment, Saer is transported from the airplane to the open planes of Serodino where he lived as a child, giving him for several minutes the “impression of unity, intemporality, and persistence” (14). This unconscious dismantling of the previous opposition and the impression it produces demonstrates how “the ritual, worn out by habit, recuperated the inextinguishable myth” (14). Instead of the engendering of dogma, the ritual also allows the possibility of a return to the original “myth.” To use Mirta Stern’s useful formula, the recuperation of the personal “myth” through the ritual drifts from the “legality of the spiral,” retroactively disrupting the engendering

of “dogma” or, alternatively, freeing “heresy” from its determination and judgment by the dogma of law.

Saer’s initial trip and approach to the river then stages a more direct return to Saer’s personal myth of “reencountering the places and affects of infancy and youth.” This approach to the river does more than register the failure of “direct experience.” It also sets up the sequence of episodes involving Scylla and Charybdis. The initial failure demonstrates how some of the categories often associated with Saer’s work—a “literature without attributes” devoid of “local color,” notions implicit in the title phrase “the river without banks”—are problems first and foremost. To categorically affirm them as a negation of all particularity, as a universal by subtraction, annexes literature to philosophy, whereas the concern here takes as its point of departure what Saer calls the “narration-object”: a “singular organization of particular attributes,” irreducible to the universals of discourse.²³¹ As Saer states in the introduction, the initial trip to the river was intended to fulfill the “tabula rasa of beginnings” (32) or the “necessity of an original nothingness” (31). The direct experience of the river, Saer asserts with some hyperbole, was meant to “convoke” all of the requisite narrative materials into an order that would also present its meaning (32). But despite the desire for “some sign or call, a first inscription,” when he finally reaches the banks the river “remained mute and closed and refractory to any evocation.” This failure of direct experience, though, also contains a kind of didactic lesson as traces of history and regional violence appear on the otherwise natural landscape.

Saer’s initial approach to the river displaces the vertical view from the airplane, the narrative “vehicle” in the first pages of the introduction, with the more horizontal view from the taxi. Despite the shift in perspective, however, the “great immobile, colorless, and empty plane” of the

river differs in only one significant way from what appeared from the airplane as an “immense flat extension of the same bluish green, immobile, immemorial, and empty”: the “immemorial” extension has been displaced by the “colorless” plane (28, 15). Yet when the taxi nears the river and the driver turns the radio off, the synecdochal totalization Saer desires from its smooth planar surface seems to assume an immemorial nature:

despite how fast we were moving, [the water] did not change its appearance, as if it did not have the least accident on its unique and uniform surface, such that, having perceived one of its parts, the totality might have been able to give itself as perceived—similar to the essence of the universe that, if we could unravel a piece [*desentrañar una parcela*], however tiny it was, we could consider the whole as unveiled” (28).

In this unfolding of conditional clauses, the initial desire for a totality perceived from one of its parts resembles what Adorno and Horkheimer associated with the artwork’s “aura”: “the appearance of the whole in the particular” and an “expression of totality” that “lays claim to the dignity of the absolute.”²³² This desired perception or percept of totality, I want to suggest, carries with it an implicit trace of violence in the action of “unraveling”: *desentrañar* also signifies “disemboweling,” and this connotation will become increasingly more explicit later. Here, after the brief disappearance of the grammatical “we” who would perceive the “totality,” the enunciation of a collective “we” again in the final clause—the “we” who would unravel this “piece” or “plot” (*parcela*) into an “unveiled” whole—is much closer to a Heideggerean approach to the awesome appearing of truth.²³³ In fact, it virtually echoes the formulation that Saer critiques in the first several pages of *El río sin orillas*, Heidegger’s provincialist claims about the philosopher’s own “plot of the planet” (*parcela de la planeta*): German language as the “natural home” of philosophy after Greek and “German soil” as the “indispensable birthplace” of poets and philosophers (15). The various meanings of *parcela* as a part inscribe the river’s

surface with the territorialities of home, knowledge, and power (in addition to a “piece” or “plot” of land, *parcela* can also refer to a field of knowledge, or area of influence or power).

When Saer arrives at the riverbanks adjacent to the airport, the reappearance of history and the arbitrary nature of the myths disturb the previous view of the place as unchanging and immemorial. Under the “ritual curve” of the flights, the museum of old airplanes provides a “historico-temporal nexus” of the area (28). “In a certain sense,” Saer suggests, “this place connects historical time in Argentina, since the river that was the stage [*escenario*], the object of disputes, the symbol, and the epicenter or origin of its past, sees its development prolonged into the technological era.” If this “historical time” is absent from the initial approach, Saer’s use of arbitrary symbols reveals a more contradictory scenario. Using the images evoked by maps to introduce the mythological figures, Saer asserts that the image of the river as a “penis... penetrating into the interior” and its inversion as a “scorpion’s tail” are contradictory “only in appearance”: various mythologies from different regions suggest that “to penetrate the belly [*penetrar el vientre*] of Terra Mater is to descend, alive, into the depths of hell”; because the terrestrial god appears in diverse myths as a “crab-woman,” many “initiatory rites consist in symbolically confronting [the pincers], conceding to being ground up by them in order to accede to a new birth.” When read with the image of the crab-woman, the ambiguous phrase *penetrar el vientre* can signify “penetrate the womb,” where the ritual of being ground up also suggests a symbolic castration; or, “penetrate the belly,” where the ritual suggests bodies ground up, orally ingested, and expelled from the digestive system. These two readings are not mutually exclusive and the act of “disemboweling” the womb of the maternal body marks the violent serial murders in Saer’s *La pesquisa* (*The Investigation* [1994]).²³⁴ *El río* figures this “new” or “second birth” as what happens during the “terrible years” of violence to those “repulsed by the belly of the

monster into temporary or permanent exile” (31). This symbolic “birth” also offers another gloss on the narrator’s in *El entenado*: symbolically ground up and expelled into exile first in the Río de la Plata then in Europe.²³⁵ Saer’s imaginary treatise adds another connotation to this fate: the exiles are those “repulsed” by this ritual confrontation, both in a physical and moral sense.

This moral connotation emerges in Saer’s identification of Buenos Aires with Scylla, giving both exile and the recurring violence a more specific mythological body. Referring to the exiles “repulsed” by the monster’s belly, Saer suggests that this “chaste conduct [*conducto estrecho*] that is the superior part [*la parte superior*] has had and continues to have a precise position and mythology in the political, economic, and social history of the region” (31). In this mythology, Buenos Aires “is usually assigned a role similar to that of Scylla, the female monster with a sad reputation, whose inferior part [*parte inferior*] of the body is formed by ferocious dogs that devour everything that passes within their reach.” The “chaste” or “straight conduct” of the exiles plays on the expression “between Scylla and Charybdis”: it brings out the implicit association of the “crab-woman” with the role of Charybdis, the neighboring female monster who swallowed up and spit out the water in between the straights through which Odysseus had to pass with his ship.²³⁶ The “superior” and “inferior” *parts*—associated respectively with exile and Scylla’s animalized body—reinforce the moral connotation added to the physical description. But they also identify the exiles with the role of Odysseus.

Together, though, these two parts form the monstrous contrast to the declared model for his experience at the banks of the river. In Paris, Saer asserts, he imagined that the trip to the river would make the “necessary images” float between water and sky like the figurations in Renaissance paintings, divided between a human scene in the “inferior plane” and a divine scene in the “superior” one. Insofar as Saer here repeats Heidegger’s fourfold gathering of earth, sky,

divinities, and mortals, what fails in the first experience at the banks is the “thinging” of place.²³⁷ In the mythological figure, the “river” that displaces the “earth” in this fourfold gathering suggests a much more violent “birthplace.” Moreover, the three paintings mentioned only in passing provide a protonarrative of conversion to transcendental ascension, from Michaelangelo’s *Conversion of Saint Paul*, to Raphael’s *Transfiguration*, and Tiziano’s *Assumption*.²³⁸ This proto-narrative converges with what Frederic Jameson’s calls a “narrativized image-fragment”: image-fragment saturated with abstract cultural connotations (“disembodied clichés” and “stereotypes”) that bear an uncanny relation to financial speculation—both are, he suggests, “headed unwittingly for a crash.”²³⁹ The paintings were produced, Saer notes, around the same time of Juan Díaz de Solís’ first voyage to the region and the first section “Summer” returns to depict these events as the clash of “sublime” Renaissance self-consciousness with an “exterior gaze” of the Indians (53).

The images do more than evoke a geocultural imaginary of the period of colonial contact. For in Saer’s imaginary treatise they establish a provocative relay between the speculative “origins” of capitalism in Renaissance Italy and the “economic miracle” of the 1970s. In “Winter,” taking up a tradition of left political invective, Saer returns to these Christological images of transcendental ascension to depict the time of “sweet silver” (*plata dulce*) and what he calls the “cult of the dollar”: the euphoric period of dollar-peso parity contemporaneous with the violence of the dirty war which, after the ascension of the dollar, left a regime of devaluation, hyperinflation, and debt. The denomination “sweet silver” reconnects the period of the dictatorship with the region’s founding aesthetic and monetary *nomoi*: Solís’s “sweet sea” (*mar dulce*) and “silver” (*plata*), the precious metal that provides the name for both the river and the region, despite its notorious absence. Both “sweet silver” and the clichéd images of religious dogma that

Saer uses present a return of the same where, to return to Heideggerean language one last time, the “creators” and “preservers” of the region meet in a common “origin.”²⁴⁰ We will return to this moment in more detail in “Winter.” For now, I want to emphasize another motivation for Saer’s recourse to the mythological figures. The “cult of the dollar” in Argentina, Saer suggests, is better represented as an imaginary of pantheism, paganism, and the Greek or Roman pantheon than a Christian divinity (201).

In this sense, the recourse to mythology appears connected to both capital and the violence culminating in the recent past. By substituting the two “parts” of Scylla’s body for the inferior and superior “planes” depicted in the image-fragments of the Renaissance paintings, Saer detranscendentalizes this imaginary but also emphasize both as parts of the same incorporated body. The proposition then to begin again after the initial failure makes the already incorporated “body” an object of critique: “The body that we presume to desire is a superimposition of cultural projections inculcated by the tortuous system that wants precisely to impede us from its pleasure; our preferred plate, the only option that a rigid repertoire canonized by custom has left to us” (32). Although Saer’s formulation implicitly renews the critique of the cultural industry undertaken by Adorno and Horkheimer, he also adds to it an emphasis on the body more muted in his critical theoretical precursors.²⁴¹ Moreover, the critique of “impure” bodily tastes (sexual and oral) already predetermined by the “tortuous system” does not simply reduce to a disembodied “pure” taste; that is, in Bourdieu’s terms, the incorporated taste of a social class.²⁴² For Saer, I argue, the “sweet or bitter flavor [*sabor*] of the world,” first provided by the “regions” of his earlier years (16), emerge in tension with the more abstract aesthetic “tastes” [*gusto*] that become the object of criticism in *El río sin orillas*: the “culture of leisure” introduced at the outset, with its “petit-bourgeois rules of modern taste [*gusto*]” (11); or the “taste [*gusto*] for

cultural anachronism typical of the dominant classes in patriarchal societies” (151). What Saer depicts in “Spring”—the sensation of “forming a single body with the world” (208)—configures a new “body” of experience, only possible through a disincorporation of the sensations and taste proper to each class: the belief, as Saer puts it, that sex is “the only luxury of the poor” and only certain palates are able to “appreciate and distinguish” the taste of caviar (209).

In the second approach to the river at the end of the introduction, the mythological allusions perform the initiatory step: the symbolic grinding up of “Saer” as a narrative subject. Saer’s recourse to “erudition” (32) and to a “more elevated curiosity” in “local color” (33) here sets in motion the episodes that follow “Scylla and Charybdis” in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Therefore, before narrating this last approach, a brief outline of this sequence of episodes from Homer’s epic is necessary. In the Scylla and Charybdis episode, Odysseus follows Circe’s previous advice, initially avoiding Charybdis by steering close to Scylla and, as foretold, Scylla devours six of the stronger oarsmen. After the ships sail on to the island of Thrinacia, though, the Southern winds keep them at bay for a month and Odysseus’s crew is faced with the prospect of starvation. Although directed by Odysseus not to eat the immortal cattle of Helios, the Sun God, the crew disobeys the orders when Odysseus goes to another part of the island and is lulled to sleep by the same gods whom he has asked for help—whose help, in fact, is lulling him to sleep. For while the crew’s appetite seals their fate, Odysseus’s moment of rest secures his escape. As the ship sets sail, the offenders receive the retribution of Zeus’ violent rage: he conjures the storm that tosses the entire crew into the sea and sends Odysseus’s ship back into the mouth of Charybdis. Saer’s introduction proceeds up until this moment, pausing before Odysseus alone is saved when Charybdis vomits part of the ship back up, allowing him to escape after the rest of the crew is lost (a scene and logic I examine more closely in the next section).

In this last approach, dated several months later after the first, in December 1989, Saer narrates his trip to the Instituto de Ravignini, headed by his friend, the historian José Carlos Chiaramonte. After acquiring a list of books for research, Saer returns to the hotel to shower and enjoy the unusually hot summer day. His comparison of this banal enjoyment to Antonin Artaud's Heliogabalus invokes the Roman emperor's imposition of Roman sun gods (the Helio who owns the immortal cattle) while alluding more subtly to shared autobiographical elements: "Artaud's ultramontane Heliogabalus has diluted into a infinite legion of layman, of which I form a part that, discarding the divine attributes of the maximal star, limits itself to taking advantage, under the pressure of fashion, of its efficacy for an integral tan and sweating virtues" (35). The same gesture that subtly alludes to the Roman Emperor's and Saer's common Syrian origins, also suggests a critical a profanation of Artaud and Heliogabalus, his "maximal star." In the mythological register, it suggests an ambiguous moment of both profaning the "sun god" ("Helios") and enjoying the leisure that saves Odysseus from the hunger and revenge meted out to his companions. In the second taxi ride to the riverbanks, the emergence of an intense storm suddenly turns the day into the "heart of night" (37), an ironic appeal to drastic weather changes that, as Saer himself emphasizes, is a recurring element in travel literature about the region.

But the storm also has a more specific intertext in *Facundo*. Sarmiento invokes the sudden appearance of the thunderstorm as a mildly threatening, but also pleasurably sublime, occurrence in the empty expanse of the Pampa. Although the storm in *Facundo* serves to illustrate the poetic character and imagination of the "Argentine people," the poetic faculty is characteristically split between the superstitious, musical poetry of the gaucho and the lettered poetry of the city, recapitulating the Kantian distinction between an uncultured terror at nature's "dominion" and the cultured feeling of its "might."²⁴³ *El río* replaces the immense empty Pampa

with the overcrowded metropolis and the gaucho in the plains with a citation of Enobarbus from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. As a traffic jam brings the taxi to a halt, the looming darkness provokes the "memory" of Enobarbus's "sinister irony": "World, now only two mandibles remain to grind you up" (38).²⁴⁴ The citation recalls the ritual of being ground up by the crab-woman and evokes, in this context, a somewhat theatrical suffering that occurs when Saer, as narrative subject, appears to take center stage. In Shakespeare's play, though, the "two chaps" figure a kind of imperial appetite: they not only refer to Caesar's imminent clash with Antony, Enobarbus's friend and general, but also seem to anticipate Caesar's eventual consolidation of imperial power over Antony and Cleopatra's Egyptian forces, as well as Enobarbus' act of betrayal—he will permit himself to be ground up. These political resonances reemerge in "Autumn" and "Winter": while Enobarbus is the first of several "traitors" and the populist president Juan Perón the last, all of the betrayals contribute to the imaginary foundations of a "Western and Christian civilization" that the military regime attempts to incorporate in the 1970s. In the mythological register, though, Saer's use of Enobarbus also alludes to the events in "loss of the ship and companions": after the crew defies Helios, Zeus' storm tosses them into the sea and sends the ship into the mandibles of Charybdis.

In the introduction, this mythological sequence is completed with the arrival at the banks of the river following the storm. Saer's sensation again of being "in the interior of an immense of circle of water" is coupled with the surface's "iridescent, unstable appearance, where no shade predominated for long" (40). The formerly "colorless" plane has been replaced by multiple shades; or, to draw out the connotations of race that appear more explicitly in what follows, an unstable hybridity. Similarly, the surface of the water as "immobile mirror" experienced during the last trip now becomes "a turbulent abyss." The end of this narrative sequence thus

corresponds to the storm that tosses Odysseus's crew into the sea and sends the ship into the abyssal mouth of Charybdis. As this "turbulent abyss" directly precedes the four seasons that follow, the introduction suspends the outcome of this "myth." To return to Saer's heuristic, the end of the introduction interrupts this ritual grinding up and spitting out before it engenders dogma. As with the initial narrative sequence of memories, this interruption also implicitly allows a recuperation of the original "myth": the first part, "Summer" returns to the first colonial encounters in the region as well as the mythological figures that emerge with the oligarchy. As we will see, the mythological bodies figure a recurring oligarchic appetite and incorporation of the region, dialoguing with how they appear in both Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Echeverría's short story "El matadero."

Between Scylla and Charybdis: The Partial Exception to the Law and the Right to Leisure

As I have suggested in the introduction, Saer's recourse to episodes from *The Odyssey* has significant precursors not only in twentieth century modernist literature and theory, but also earlier Argentine literature. Joyce's *Ulysses* provides the most famous modernist return to the epic, employing the episodes as a framework for the chapters of the novel and allusions within it. Saer similarly uses the episodes as a structuring device, but in the more limited sequence rather than as a doubling of the entire epic form. In this, it coincides with the more concentrated focus on the Sirens episode in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as in Franz Kafka's singular rewriting "The Silence of the Sirens," both of which Saer has repeatedly returned to in his critical texts.²⁴⁵ Although they do not explicitly mention Kafka's rewriting, Adorno and Horkheimer's allegorical interpretation likely presupposes it, and I want to suggest in what follows that Saer's use of the episodes with Scylla and Charybdis dialogue with the

earlier rewriting in Argentine literature. As David Viñas argued in his important *Literatura argentina y realidad política* (1964), the nineteenth romantic writer, Esteban Echeverría encapsulates the “Scylla and Charybdis of our cultural history” in his definition of the dual “national” and “humanitarian” focus of *rioplantense* intellectual life: “we will always have one eye fixed on the progress of nations and the other on the entrails [*entraña*] of our society.”²⁴⁶ Without discounting other more recent invocations of the figures in Río de la Plata,²⁴⁷ I want to focus here on their textual precursor: Echeverría’s short story “El matadero” (“The Slaughterhouse”), written during General Juan Manuel de Rosa’s dictatorship. Saer’s recourse to the episodes that immediately follow the Sirens, I argue, borrows from, extends, and critically supplements Adorno and Horkheimer’s allegorical interpretation, in part through this previous regional inflection of the figures with race.

In Adorno and Horkheimer’s allegorical reading of the Sirens episode, Odysseus’s escape from the Sirens’ song provides a critical prehistory of art and the division of labor in the modern industrialized West. Odysseus devises a two-tiered escape from the lure of the song that leads passing ships to their doom. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the ship’s crew represents the becoming practical of labor: they row with their ears stuffed with wax, knowing only the song’s danger and nothing of its “beauty,” its “promise of pleasure” (34). The ties securing Odysseus to the mast then represent the becoming art of the Sirens’ song: since the same bonds that tie him to both practice and his social role also keep the Sirens’ away from practice, the beauty of their song becomes art, “a mere object of contemplation.” Although Odysseus figures more generally in their argument as “the prototype of the bourgeois individual” (35), associated with enlightenment and rationality, in the Sirens episode he appears as both manager and bourgeois concertgoer; his crew, as the “submissive proletarians” harnessed to the same rhythms in all

realms of collective life, from work to the products of the culture industry (28). In this epic escape from myth, Odysseus dominates both “internal” and “external” nature: he dominates “internal” nature by denying happiness both to himself and to his workers; and he dominates “external” nature through the epic overcoming of the Sirens. Adorno and Horkheimer read this moment not as epic, but *as if* it were tragedy: like the Sphinx after Oedipus solves her riddle, the Sirens would be finished “down to their most distant descendents.”²⁴⁸

In this way, the escape adapts to mythic law and violence through the logic of “cunning.” For Adorno and Horkheimer, all law to date bears the trace of “mythic inevitability,” a vicious circle that renders equivalent the curse, the terrible act that expiates it, and a resulting guilt from the act that only reproduces the curse (46). As a correlate, though, their allegorical interpretation also extends a quasi-written law to the mythic figures in *The Odyssey*, who appear as “legal claims” and “petrified contracts” (45). In confronting these mythic forces, Odysseus both escapes and adapts to mythic law. The escape from the violence and inevitability of mythic law occurs, they argue, through the discovery of a “loophole” that paradoxically both eludes and fulfils the law. Like Benjamin’s apposite concept of divine violence, which similarly expiates the guilt and retribution that defines mythic violence,²⁴⁹ Odysseus’ escape effectively expiates his guilt. At the same time, however, the violent retribution of the mythic law that Odysseus flees, Adorno and Horkheimer assert, ends up being reproduced by what reason becomes in this overcoming—an “exception” to rationality that takes the form of “cunning” (48). “Cunning” adapts to mythic inevitability rather overcoming it, reproducing a logic whereby “the contract is fulfilled but the other party is cheated” (46).

This “loophole” of escape can be read, I want to suggest here, within a “dialectic of the partial exception” that *El río sin orillas* both extends and alters. The encounter with the three mythic

figures central to Adorno and Horkheimer's argument—Circe, the giant Cyclops Polyphemus, and the Sirens—all involve a self-sacrifice or renunciation in the interest of self-preservation; overcoming myth adapts to the mythic world, but its “unsubstitutable” self points beyond its economy of sacrifice.²⁵⁰ If the Odyssean self thus always represents a *partial* exception to mythic law insofar as he adapts to the violence he escapes, he also becomes the *exceptional* part that escapes through the “loophole” in the law. In terms of the Sirens episode, only Odysseus “hears” beauty's “promise of happiness” maintained in its refusal. This dialectic allows Adorno and Horkheimer both to follow Odysseus's exceptional expiation of guilt and to substitute it for an expression of shame at the Sirens' fate—a shame, moreover, that has as its counterpart the immodest claim that “all songs have ailed” in Western music since this missed encounter.²⁵¹ Insofar as the mythic violence against the Sirens extends “down to their most distant descendents,” the allegory is also a microcosm for points where “civilization's” vengeful overcoming of its colonial others mimetically resembles the “barbarism” to which it's supposedly opposed.²⁵²

The sequence of episodes that immediately follow the Sirens in *The Odyssey*, the episodes that Saer inscribes in *El río sin orillas*, brings out other consequences of Odysseus becoming the exceptional part. These episodes—from “Scylla and Charybdis” to “the loss of last ship and companions”—are largely absent from explicit consideration in Adorno and Horkheimer's excursus. But they suggest both a far more arbitrary “loophole” of escape, not easily reducible to self-sacrifice, and more severe consequences, as the sacrifice is displaced wholly onto the “proletarian” crew. Let us return, then, to the sequence of episodes and extend this allegorical interpretation at the point where Saer's introduction leaves off. Adorno and Horkheimer's allegorical interpretation reads the foretelling of Odysseus's escapes as a “calculated” rationality.

When the ship first passes through the straights between Scylla and Charybdis, following Circe's advice, Odysseus already knows that he will lose six men by steering close to Scylla. But the logic of calculation takes both a more perverse and less clear form in the episodes that follow. After his no longer submissive proletarian crew disobeys orders and slaughters the immortal cows of Helios, their attempt not to starve is met with, in Benjamin's related terms, a form of "mythical violence": they dare to challenge their fate. The "loophole" Odysseus discovers is two-fold. The escape, sanctioned initially by the nap, is then secured by his seizure of the fig tree above Charybdis' cave, again as foretold (or "calculated") by Circe: just before he has lost all hope, the remainder of the ship is vomited back out by the monster and, with the grace of the gods, Odysseus is allowed to escape unseen by Scylla (*The Odyssey* 12.220-12.454).

In one of the few references to these episodes in Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, Scylla and Charybdis illuminate how the objectifying language of myth assumes the character of a "legal relationship": "Scylla and Charybdis have a claim on anything that comes near their teeth" (45). Charybdis's last minute vomiting up of Odysseus' ship, in fact, ambiguously occurs "at the time when a man leaves the law court, for dinner, after judging the many disputes brought him by litigious young men" (12.430).²⁵³ In this case, the "cunning" that saves Odysseus also secures the freedom from necessity that originally exempted him from the feast: to continue the allegorical reading, Odysseus arguably claims the right to leisure along with his proprietary rights to the ship; and, by seizing the tree above her plot, Odysseus strips Charybdis of the right to her claim, "down to her most distant descendents." But if Odysseus's claims are heeded, they are not necessarily even heard. The judge simply leaves the court, suspending his application of the law for the day. It remains unclear whether the case has been dismissed or arbitrarily decided so that the judge, like Odysseus, may return home to finally eat with impunity.²⁵⁴ In either case,

however, no other claim to the ship appears possible, whether by the deposed crew or the mythic deities—that is, by industrial proletarians or a more heterogeneous colonial subject.

When Echeverría implicitly rewrites this sequence during the civil wars following Independence, he restages the central conflict of the story as “a kind of intestinal war between stomachs and consciences” (“El matadero” 11). This trope of an “intestinal war” or “struggle” also emerges in the opening of Sarminento’s *Facundo* and provides a related, but less stark, opposition between civilization and barbarism.²⁵⁵ As Saer summarizes in “Winter,” Echeverría’s story is set in the 1830s during the “epoch of Rosas” (the time when the Federalist dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas held power in Buenos Aires) and it depicts the torture then self-sacrifice of a young Unitarian intellectual, emblem of civilized society, at the hands of “savage gauchos, partisans of the dictator” (*El río* 171).²⁵⁶ The events of the story occur during Lent and a quasi-biblical flood, but even though the narrator begins by claiming the old Spanish historians of America as “our prototype,” the genealogical connection to Noah that these historians had claimed is enigmatically refused in the first lines (Echeverría “El matadero” 7). Accordingly, no act of divinely sanctioned violence appears in the story and, in the allusions to the mythic violence of the gods, no boat reappears from the bowels of Charybdis. The flood, though, serves as a pretext for the “Restorer” (Rosas) and the catholic church to decree a partial exception to the general prohibitions of Lent: they order cattle to be quartered at the slaughterhouse and given to the Restorer’s partisan supporters—the poor members of “the peculiar petit proletarian class of the Río de la Plata” (14). In this “intestinal war,” the members of this heterogeneous class appear to represent the “stomach,” much as Odysseus’s crew does when they eat the proscribed cattle; the persecuted Unitarian and, by extension the exiled author, acquire the moral value of “conscience” by abstaining from the feast (Echeverría’s rewriting of Odysseus’s abstention).

However, the depiction of the partisan mob goes beyond a political denunciation of the dictator. Lead in front by the butcher, the mob takes the form of a Scylla-like creature: “At [the butcher’s] back, following every movement, romped a gang of children, Negro and mulatto women, offal collectors whose ugliness matched that of the harpies from fables, and huge mastiffs which sniffed, snarled, and snapped at one another as they darted after the prey [*preza*]” (16-17). The “prey” here refers immediately to the cattle given to the poor during Lent and, in the period of the story, a principal source of wealth in the region. In the grotesque violence that follows, though, the “prey” comes to include first a child accidentally decapitated in the commotion and then the bloody slaughter of the bull following its castration. Both prefigure the fate of the Unitarian, who later dies in the hands of the *caudillo* “Judge of the Slaughterhouse” (15). This figuration of Scylla, which animalizes the black and mulatto women and children, also racializes the body seeking possession of the digestive or incorporative organs (the “offals”).

The racialized Scylla figure in “The Slaughterhouse” expresses a specific anxiety about the postcolonial region following Independence. While this anxiety may be inseparable from the political incorporation of the nation (the “barbarous” Federalist dictatorship), it appears more directly tied here to the heterogeneity of the social body (the “peculiar petit proletarian class”). The very use of “harpies” to qualify the black and mulatto women’s “ugliness” not only invokes the mythological figures’ thievery (whether of food or of people), but also expresses a specific anti-democratic fear regarding the nation’s prized “prey” [*preza*]: that the desire for next to nothing (the leftover entrails from the cattle slaughter) is equivalent to the desire for everything (the digestive or incorporative organ at the very center of this “intestinal war”).²⁵⁷ In *The Odyssey*, the consumption of proscribed cattle seals the death of the proletarian crew; in “The Slaughterhouse,” the mythic Scylla figure has mixed—if not eaten and merged with—the

“peculiar petit proletarian class.” As a result, the link between enlightenment reason and the epic overcoming of myth cannot be completed. This racially heterogeneous, quasi-mythic class has staked a counter claim on the cattle and the return of the ship remains merely allegorical: as the narrator makes clear from the beginning, the storm waters have already subsided and Noah’s ark is only an allusion. Although the Federalists accuse the “blasphemous” Unitarian “heretics” of having brought about “Judgment Day” (8), no divine or sovereign violence intervenes in the story to decide whom the represents the real “heresy” (and thus also the real “dogma”). In an externalization of Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis, the Unitarian—“patriot, illustrious friend of the Enlightenment and liberty” (32)—literalizes his self-sacrifice after the Restorer’s partisans take him to the Judge of this “slaughterhouse.” The Judge repeats the ambiguous decision of his Odyssean precursor, but rules against the enlightenment intellectual: rather than try him for a crime, they threaten to rape him, and he chooses death over emasculation. Before the possible death sentence can be carried out, however, he dies from righteous moral indignation in a violent internal struggle against his bonds. His death leaves the body, Christ-like, on the cross, while the spirit, like the author in exile, anticipates political resurrection and redemption.

Echeverría’s rewriting of these episodes has no correlate to what I have called above the “right to leisure” in these episodes: the seizure of the fig tree that secures Odysseus’s earlier daydreaming and his ascetic exemption from the crew’s hunger.²⁵⁸ This moment becomes a central part of “Spring,” but the critical dialogue with Echeverría’s figuration begins in the first section, “Summer.” In “Summer,” Saer returns to the myth of Scylla to provide a prehistory of the cattle-ranching oligarchy, the triad of “rancher, smuggler, slave trader” as the first source of postcolonial wealth. Whereas Echeverría’s story racializes the Scylla figure, Saer’s imaginary treatise narrates the recurring oligarchic incorporation of the region as both the swallowing of the

region's colonial subjects, and the proliferation of racial traces in language and discourse. "Winter" then represents the industrialization of this incorporative, oligarchic violence, but also the many forms of adapting to it, when the ship and the companions are tossed into the sea. Significantly, the postindustrial port in "Spring" then generalizes the metaphor of shipwreck and the undigested remainders of the violence. But it also rewrites the loophole and the dialectic of the partial exception: in the central aesthetic scene, Saer recounts a moment under a willow tree when an indigent grandmother, several children, and a horse wade into the river, dissolving both the mythological figure of Scylla they evoke and the sociological discourse that renders them as "almost a race apart." In this way, Saer's "imaginary treatise" reactivates and publicizes the right to leisure allegorized in Odysseus's seizure of the fig tree.

The episodes that Saer adapts depict a much more arbitrary claim for a right to leisure than Adorno and Horkheimer's allegorical interpretation of the Sirens, the episode directly preceding the sequence with Scylla and Charybdis. The sequence, I argue, supports Saer's imaginary treatise as a supplement to this allegory, in explicit dialogue with a related Adornian question. After narrating the "tradition of violence" that culminated in Argentina's final and most brutal dictatorship, Saer concedes that his invitation to pleasure in "Spring" will lead skeptical readers to repeat the twentieth century's "capital question," a question first formulated by Adorno: "is it possible to write poetry, that is to say, accept life, after Auschwitz?" (207). Saer responds affirmatively by citing Adorno's own formulation of "beauty" in *Minima moralia*: "Everything that prospers in beauty while still under conditions of terror is mockery and detestable by itself. However, its ephemeral form contributes to the task of avoiding terror. Something of this paradox is in the foundation of all art, and today it comes to light in the fact that art in general still exists. A well-secured idea of the beautiful demands that happiness is refused and, at the

same time, maintained” (207).²⁵⁹ Saer makes this idea of the beautiful a formal principle in *El río sin orillas*, largely refusing “happiness” for the majority of the narrative before emphatically maintaining it in “Spring.” When “beauty” does appear in Saer’s narrative text under conditions of terror or extreme iniquity, it takes on an aspect of “mockery” and what Borges similarly defines as the “caricature” that results from “showing and squandering” the narrator’s “aesthetic means.”²⁶⁰ The allegorical reading of the Sirens episode, however, makes a happiness maintained only in its refusal the sole property and means of Odysseus, the Enlightenment figure. The episodes that *El río sin orillas* adapts, episodes that immediately follow the Sirens, depict a much more arbitrary claim for a right to leisure.

“Summer”: Oligarchic Incorporation, the Erasure of Race, and the Crystallization of the Region

“Summer” extends from the period of initial colonial encounters to the nineteenth century and depicts the “crystallization” of an “Argentine singularity” (96) out a place where originally “nobody” lived. In the previous chapter, we have seen how Saer’s imaginary treatise dialogues with his earlier novel *El entenado*, the story of the unnamed narrator’s life among a cannibal tribe. Here I will focus on the mythological figures that supplant the myth of cannibalism in the earlier narrative next, putting *El río* in dialogue with Echeverría’s inflections analyzed above. In “Summer,” the initial encounters between the Spanish and the region’s many indigenous groups gradually transform into a new mythological figuration of the oligarchic elite. “Summer” begins with the familiar assertion that “nobody” occupied the immediate coasts of present day Buenos Aires accept what the Spanish called *sabandija*, “creepy crawlies,” a word that came to later designate “dangerous and contemptible people” (41). The association appears again several

pages later when Saer returns to invoke the arbitrary shape of the Río de la Plata as a “scorpion”: Juan Díaz de Solís had awakened a body that was “sleeping” in the Atlantic (29) and now we come to learn that that they had gone past its pincers and through its body to land on the Río de Uruguay, its “tail” (45). Its as if here the original attack by the anthropophagic tribe takes on the mythic engendering of the Charybdis-like crab-woman, and Saer will go on to depict the original Europeans who landed as being “expelled” from their values more than the place itself (43, 47, 53). The ritual conditions what Saer later terms a general “exiles” mentality in the region.

“Summer” links the mythic formation of Scylla to the much later “golden age” of the cattle-ranching oligarchy (1880-1930). Saer’s introduction of this figure evokes the language used in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which cast the figures of Charybdis and Scylla as a kind of legal claim: “before possessing the plains, [the cattle-ranching oligarchy], seated in the right pincer of the scorpion, had to dominate the great river. Like the ferocious dogs on the waste of Scylla, they devoured everything that passed in their vicinity” (*El río* 86). Scylla’s devoration seems closer to the “unwritten law” that characterizes patriarchal society in the plains and coexisted with the written law of the new republics in South America (*El río* 90). In Saer’s narrative text, the prehistory of oligarchic domination suggests how this partial exception to the law operated in the period of Independence. Smuggling, the region’s “first source of wealth” (86), thrived during the Spanish monopoly on regional trade when the various Dutch, French, and English ships arrived with the contraband: “When, thanks to a bribe, the authorities allowed them to dock, the smugglers unloaded the merchandise onto the shore and exchanged it for cowhides or Bolivian silver; when they did not succeed in coming to an agreement, they sought out a secure place where they could anchor in the river—the *mariner’s inferno*—and, literally opened the boat like the great department stores of Haussman Boulevard do at nine o’clock in the morning”

(87). In this analogy, “Haussman Boulevard” becomes transatlantic, and the ship a store of contraband commodities that range from the everyday to the exotic. The elegy to commercial exchanges from the General Lawyer for Buenos Aires in 1660, which Saer includes immediately after, casually lists “slave permits” among the benefits of the market.

At this point in the narrative, the phrase, “*the mariner’s inferno*,” has no clear reference. At the end of “Summer,” we see that the phrase refers somewhat theatrically to the shallow waters of the river. Here it alludes to the “alive descent into hell,” the ritual of those who penetrate the belly/womb of the mythic crab-woman and are ground up and expelled into “exile” as a result. In the list of commodities that include “slave permits,” though, it also seems to evoke the transatlantic slave trade and the expulsion into “exile” of the African-descended inhabitants of the region. For, as Saer asserts, “smuggler, slave-trader, and rancher” were three faces of the same economic activity during the period of Independence: when Bolivian silver was scarce, “cowhides” were exchanged for “blacks and other commodities”; slaves were then often sold to work in the plantations of Brazil or the mines of the *cordillera*, when they weren’t employed as domestic servants or ranch hands in the region (88).

In this account, Saer presents an interregional colonial comparison that enacts the “self-caricature” or “mockery” that both Borges and Adorno attribute to the prospering of aesthetic beauty under conditions of terror or gross iniquity. Saer strikes an elegiac tone—attributed elsewhere in the narrative to Borges’s residual nostalgia for the patriarchal epoch—when he claims that although the black domestic slaves and ranch hands of the Río de la Plata were given the work requiring more effort, “they willingly performed these jobs [*realizaban gustosos esos trabajos*], which, however hard, were nonetheless infinitely lighter than what waited for them in the mines of plantations of Brazil” (88). In Borges’s terms, the language that represents the

black subjects of the region “exhausts” itself in exaggeration: their forced labor is “*infinitely* lighter” and “*willingly* performed.” In addition, the adverbial “willingly” (*gustosos*) not only carries with it the connotations of this work being performed “deliciously” or “tastily.” But, as an adverb *sin mente* (“without –ly”), a grammatical ambiguity closely analyzed in the previous chapter, *gustosos* also resembles an adjectival “delicious” or “tasty” associated with the black laborers themselves, producing an “unconscious” mimesis of colonial relations. As a result, both labor and laborer become aestheticized objects for consumption.

This euphemistic hyperbole sharply contrasts with the colloquial expression that immediately follows it. For, in addition to the frequent comments by travelers that blacks did most of the work in the patriarchal system of the planes, the colloquial phrase meaning “to work a lot” is still often rendered by “to work like a negro” (*trabajar como un negro*). This phrase brings out the racialized colonial dimension of the division of labor as well as what we can call, drawing on Borges’s definition, Saer’s “baroque” claim. This exaggerated claim “shows and squanders” its “aesthetic means” (Borges *Historia* 5) the same means denied to those whose labor helped secure the leisure of the dominant class. In so doing, it tends towards a self “caricature” (Borges) or “mockery” of what “prosperes in beauty” (Adorno) under conditions of gross iniquity and terror. It is with this force field of tensions, then, that the narrative of capital and colonial labor is suddenly interrupted by a dissolve into the more recent autobiographical present.

The narrative interruption revisits the trip to the banks of the river following the storm in December 1989 when Saer experienced the “sensation of being, not on the shore, but in the center of an immense circle of water” (88). This return to the sensation of a river without banks now adds the question about how the city had gone from its original emptiness, when “everyone had fled it like the plague” or been simply “passing through” [*de paso*] from almost time

immemorial, to the point where the region around Buenos Aires had become “a place of permanence” inhabited by almost half of Argentina’s population (89). This contradiction, Saer asserts, has given the region’s inhabitants “a general mentality of exiles [*desterrados*],” and those said here to be “passing through” are “Indians, Europeans, and livestock.” In the context of the discussion above, the absence of afro-rioplatenses in this trio of semi-nomadic founding figures is more than conspicuous: the descendents of Africans have been effectively displaced by the “livestock” that slaves were exchanged for in the patriarchal system of the plains. As we know from the introduction, this second sensation of the “river without banks” follows a torrential storm (the rare and powerful *sudestada* or *suestada*, as Saer goes on to explain in “Fall” [128]). And it is as if the descendents of Africans in the region had been swallowed by the sea in a repetition of the fate that befell Odysseus’s crew after eating the proscribed cattle—a fate echoed by Saer rendering their labor an object of aesthetic consumption above.

Earlier in “Summer,” Saer recounts how, before the “*foundation* of Buenos Aires” (70), the fort at Sancti Spiritus²⁶¹ was burned to the ground and the few surviving horses fled and subsequently multiplied in the open plains, the *llanura*. These events, which also have echoes in Saer’s novels *Nadie nada nunca* and *La ocasión*, buttress Saer’s assertion that the livestock, both the wild horses and cows, “created civilization” (73). Here the claim about their presence in the imagination of the plains shifts suddenly to Saer’s memory of a bus trip into the plains that occurred shortly after the military coup in 1976. In this memory of an extended stop at a roadside restaurant, the imprints of animal hooves alongside the tracks of vehicles in the recently dried mud lead to thoughts of Proust’s “uneven paving stones” when a cattle truck appears. The sounds and smells from the truck produce a sudden “sensation of familiarity and belonging,” a feeling of permanent “unity” with a “diversity” of associations that fill him with a “sensation of

limitless happiness” in the midst of “the personal and historical disaster” (76). The memory of the “multitudinous herd” that forms part of the imaginary of even a child of immigrants like Saer then turns immediately into a discussion of the word *cimarrón*, which went from designating domesticated animals that returned to the wild to include Indians and blacks who escaped into the pampa or jungle. To demonstrate the “manly, primitive, and liberatory prestige” the word took on in the Río de la Plata, Saer cites Borges’s use of *cimarrón* in the 1930s to “exalt” gauchos and “slander” (especially Italian) immigrants: “the good fugitive-slave prose of the also Uruguayan D. Vicente Rossi [*la buena prosa cimarrona del también oriental D. Vicente Rossi*] (78, 79). The caged and moaning animals present an unremarked link with those who suffered State repression. If this association does not diminish the “happiness,” it nonetheless taints its presentation with mockery: the discussion of *cimarrón* also capitalizes on the connotations of escape from captivity and labor. Saer, however, leaves out what the *buena prosa cimarrona* also refers to: not just the “wild” prose of the “also oriental” (*también oriental*) immigrant writer, a designation that subtly (and ironically) gestures again at Saer’s own particular immigrant heritage as a child of Sirian immigrants; but D. Vicente Rossi’s exaltation of the afro-Uruguayan contribution to the “origins” of tango in *Cosas de negros* (*Black Matters*).

El río sin orillas renders this partial erasure of race as both the repression and symptomatic proliferation of its traces. This partial erasure, already evident in Saer’s mimetic consumption of colonial labor, becomes clearer at the end of “Summer” when Saer depicts the region’s crystallization into a monad. In Saer’s narrative, the period of mass immigration is the harbinger of a new “opacity” that disrupts the “transparency” of the “classic” patriarchal system of the Río de la Plata and brings out new “excesses of language” in the propertied classes. Saer’s example is the way immigrants became “zoological alluvium” (91). But in addition to the implicit

“excesses” of his own prose above, Saer also cites Borges again to show how the term for Afro-rioplatenses (*el negro*) went from being “installed in the field of the non-human” to “only a morphological trace, ‘in the grace of certain young ladies’, as Borges would say.” Despite being reduced to a morphological trace, race and color reappear in other epithets like *cabecitas negras* or “little black heads,” a term used to designate the predominately *mestizo* rural migrants from the interior of the country, while, Saer surmises, immigrants are likely the responsible for the disdainful use of *negro* to designate any non-European (92, 94). Color, less explicitly tied to race, then emerges conspicuously in the images that render what Saer above called the “generalized mentality of exiles.” After 1930, the new opacity figuratively appears as a “black stain” on demographic maps while the “accumulation of black dots” evokes the image of a magnet that, after first repelling inhabitants, now attracted them (92, 95). In these images of sameness, the region takes on the appearance of a monad, both “force field and thing.”²⁶² At the same time, the narration of the region’s crystallization into monad is simultaneous with the various tribes of the South being “erased from the terrestrial crust.” In addition to their “slow and toothless” descendants reduced to begging, those who remained in the estuary are represented in a cruel caricature of the silenced subaltern: “it is not possible to know if they do or do not have nostalgia for times past because, rigid and immobile, they only survive embalmed in the Museum of Natural Sciences” (96). What Saer calls the “crystallization” of an “Argentine singularity” coincides then with “the tendency towards planetary uniformization.” And in the narrative, this monadic crystallization includes both the erasure of alterity from the landscape and these excesses in language and tone that emerge in the process.

“Autumn”: The Dominion of the Plains, the Incorporative State, and Accidental Exile

The problem Saer ends with in “Summer” sets up an important context for the return of mythological allusions in “Autumn.” Saer juxtaposes the nationalist propensity to identify some “national being” with those thinkers, like Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, who approached the country not as an “essence to venerate, but a series of problems to unravel [*desentrañar*]” (97). “Autumn,” which takes up the “intercrossing of particularly foreign texts that have forged images of the region” (115), returns not only to the plains but also to the dual sense of *desentrañar* as both “unraveling” and “disemboweling.” In this section, the mythological allusions are set into motion between what Saer calls two “Kafkian” particularities of the plains. The first one, more apparently natural, is the “sensation of oppression” experienced in the open plains under the dome-like sky. The second, more apparently historical, is “Alsina’s Trench,” the grandiose unfinished trench designed to protect new colonies from raids by Indian tribes. The apparently natural sensation, I argue, nonetheless bears traces of history, while the historical example appears naturalized in the bodily metaphor of the “bowels” and the oligarchic incorporation that “swallows” the tribes. For in Saer’s treatise, “Alsina’s Trench” not only marks the border limits of civilization, but also the transition between the State policies of “integration” and those of the “extermination” of the Indians at the end of the nineteenth century.

The first “Kafkian” particularity emerges with another ritual voyage: the repetition of Saer’s weekly train rides to the French countryside that produced, for him, “the perfect illusion of identity” between the half-lit plains of Beauce and the plains of his *rioplatense* youth (115). It is quite appropriate that the train provides the vehicle of this “illusion of identity,” since the implementation of the railway system has been read as a standardization of space that destroyed the aura and identity of local place.²⁶³ Unevenness, though, creeps back into this perceived

identity. The illusion returns “the placid flavor [*sabor*] of infancy” to the writer living abroad, but despite the identity, the French plains appeared somehow “wealthier” and more “civilized” in comparison, making it an “almost perfect identity” (116, 117). Saer then asserts that if he were to step outside the train in the Argentine plains, he would not experience what Drieu La Rochelle called “horizontal vertigo,” but instead a feeling of the horizon closing in around him, what he will characterize shortly after as a sensation of “oppression.” It is, however, Darwin’s observations about the plains in Santa Fe that first demystifies the vision of horizontal infinity as an illusion: juxtaposed with the calculable horizon on the sea, the fluctuating size of objects on the plain’s horizon proved that the flat surface was actually uneven; and, in Darwin’s own words, this was enough “to destroy the aspect of grandeur that is obligatory encountered in the vast plains” (118). Whereas Darwin analytically destroys the sublime “grandeur” projected by the traveler, Saer’s two object lessons demonstrate how the “singularities” of the plains disrupt perception even after the analytic destruction of their aura.

Saer’s two “singularities” return to both the traveler’s perception and the erasure of alterity. In the first example, the emptiness of the plains reproduces a vision of the identical associated with the traveler’s gaze. The plains make evident the “serial and repetitive tendency of the world” or give “the impression that everything, in the plains, groups itself in colonies” (119). To extend the concept of “colonies” to the non-human landscape—the appearance of “lilacs and only lilacs, cows and only cows” in the emptiness, earlier examples that Saer reiterates here—is also in effect to naturalize the immigrant’s colonial vision of the space. Albeit in a more self-reflexive form, this colonial, perhaps even “Europeanizing,” vision repeats the illusion of infinity unmasked by Darwin: “the empty space juxtaposes itself, above all to the eye of the traveler, always equal to itself, and, as in appearance nothing changes with the displacement of the eye,

the imagination adds the fragments and creates the illusion of infinity.” Despite the displacement from the confines of the room to the open plains, this repetitive landscape resembles the white wall of the room in *El entenado* and Lispector’s *A paixão*.²⁶⁴ In this example, though, the eye is merely displaced across the surface of the plains, and there is no alteration of either the landscape or the subject in this serial infinity.

In the second “singularity” of the plains, though, the vision of the self-identical traveler is disturbed and altered. The figure that provides the example demonstrates how the presence of a single living or inorganic object becomes “the only pole of attraction for the gaze.” But, in addition, the example of a single horse on the horizon that “magnetizes the gaze” returns to both the language of the monadic crystallization of the region and the figure subsumed within the general “livestock” of the plains. In this case, the object does not serve merely to unmask the illusion of infinity and grandeur, as it does in the citation from Darwin. It increases the abstractness of the space and provokes a series of interrogations about the nature of “the horse,” challenging the concept of its “Unicity.” What was before perceived as a horse now appeared as “a palpitating and obscure mass, a problematic entity that contaminates all of the existent and acquires the enigmatic clarity of a vision” (120).²⁶⁵ In “Summer,” as we saw, the sensation of the “river without banks” was equated with a “general mentality of exiles.” This exilic mentality was the result of a shift from the originary figures just “passing through” the emptiness—Europeans, Indians, and livestock—to a densely populated “place of permanence.” The crystallization of the region into a monad, a magnetic “force field and thing,” nonetheless depended on a partial erasure of race, and more specifically, the region’s black inhabitants, metonymically included in the undifferentiated image of “livestock.” The remagnetized “vision” that transforms the horse into a non-human mass or entity on the open plains does not

acknowledge this racial dimension of coloniality suppressed from the earlier monadic crystallization of the region. Only in “Spring” do the racialized colonial categories return. At the same time, Saer’s statement there that “the unicity of sensations leads not to the individual but to the monad” (209) appears as a kind of belated lesson from this scene in the plains: sensations can be disincorporated and transferred, allowing for the possibility of a new body of experience—and a new “Same”—that comes to include the racialized subjects otherwise confined to the “terrain of the Other” (219).

In “Autumn,” though, this fleeting enigmatic vision hardly leads to any liberatory line of flight. Instead, the oppressive dome-like sky reveals the first “vaguely Kafkian” particularity of the plains: a pleonastic “vertical vertigo” rather than a horizontal one, an impression of suspended progression that reveals the “sensation of freedom” obligatorily experienced in the planes as nothing other than a “myth” (120, 121). What Saer calls a “sensation of oppression” then cuts across the distinction, operative in both Kant and Sarmiento, between the uncultured experience of nature’s terrifying “dominion” and the sublime cultured feeling of its “might.”²⁶⁶ As Saer emphasizes, the foreign traveler depended on the gaucho tracker or guide’s ability to discern “shades of the neutral and identical” in the empty plains, like the white on white of suprematist painting (121). The second “Kafkian” particularity, the grandiose but unfinished trench commissioned by the Minister of War, Adolfo Alsina, then brings out a more socio-historic and politically inflected sense of “oppression” in the plains.

Saer narrates this moment from the perspective of the French engineer and positivist Alfred Ebelot, who was hired to help design the project: the State set out to build an enormous trench—three meters wide, two meters deep, and three hundred and seventy four kilometers long—around the colonies of immigrants and *criollos* to protect against raids from Indian tribes. *El río*

first sets up Ebelot's discourse through a repetition of the mythological allusions. After using the evocative connotations of the "mariner's inferno" earlier in the narrative, "Autumn" attributes the actual denomination "the mariner's inferno" to an anonymous "Englishman" who used it to designate the difficulty of navigating in the shallow waters of the Río de la Plata. In continuity with the evocative excess of the phrase, Saer contrasts this shallow "inferno" with two references to the depth of *Dante's Inferno*: first, the giant three-headed Lucifer grinding up the bodies of the "traitors" at the foundation of Christianity and the Roman Empire (Judas, Cassius, and Brutus); and second, Dante and Virgil's escape from the same demon, qualified as their emergence from an "expiatory pit" (*El río* 125). The gloss repeats the motif of traitors who all die by suicide (like Enobarbus), but in their betrayal, also provide the conditions for instituting the new order.²⁶⁷ At the same time, the expiatory escape can also be read as another partial exception that adapts to the unjust law that it eludes. This possibility, already implicit in the cruel punishment of the "traitors," is further drawn out in the allusions that follow. The section returns to the popular beliefs about the regional winds that produce the rise (the *sudestada*) and fall (the *pampero*) of the Río de la Plata's waters and to the persistent myths about tribes of giants in the Patagonia. Abelot's writing then makes explicit the consequences implicit in the mythological allusions. For after this "defensive war" (148) to protect colonial settlements was abandoned, the tribes of the *pampa* and the eastern Patagonia became the object of more outright extermination.

Read in this mythological register, Alsina's Trench represents a turning point that precedes and prepares a repetition of the massacre that befell Odysseus's crew. Historically, the trench marked the transition from the policies of "integration" to "extermination," when the State undertook the "Conquest of the Desert" at the end of the 1870s. The trench was designed, Saer comments, "less to impede the invasions than to slow the return of the Indians to their huts with

the booty; that is, the innumerable heads of cattle that they robbed from the cattle-ranchers of Buenos Aires province (a province, it should be said in passing, they had appropriated previously from Indian lands)” (148). In the mythological register, the extermination that follows the policy of “integration” enacts the requisite punishment for the theft of the proscribed cattle. Several citations from Abelot then configure this moment as the oligarchic State’s swallowing of the hostile tribes. Because there were already numerous broken contracts and mass desertions by those on route to the project, the mercenary soldiers working on the trench carried a gun on their hip “in case of intestinal discord.” This gesture at the fate reserved for further traitors to the civilizational project of the State completes the subtext of betrayal with an allusion to the paradigmatic gaucho deserter from the army, Martín Fierro. It also effectively inverts the judgment of Echeverría and Sarmiento’s “intestinal war”: rather than the ascetic “conscience” of the civilized against the consumptive “stomach” of the savages and barbarians, indigestion here figures the stirrings of objection within both the individual body and the larger incorporative body of the civilizing project.

The second citation of Abelot’s commentary already prefigures the extermination to come. Ebelot’s evolutionary progressivism presents the “anachronistic” (147) tribes as a *pharmakon*-like mixture within the digestive organ of the victor’s social body: “[the Indians] will disappear, but not without infiltrating into the victors some drops of their own uncultured blood—venom perhaps, but perhaps fermentation that will make unknown energies boil in the bowels [*entraña*] of the people of that region” (149). If “Summer” ended with praise for an approach that treats the country as “a series of problems to unravel [*desentrañar*]” (97), the problem “unraveled” or “disemboweled” in Ebelot’s writings from “Autumn” is the oligarchic State’s swallowing of the defeated tribes. This swallowing of recalcitrant “savages” reveals a new moment of truth in the

earlier metaphor of an “intestinal war,” deployed by the sane liberal and enlightened romantics who now formed part of State power. At the same time, “Autumn” leaves the problem unresolved by ending inconclusively in the “bowels” (*entraña*).

The sudden switch from Abelot to the last two European intellectuals in “Autumn,” the French social scientist Roger Caillois and Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, has a twofold effect on this sequence. First, it implicitly links the massacre of the Indians to the Second World War, Nazi occupation, and more indirectly, to the Shoah. This link will be completed in “Winter” with the State’s “machine of annihilation” constructed, Saer asserts, with the aid of what he calls the “exportation of Nazi technology” (195). The sudden escalation of the war turned the separate visits of Caillois and Gombrowicz to Argentina into a more prolonged stay (four years for Caillois, twenty three for Gombrowicz). In this sense, their cases represent an anomaly in what Saer refers to as certain tradition of the “foreign lecturer” in the region of the Río de la Plata. In terms of my analysis here, however, they also suggest a more contingent “loophole” or escape from what Saer calls, referring to the quasi-science fictional landing of Gombrowicz in Argentina, “the explosion of the ship *Europe*” (156). Much like Saer’s own extended “exile” in France, their initial escape from the disaster was largely unintended.

Yet if both Caillois and Gombrowicz developed a marked engagement with the region and its literature, they existed at the virtual antipodes of literary culture: Caillois was welcomed into the circle of “official culture” around Borges and the journal *Sur*; Gombrowicz, whom Borges studiously tried to ignore, famously juxtaposed his interest in “life” with Borges’s concern with only “literature” (153, 157). For Saer, this “Borges-Gombrowicz antinomy” obscured the common concern in their work with “how to resolve the contradictions of a culture that, recognizing its tradition within that of the West, knows it does not fully belong to that tradition”

(157). Within the commonality, their difference was in their approach: Borges assumed this tradition as a whole to find “secondary corridors, secret passages, and carve his own burrow”; Gombrowicz opted for “demolisher of statues” with “an arbitrary and savage insolence” (157-8). Although Saer slightly chides the “false count,” he inscribes Gombrowicz—because of his insolent approach, the poverty he endured, and his antagonism toward the dominant literary circles—within an alternative “army of phantasms”: the intellectuals and writers who have been relegated to a “fictitious destiny” by the more “official discourses” of the State.²⁶⁸ If these “phantasms” are thus a part of what the epic narrative leaves behind, “exile” as a loophole of escape from disaster does not alone guarantee the triumph of the escapee. Borges here forms the counter-image: a writer who was made into a “sacred object” by the official discourses of the State.²⁶⁹ Saer’s strategy, as we will see in the sections “Winter” and “Spring,” combines elements of both positions: dissolving the sacred aura of capital and culture, not simply from the position of heresy but also through a critical return to the myths.

“Winter”: “Belonging” to the West, or the Perverse Aura of Capital, Violence, and the State

“Winter” turns from foreign travelers’ images of the region to a recent history or even tradition of political violence and instability in twentieth century Argentina, from the coups that ended Radical and Peronist governments to the dirty war and the Process of National Reorganization. This penultimate section appropriately returns to the last episode of the epic sequence, “loss of the ship and all the companions.” In “Winter,” the State’s “machine of annihilation” has as its mythological correlate a Charybdis-like swallowing and vomiting up of the disappeared. To explore an “intimacy with the massacre” that has become constitutive of the

local imagination, Saer argues, it becomes necessary to adopt an “ethnographical or anthropological” perspective, refusing “moral, political, and historical judgments” (173). This refusal to pronounce judgments contrasts, on the one hand, with the popular justice on the margins of the law before the dictatorship, and, on the other, with The Process that unleashed its form of law-preserving mythical violence. At the same time, the refusal of judgments does not preclude the mounting of evidence and here Saer combines the approaches of both Gombrowicz and Borges: insolent demolisher of and intimate burrower into the “statues” of Western tradition.

As Saer’s passing reference to the Sirens begins to suggest, the articulation of myth and modern industrial society has consequences for the problematic of tradition shared by both Borges and Gombrowicz. Saer’s reference to the Sirens myth places it within both the mass movements of the twentieth century and the recurring coup d’etats that suppressed them (1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966, 1976). In Saer’s presentation, the middle classes may have provided support for the “great popular movements” of the twentieth century in Argentina (Radicalism, Peronism), but they often “abandoned [the movements] for other siren songs at the first sign of turbulence” (169). At the same time, Saer suggests, the “famous Western values” that the elite sectors of society “moved earth and sky to preserve... are nothing other than the voluble and narrow convictions [*convicciones estrechas y friolentos*] of the middle class.” If this more casual use of “siren songs” highlights the ambiguity of the figure (the lure of popular movements and more fascist ones), it also suggests the frequency of the middle classes abandoning a nominally progressive “siren song” for other ones—whether these others were linked to the suppression of popular movements or the Sirens’ song itself, where only Odysseus continues to hold to the promise of happiness, maintained in its refusal. That these “convictions” of the middle classes are “voluble” [*friolentos*]*—*a word that can also be rendered as “sensitive to the cold” or even

“cold-natured”—evokes the recurring partial exceptions to law that culminated in the country’s last and most brutal dictatorship. That they are also “narrow” or “chaste” recalls the “narrow” or “chaste conduct” that Saer associates with exile and the “superior part” of the mythological figure of Scylla (28). Following this logic in the terms that I have used above, the “Western values” associated with this “exceptional part”—the part that escapes the unjust law, whether through adapting to it or through exile—provide an ideological justification for the repeated partial exceptions to law. In their frequency, moreover, these partial exceptions appear as more of a norm. The elite who move “earth and sky” in defense of these values take on a Zeus-like role in the myth. “Western values” provide an ideological justification for the mythic violence: the storm that tosses the crew into the sea and back into the mouth of Charybdis.

[“Winter” depicts this storm as different forms of accordance with and adaptation to the violence / to the loss the ship and companions.] “Winter” figures two different ways that the “rituals” of the period engender forms of “dogma” during the last dictatorship, returning to the spiral of myth that Saer introduces in the introduction: the “cult of courage,” which I turn to know; and the “cult of the dollar,” which I return to below. The “cult of courage,” comes to characterize the morphology of the gaucho figure in the popular imaginary. In “Summer,” Saer had already planted the seed of an argument that he resumes here: not only did “the gaucho” name a literary character that long outlasted the historical type on which it was based, but those responsible for forging this “myth” into a “sacred entity” were perhaps also responsible for their disappearance (84). Contrasting that with the intransigence of the “real gaucho,” Saer includes a quasi-ethnographic personal memory of a party in rural Colastiné Norte where a series of drunken insults lead to large knife fight between two groups who were also his “friends”: he describes the practice of cutting not to kill (“the last trace of civilization”) and their return to

drinking and laughing an hour later, “as if it was a kind of sporting event” (85). In contrast to the ethnographic description, “Winter” defines the “cult of courage” as “a prolongation of an attitude that, when faced with the social transformations produced by immigration, tries to attribute a mythological valor [*valor mitológico*] with superior ethical connotations to the sordid and banal violence of the patriarchal epoch” (177). Saer’s literary example here is the “elegiac tone” in Borges’s poetry about the epoch of his *criollo* grandfather as well as his stories of knife fights and *compadritos*, the figures that resulted from the urbanization of the last gauchos (176-177). *El río* juxtaposes a verse about the “epic universe” of Borges’ grandfather to an account from Alfred Abelot that names Coronel Borges and partisans of General Mitre who devoted themselves to influencing elections. Similarly, the specialization in “courage” of their urban avatars also became an employable value, turning many into professional bodyguards, racketeers, and strikebreakers. Saer’s critical account dissolves the “sacred” aura the myths have attained by juxtaposing them with a “realist” anthropological description of their morphology. The technique is close to Gombrowicz: demolisher of statues. But, like Borges, Saer also finds other corridors and establishes a burrow within the figures, like the gaucho, formerly frozen in rigid forms.

This critical account includes the morphing of the “cult of courage” into both the *bandido justiciero* (“avenging bandit”) during the period of mass immigration, and in the 1960s and 70s, the spectacular political violence of the left-Peronist Montoneros. The trajectory of the latter joins a sharply critical exposition of Juan Perón and *justicialismo*. Although the description of Perón remains “anthropological,” Perón’s nominal attempts to chart a “third position” between capitalism and communism, as well as the calculations that constantly betrayed his popular constituencies, ends up associating him with the allegorical position of Odysseus: he escapes into

exile while the crew is lost. If Saer again practices a demolishing insolence, he also establishes other corridors and burrows on the left side of this straight: a memory turns to a poet friend who became a Montonero and Saer, refusing to judge his motives for joining, questions instead his “possibility of dialogue” (186) with leaders who not only sent so many of their soldiers on “suicide missions” (183) while in comfortable exile themselves, but also sought reconciliation with the same generals massacring their troops. Here both Borges and the Montoneros return in an unexpected convergence: the former, for a short time, exalted the generals as “gentlemen”; the latter, proposed an accord with the generals during the World Cup and the Malvinas War. The logic of the rituals exalted by the “cult of courage” here take on more dogmatic forms. On the one hand, public opinion often celebrated the assassinations and robberies carried out by the Montoneros, as if it was a “sporting event” (186), recalling Saer’s earlier intimate memory. On the other hand, even after the dictatorship and the exposure of its extreme repression, the sign of any new crises often provoked popular opinions in support of authoritarian government: the expression, *millón de muertes* (“a million dead”), an eerie calculation that anyone, from old ladies to taxi drivers, might utter as a solution to current problems.

The “machine of annihilation” deployed by the State during the dirty war then joins this mythical violence to industrial society on the semi-periphery. The construction of this State machine was made possible by an “*exportation of nazi technology*” (190) that operated in fairly direct ways: the well-known exodus of Nazi criminals who often served as ideological mentors to, and at times actively collaborated with, sectors of the political right and the military in Latin America. On the other hand, it occurs more indirectly with the increasing tendency of the United States in the twentieth century to treat the continent as its “own dominion” (191). The citation of an official U.S. government pronouncement in 1963 completes what, in Marxian terms, can be

considered the productive forces of this “machine”: “Our primordial objective in Latin America is to aid, wherever it is necessary, the continual development of the military and paramilitary forces, in their capacity to provide, in union with the police and other forces of security, the necessary internal security” (191). The attempt to “erase” the State’s enemies through humiliation, torture and eventually death (200) reconnects the “machine of annihilation” to the myth. At the same time, the more extreme attempt at complete material erasure, “burning and even cutting up cadavers,” ultimately fails. Unlike *The Odyssey*, where only the remnants of Odysseus’s ship are expelled by Charybdis, an “inconceivable crowd of shadows” resurfaces when “the earth vomited up the bones, the fragments of charred but irreducible bones.” This “crowd of shadows” does not appear unrepresentable but “inconceivable.” As “inconceivable,” we could say, it evades both philosophical concepts and physical conception, including the “new birth” produced by confronting the pincers of the Charybdis-like crab-woman. Like the “army of phantasms” evoked in “Autumn,” the “crowd of shadows” and the “irreducible bones” figure the spectral remainders that both the “machine of annihilation” and the epic leave in their wake.

The “cult of the dollar” then provides the second engendering of dogma out of ritual during the violence of the dictatorship. As a correlate to the “cult of courage,” which appears to glorify violence outside the law, in continuity with patriarchal society, the “cult of the dollar” represents a Christian and capitalist “dogma” in *El río sin orillas*: Christian iconography provides the false aura of neo-liberal capitalism. This particular aesthetics of politics converges with the military regime’s stated defense, voiced often by its ideologues, of “Western and Christian civilization,” a state “dogma” that explicitly sought to identify and eradicate “heresies.” In the depiction of this “cult,” “Winter” taps a tradition of political invective that represented monopoly capitalism as a “cruel, insatiable, and sordid divinity,” a discourse common among anarchists, socialists, and

communists since the end of the nineteenth century (201). For Saer, though, Paul Lafargue's claim that the only god of capitalists, whatever their faith, was Capital itself, suggested a monotheistic imaginary not easily adapted to the "cult of the dollar" in the Río de la Plata; instead, polytheism, paganism, and the Greek or Roman pantheon provided a more adequate imaginary for the region. Although during the moment of parity, the economy manifested the "divine essence of the American currency" (202), the massive debt accrued by the State led to subsequent devaluation and hyperinflation in a new flight of the gods. "Winter" draws a comparison between the return of the dollar to its former Olympian heights and the luminous, benevolent, but all too brief appearance of the "Virgin" (the dollar), who left the "little priests" (the middle class) with only nostalgia for the miracle, while the partially shattered aura of the dollar, like the dispersed "relics" of a saint, returned to mere domestic or household gods.²⁷⁰ For Saer, the denomination of "sweet silver" merely served as a "pious but transparent veil that tries to cover the most repulsive deformities" (201). Adapting Benjamin, we could say that the "cult of the dollar" presents a destructive preservation of aura: on the one hand, it served as a "pious but transparent veil" during the atrocities of the dirty war; on the other, even when the "mirage of prosperity" disappeared, the new regime of debt left real material devastation, a situation that reached a certain critical point in the economic crises at the beginning of the new millennium.

This conjoining of ideology, myth, and machine has significant consequences for final form that the disjunctive oppositions in the region have taken. If in "Atridas y Labdácidas" (1974), Saer had figured Homer as the "inventor of the West" (36), "Winter" ends by displacing "the disjunctive of belonging to the West or not" (205), the opposition that replaced the earlier "civilization" or "barbarism," and "Europeanizing" or "nationalist" positions. For Saer, this disjunctive not only ended without resolution, but it would be "absurd" to pose it again for two

principal reasons: one, the unending debates about national identity were replaced by the “inhuman breaths” and “bloody explosion of the seventies”; and second, the way the problems of immigration in “Western industrialized countries” are now framed repeats, in both its language and form, the ideologies of “patriarchal society” in the Río de la Plata when it “felt its privileges threatened.” Saer’s interregional critique presents the Río de Plata as an “initial mirage” that anticipates the mass migrations of the twentieth century as well as the ideological reactions to them—a critique that holds as well for France, Saer’s place of residence, as it does for the United States. *El río sin orillas* anticipates the re-minting of the ideologeme “Western civilization” that began only a few years later.²⁷¹ In Saer’s narrative text, the attempt to suture “the West” to an epic narrative of “civilization” produces the “inhuman breath” and violence of Argentina’s last dictatorship. Rather than “transcend” civilization or Occidentalism, as if “the West” was itself a stable identity or locus, *El río sin orillas* dismantles the point where the civilizational epic becomes the dogma of “Christian and Western civilization.”

“Winter” accordingly ends in a series of negations that begins with the refusal of any “affirmative identity” (206). Against belonging to a country or a tradition, recognizing oneself in a name, a social position, “Saer” offers a possibly more “legitimate pride” in “recognizing oneself as nothing, as less than nothing, mysterious fruit of contingency, product of inextricable combinations that equate all living things [*igualan a todo lo viviente*] in the same fugitive and hazardous presence.” This “fugitive” and “hazardous” presence gives *lo viviente* a sense of being both fleeting and in flight from the law. These qualities do not make “the living” into the opposite of what did not escape or what has been relegated to the margins of official culture (the “crowd of inconceivable shadows” or the “army of phantasms”), but rather their precarious other side. If previously the ephemeral appearance of beauty has tended to take on a “mockery”

(Adorno) or “caricature” (Borges) in the context of terror, “Spring” marks the moment of a more overt defense of “beauty,” “happiness,” and the experience of a new present. The central scene that stages this conjunction and the theoretical formulation that Saer draws from it—the “end of art” as the task to represent “the Same” rather than “the Other” (219)—will allow a critical recasting of contemporary debates about the “end” of literature or art. For this aesthetic scene also repeats and suspends the decision of the final event in the sequence of myths: the moment when Odysseus secures his right to the ship along with his right to leisure by seizing the fig tree above Charybdis. The narrative of “Spring” does not, in this sense, represent a “heresy,” a designation that still depends on “dogma” as either an explicit or implicit reference for its transgression. It returns instead to the dual sense of myth after the nightmare of recent history.

“Spring”: The End(s) of Literature, the Common Logos, and a World in Alteration

The return to the narrative present in “Spring” presents a more generalized landscape of shipwreck and suspension. The “post-industrial landscape” and “de-activated port” in Saer’s province of Santa Fe set the stage for a shift from a concern with the return of the ship to the moment under the tree, the right to leisure. Prefiguring the scene that will illustrate them, Saer’s more general aesthetic formulations and concepts—the sensation of “forming a single body with the world” and the experience of “happiness”—set the scene on the banks of the river under a tree: “Neither a deserved gift nor an anticipation of some transcendence, [happiness] settles in us when we walk in the vicinity of the river under the great flowering acacias.... In the luminous morning, walking over the yellow flowers that cover the path, the infinite present is no longer captured by the senses but in perfect entity with them” (208). In the introduction, the acacia competes for “aesthetic stardom” in Spring with the jacaranda and lapacho, two trees, Saer notes,

that were used as adjectives to beautify the country abroad during the dirty war (27). However, when Saer turns to demonstrate these general formulations with the “particularity and immediacy of the sensations and emotions,” he displaces the “stardom” of the acacia with a willow. Besides marking the first sign of Spring with its leaves, the willow also accesses a different aesthetic register and tradition. On the one hand, it anthropomorphically embodies the traits associated with Odysseus: despite the “slightly theatrical suffering” to which it owes its prestige, the “true temperament” of the willow is “extremely practical and rational” (211). On the other, *En el aura del sauce (In the Aura of the Willow)*, the title of the collected poetry of one of Saer’s literary mentors, Juan L. Ortiz, alludes to both the auratic experience under a willow and a poetic performance of the river “without banks” in the final sections of the narrative.

The “delight” of this experience does not come from either of the traditional aesthetic criteria: “the pleasant organization of the elements that composed the landscape”; or, the “supposed moral satisfaction that the civilized man searches for in the reencounter with nature” (212). Rather, it comes from both a “consent” of the senses to what is “exterior” to them and an unexpected jolt that allows, in turn, a new perception of this “exteriority.” As we see in what follows, this exteriority is initially inscribed in race and class categories. Saer, sitting on the banks of the river under a willow tree, is startled by the voices and hoof beats of old woman, children, and a horse approaching the river. This informal *mestizo* family belonged to the category of “the poor,” a social class “almost a race apart,” often racialized by the epithet *negros* even though few are of African descent (214). That they have been “[e]xpelled to the exterior of the villages” or installed in a “no man’s land” echoes the mythic violence of the epic sequence, while a series of plays on the word for “coup” (*golpe*) accompany their sudden arrival at the riverbanks, recalling Echeverría’s association of Scylla with the oligarchic dictatorship of Rosas.

The scene, however, presents a moment of auratic appearance that then dissolves these categories of negative difference and alterity into a representation of sameness. The children run into the water and, as the older woman lifts up her dress to wade in after them, Saer describes “a sudden sensation of intense and delightful freshness” in his own feet, an almost erotic description of the “caressing liquid” that travels up his own legs despite being fully clothed under the willow tree (217). In the interplay of distance and nearness, this auratic experience appears as the suppressed trace of a relation not just with non-human “nature,” but also with the racialized subjects relegated to the borders of the human. Saer sets the scene as a fragmentation of bodies and incorporated tastes. The cliché that sex is “the only luxury of the poor” is false not only, Saer asserts, because our sensations are not a “luxury,” but also because it assumes a “unicity of sensations” associated more with the “monad” than the “individual” (209). The monadic untransferability of sensations, Saer asserts, sustains a “myth” and “illusion” of the rich, who assume that their right to eat caviar is because only they know how to distinguish and appreciate the delicate sensations of its taste.

The shared sensation with the older woman entering the water then shows Saer “the tenuous mirage of the individual,” inspiring him to gloss a fragment from Heraclitus evoked in both *Nadie nada nunca* and *El entenado*, as I have suggested in the previous chapter. Against Enesidemus’ claim, who maintains that some phenomenon are perceived only by an individual, Saer affirms Heraclitus and Epicurus’ position that the “Logos is common to all” (218). We should understand “Logos” here not just as “speech.” As the example suggests, “Logos” also involves an “ac-count”: a count and accounting for the common, for who can or cannot sense, perceive, or think specific things.²⁷² The fragment, then, that “Those who enter in the same rivers bath themselves in the current of an always new water,” becomes “it is possible that the

river changes continuously, but its always one and the same person who enters it [*siempre es uno y el mismo el que penetra en él*].” This gloss provides the conditions for Saer’s claims about literature and art. The function of literature becomes the creation of an object that “points towards that which specialists and layman have in common,” and the “end of art,” Saer affirms, “is not to represent the Other, but the Same” (219). This prescription to “represent the Same” dissolves the aura of the scene; to use Benjamin’s language, it extracts sameness from what is unique. Saer’s imaginary treatise, however, not only presents something other than what Benjamin calls a “destruction of aura, a stripping of the veil.” But it also reintroduces this conceptual moment back into the narrative, rather than making it an end or telos.

It is thus worth pausing to examine the paradox of this conceptual gesture that brings Saer’s imaginary treatise in proximity to philosophy. On the one hand, the aesthetic subject that is “one and the same” does not preexist this representation of “the Same” and, in the narrative, only appears with a figurative return of what had been swallowed up in the recurring mythical violence. In this sense, it too bears comparison with an egalitarian indifference to differences that, I argued, is also operative in Lispector’s *A paixão*. “Winter,” though, ends with the injunction to “recognize oneself as nothing, as less than nothing, as the fruit of contingency,” a state not unlike Lispector’s G.H., who becomes “larval” in a “refuge of indifference.” But there is also no corresponding conceptual moment of sameness in Lispector’s *Paixão*, and an “end of art” ambiguously suggests both a positive goal or *telos* as well as art’s abolishment—in this case, by philosophy. Moreover, several factors trouble this concept of “the Same” as an affirmative prescription in itself. Besides the masculine gendering of the new subject who is “one and the same” (*uno y el mismo*), the poem by Wallace Stevens that Saer excerpts from, “Anecdote of Men by the Thousands,” reinforces the scene’s gendered vision: “The dress on a woman from

Lassa [sic], / In its place, / Is an invisible element of that place / Made visible” (219). While the enjambment in the third line of the stanza ironically alludes to an “unveiling” or “stripping of the veil” (the dress appears momentarily as an “invisible element”), the final line makes the local dress newly “visible” as a veil without, of course, actually making *it* visible: the dress connotes local color but we do not know what it looks like. Saer’s gloss on the poem is that “the exterior of a place is no more than a manifestation of something that is [*es*] not proper to this place, and that is [*está*], not properly in any part, but rather in all parts, which is equivalent to saying the same.” The emphasis on “the exterior” as what is not proper, ontologically, to any place or part, applies to several elements of the scene: the sociological discourse that renders the group a “race apart”; the position of the “foreign” poet-tourist (a position Saer ironically doubles); and finally, the river itself as the “dress” that covers the legs of both the anonymous woman and Saer.

While the older woman and the children disappear here—only to suddenly reappear from the water thirty pages later at the very end—the narrative turns to the river’s unstable and changing surface as “veil.” Rather than “exotic,” Saer suggests, the rivers are instead “the result of a series of geological, geographic, and human contingencies, in which, beneath local color, the common Logos follows the soliloquy of its covering with the world [*el Logos común prosigue el soliloquio de su empastamiento con el mundo*]” (220). In this formulation, the “soliloquy” is produced by a “covering” (*empastamiento*)—or, to draw on the meaning of *empastador* (“book binder”), a “binding”—of the “common Logos” with “the world.” Although the remainder of “Spring” narrates a final trip to the post-industrial port of Santa Fe, the trip itself is inseparable from the “soliloquy” that emerges from the multiple meanings of Saer’s polysemic neologism, *empastamiento*. Rather than making the invisible finally visible, or resting on the experience of

invisible exteriority, the world in this final section appears in alteration: an alter-world where the same can turn into the other, or heteronomy into autonomy, and vice versa.

The enmeshing of world and text is clear from the first example Saer explicitly gives to illustrate this *empastamiento*: the difficulty of describing the color of the rivers' waters. The collage of poetic verse that Saer draws from to illustrate this difficulty—Leopoldo Lugones, the national hymn, early Borges, and an anonymous gaucho—repeats the elements that composed the previous scene under the tree, but in a more *criollo* nationalist register. The connotations of race and nation in these descriptions also suggest how the “banks” have not yet been left behind: the water that is “brown like an Inca” (Lugones), a “light brown” usually applied to horses (Borges), and the “lion” color symbolically inherited from Spain (Lugones, the national hymn); or alternatively, various blues reflecting the sky, the colors of the Argentine flag, and a horse's coat (Borges), this last blue—*azulejo*—rendered enigmatically in the reported speech of gaucho as “a body projecting into the light [*sobresaliente a claridad*]” (222-223).

In this context, Saer's citations of Juan L. Ortiz's “post-symbolist” poetry take on a critical role. As if emerging from the titular tree, *In the Aura of the Willow*, Ortiz's lyric verse repeats some of the same imagery in a more ironic tone, playfully invoking them as transitory moments of the water's appearance. In addition to undermining the *criollo* appeal to authentic regional subjects, consistent with what Saer calls Ortiz's hostility to provincialism and nationalism alike (225), the poetic verse of “Juan L.” also submits Saer's descriptions of the river to the same process of dissolution and erasure. Despite its objectively descriptive cast, Saer's experience of the river's color does not initially escape the symbolic doubling of color and race: “it should not be forgotten that the sky is reflected in a pinkish or yellowish surface, in such a way that the tint of the water is indefinable; when the surface is pinkish, the water requires an iridescent aspect,

and when it is more beige, it is diluted and sometimes greenish-blue that recalls certain frescoes of Tuscany or Umbria” (223). Just as the “pinkish” becomes “iridescent,” the “beige” is diluted and replaced by Saer’s painterly references. Implicitly playing on the sense of *empastar* as “to daub,” these references both evoke the religious themes of the frescoes and cover over them with material daubs of color. As if in impatient response, though, Ortiz’s cited verse then undoes and dissolves Saer’s painterly “daubing” of the waters as well: “Yes, yes / the green and blue, revealed, / which tremble at about ten because they’re leaving / and in the middle of the afternoon they undo or lose themselves / in their own incredibly fragile water...” (223). It is thus Ortiz’s verse that dissolves the remnants of the “banks,” poetically enacting the title of Saer’s treatise. This dissolution, where the banks are finally, if only momentarily, left behind, displaces Saer with a discussion of the poetry and figure of “Juan L.” himself.

Although the discussion of “Juan L.” leads to one final evocation of being symbolically ground up, this ritual returns the Charybdis-like crab-woman to the “primal scene” of the region: the cannibal myth from *El entenado*. Despite *El río* coinciding with the end of what Eric Hobsbawm has called the “short” twentieth century (1917-1990), the disintegration of the Soviet State does little to disqualify the aesthetic and political tradition within which Saer explicitly inscribes “Juan L” and implicitly himself. For Saer, the poetry of Juan L. appears centrally concerned with the aesthetic dilemma identified by Adorno: “the scandal of evil and suffering that necessarily disturbs the contemplation of a world that is also a source of inexhaustible beauty” (228). Politically, Ortiz maintained a life-long sympathy towards communism, but as what Saer calls a “dissident,” friendly with militants but irreverent towards party leaders and sectarians (225). This discussion then fittingly ends with Saer recalling the formation of an archetypal island adjacent to Juan L.’s house, an emergence likened to both the “birth” of a baby

and the inauguration of a “world” in Egyptian cosmogony (231). This archetypal figure of natality nonetheless formally resembles the other islands of the Delta that contribute to the water’s immobility: “profuse, immobile, and indolent, [the islands] interfere with and break the current, inducing it to enter the Río de la Plata, ‘*through twenty two mouths*.’” This interference also modifies the anonymous citation that first introduces the place that Juan L. “transformed into a landscape and cosmic intercrossing” (224). In the earlier citation, the full quote more clearly invoked the “primal scene” of the region and *El entenado*, since it was the Paraná River that “entered in Solís’ river through twenty two mouths” (224). Saer’s modification leaves the patronymic names behind (Solís and the Paraná, Guaraní for “Father of rivers”), focusing instead on the break in the current induced by these islands and the subsequent passage into the Río de la Plata through the “mouths.”

The final trip by bus to Saer’s native province brings the results of this passage into view: the postindustrial landscape of the port where technological development and progress appear suspended. Here, the narrative evokes various figures of “indolence”—the roadside sandwich and strawberry vendors, a memory of an Indian boy reading a comic book in a roadside median outside the Bogotá airport—that appear to the returning writer as examples of “gentleness” or “sweetness” (*dulzura*) (236). This revalorization of “indolence” accompanies an aesthetic revalorization of the port’s in-between status—not yet abandoned, not yet reactivated—as its distinctive “beauty” (237). For the returning writer, the various weathered, worn, and retouched objects of the provincial port acquire an “aura of affectionate familiarity.” And, as with Benjamin’s notion, the aura of these objects emerges in dialectical tension with the factory-new products of consumer society. The “archaic technology waiting for an improbable second use,” Saer suggests, should not be seen as an “economic and industrial anachronism.” Instead, the old

cars that have been “shipwrecked” on back patios demonstrate how the “prototype” of reproducible models becomes a “unique object”: “through having evacuated the prejudice of utility, and having covered itself [*empastarse*] again in, as well as confused itself with, nature, [this archaic technology] has gained aesthetic autonomy.” The becoming-autonomous of the object thus stages the dissolution of its prototypical sameness. But it also enacts a particularly regional sense of the phrase *empastamiento con el mundo*, since the verb *empastar* additionally signifies “to convert into pasture.”

Yet, while the sameness of this object is here dissolved, the egalitarian deployment of subjective sameness returns in the example that follows shortly after: the “half-Indian” young women who have come to work as prostitutes in the bars of the inactive provincial port and whom a chaste public casts ambiguously as “living, and sometimes extremely attractive, attacks on public morality” (239). Saer reads the sex workers instead as “symptoms” of a general “exodus” from the country to the cities. In this sense, they become symptoms of a sameness that includes Saer’s own “exile” in Paris: whether they move from the rural areas to the provincial cities, or from the latter to Buenos Aires and the U.S. or Europe, it is the “possibility of perverting oneself and becoming somebody” that drives this general exodus (240). If, on the side of the object, heteronymous sameness converts into aesthetic autonomy, on the side of the subject, autonomy is subordinated to this condition of heteronymous sameness.

Both of these components are a part of the reconfiguration of aesthetic space as a monad, “windowless,” as Adorno asserts, but not closed to the world. With a humorous but not mocking tone, Saer connects this space to the unfolding of a popular epic. For although the favorable weather, Saer suggests, may be the “only gift” for those who have nothing, those who possess something “usually enjoy their property in the middle of a *little plot of land* [*terrenito*], a meager

rectangle of countryside incorporated into the city that is the first step in a very large epic, made of perseverance, fears, anguish, and unexpected events, which the less favored classes must struggle against to possess their own house” (242). The “epic” unfolding of this “plot of land” [*terrenito*], the patio, can be directly contraposed to the desire in the introduction for a “plot” [*parcela*] of the immutable, colorless surface of the water to open immediately into an unveiled “whole.” This difficult and slow process faced by the popular classes gives the “covering with the world” (*empastamiento con el mundo*) a constructive cast: on the one hand, it evokes the sense of *empastar* as “to cover [the walls] with plaster”; on the other, the constructive materials now include the “perseverance, fears, anguish, and unexpected events” endured by those whose status as “exiles” (*desterrados*) is closer to landless (*sin tierra*). Saer’s discussion of the various trees that can be found in this semi-public space of the house then evokes another regional sense of *empastamiento* as the “plantings” on the patio. The patio even begins to take on a polemical cast as a counter to the numerous national psycho-sociological treatises on the “silent Argentine” (243). For proof, Saer refers to the recent increase of the already “deafening noise” in local bars and restaurants, as pianists have been added to even the more elegant dining rooms in the center of Buenos Aires. The writer returning from Paris recounts the “terror” he experiences when both clientele and staff suddenly break out in song, accompanying the lyrics of a tango. In this postmodern hybrid of mass and high cultural tastes, the implicit enactment of *empastamiento* as an orchestral “sounding out” appears in a more negative light. Indeed, this “sounding out” contrasts with the more subdued soliloquy that recounts the scene under “the aura of the willow.” The earlier scene, moreover, can now more clearly be read as a narrative incorporation of the provincial countryside into the metropolitan texture of Saer’s urban city of residence—the “plantings” on the “patio” that the narrative text reconstructs as its world.

The critical potential of this regional restaging of the world emerges in its capacity to interrupt a narrative of global sameness. For despite the “urbanization of the countryside” and the extension of “urban civilization” to all corners of the globe, Saer argues, the urbanizing process of “civilization” essentially remains incomplete (245). Extending the critical potential beyond domestic space, Saer appeals to Gombrowicz’s observations about the “sensual indolence of public comportment” and the traces of “provincial society” even in the center of Buenos Aires (247). In this sense, the image of “planetary uniformization” at the end of “Summer” now appears as a contestable fiction through the regional “singularity” that had earlier seemed to confirm this same tendency. The last juxtaposition returns to the analogy with the stage as the urban “balcony,” which facilitates an “aseptic crowd bath,” contrasts with the more intimate and private space of the regional “terrace” (248). For while the balcony maintains a spectacular relation with social life, where one sees “the great theater of the world” and is seen by it, the terrace reconstitutes different limits to the aesthetic space of the text, as the appearance of the moon, stars, and sky usher in the return of Heraclitus’s “common Logos.”

In this respect, then, *El río sin orillas* can be reconstellated with the end of *El entenado* (the narrator “with, but also among the stars”), but also, I want to suggest, with Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.* and *A hora da estrela*. Both *El entenado* and *A hora da estrela* depict negative constellations that momentarily flash up in the eclipse of the other (Macabéa and the Colastiné). *El río sin orillas* ends with a similar constellated sky. While the constellation in *El entenado* alters the more definitive “collapse” with a more uncertain “eclipse” of the disappeared Indians, the constellation in *El río sin orillas* suddenly dissolves when the old woman whom “had entered the river to her knees” thirty pages earlier suddenly returns to the banks. The reappearance of the woman and children supplement both the indeterminate finality of *El entenado* and the cruel

judgment in “Summer”: that the defeated tribes had been reduced to “toothless and tattered vestiges” in the country’s Northern and Southern peripheries or “embalmed” as silent statues in the Natural History museum of the Río de la Plata. In a final play on *empastamiento* as the “filling” of cavities, this world *fills* the gaps of silence that excluded them from a “common Logos”: together with their features and skin color, the children’s rapid and shrill voices are perceived as signs indicating the persistence of the “disappeared Indians” (249). While this recognition returns a certain alterity to the subjects subsumed earlier as “one and the same,” Saer also no longer appears as an identical subject. Although most of the descendents of Indians had Spanish surnames, the names could also be “Polish, Arab, Anglo-Saxon, Italian.” Saer recounts an anecdote of George Chaworth Muster who, in 1869, discovered with some pride that the Tehuelche Chief Casimiro had an English-speaking son named “Sam Slick.” To follow this associative register, it would thus also be possible to encounter one of the descendents of the “disappeared Indians” with an Arab name like “Saer.” “Saer” is thus also altered through a disidentification with the identity of the immigrant writer and the displacement of the proper name. This final scene also suggests a gloss on the literato’s two approaches to cannibalism cited in “Summer”: Borges’ joke, “where Juan Díaz fasted and the Indians ate,” a form of non-relation between the two; and the puerile claim, “we are the descendents of those who ate Solís,” an extreme case of identification. This final scene suggests instead the following: although not properly related as family, Saer’s “we” is *not unrelated* to the descendents of the disappeared Indians. In this sense, the final scene on the banks of the river stages a similar ethical relation of the unrelated that Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.* ends with: “simply being in the corner and the other there too.”

The constellation of these monadic aesthetic spaces—one in an urban Rio de Janeiro penthouse at the beginning of the Brazilian military dictatorship and the other on the banks of a provincial Santa Fe river in post-dictatorship Argentina—provoke some pause over the various discourses that tie literature to an “epochal” shift occasioned by the dictatorships or to general narratives of “collapse.” As I have shown, though, the appearance of this scene is not indifferent to history or to a tradition defined by recurring conflicts, conflicts that are both abstract (a capitalist driven “planetary uniformization”) and concretely specific (its ex-colonial particularities). Saer’s “imaginary treatise” does not refute these larger narratives nor suggest an end to the conflicts. More modestly, it returns at the end to recurring scenes in Saer work: the gathering of friends around a feast or meal. The form it takes here, the typical Argentine barbecue or *asado*, operates as both “ritual of evocation of the past” and “a promise of reencounter and communion” (251). Yet this “nucleus” of the Argentine’s “mythology” and “mysticism” also provides a final alteration of the sequence of episodes from *The Odyssey*. The promise of this ritual does not reinscribe the logic of the exceptional or superior part associated with exile. Rather, it effectively blurs the distinction between the moment repeated throughout *El río*—the crew who, in devouring the sacred cattle of Helios, provoke the mythic violence of the gods—and the final moment when the judge returns home to eat dinner, the moment of indecision when the ship is vomited back out, offering only Odysseus the “loophole” of escape. *El río* ends without any judgment of this precarious collective whose “ritual and promise” gives “an illusion of historical and cultural continuity” to the writer (251). These illusions and impressions, Saer asserts, should not be differentiated from those that make any other life possible. At the same time, though, they nonetheless recuperate a specific myth: one that

temporarily neutralizes the “war” between stomachs and consciences, or between incorporative violence and the right to leisure, and suspends the law preserving these hierarchical distinctions.

End Notes

¹ On world literature as a structured space, see Casanova *The World Republic* and “Literature as a World”; on a world-systems approach, see Moretti “Conjectures” and “More Conjectures”; on a return to the Goethean notion of *Weltliteratur* to consider works that move from their culture or language “of origin” to another literary system, see Damrosch. For two of the more influential philosophical approaches, see Nancy *The Creation of the World* and Badiou *Logic of Worlds*. Badiou develops a rigorous logic of the “transcendental” that measures degrees of appearance and existence, but the various theories of “world literature,” I suggest, also operate with a similar logic.

² Casanova *The World Republic* 88-89; 54.

³ “More Conjectures” 78-9. The formulation is Moretti’s own summary of his original proposal (“Conjecture”) in light of critiques, but the problem predates this focus and persists, as I return to below.

⁴ *Modern Epic* 233; *The Atlas of the European Novel* 193-6.

⁵ I am summarizing a multiplicity of positions within larger and often diverging projects, though many of these authors are also gathered together in the collection edited by Ileana Rodríguez, *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, published just after the formal disbanding of the U.S.-based Latin American Subaltern Studies group. On Spanish American testimonio, see especially the essays edited by Gugelberger in *The Real Thing*; on subalternity, see especially, Beverley *Subalternity and Representation*, but also the edited volume by Rivera Cusicanqui and Barragán, *Debates postcoloniales*; on cultural heterogeneity, see especially Cornejo Polar, “*Indigenismo* and Heterogeneous Literatures” and *Escribir*; on the lettered city and the coloniality of power, see respectively Rama *La ciudad letrada*, Quijano “Colonialidad y modernidad / racionalidad,” “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentricism, and Latin America,” and Mignolo’s *Local Histories/Global Designs*; on a deconstructive Latin Americanism, see above all Moreiras *The Exhaustion of Difference* and on a philosophy of liberation, see Dussel’s early *Introducción a la filosofía de liberación latinoamericana*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Portuguese and Spanish are my own.

⁶ Férrez *Literatura marginal*; Rocha “Dialéctica”; Santiago “Cosmopolitismo do pobre”; “Uma literatura anfíbia,” both in *O cosmopolitismo do pobre*.

⁷ *The Order of Things* 310; 325-7. Foucault’s characteristically sweeping statement, “From now on, all languages have an equal value: they simply have internal structures” (311), obviously makes more sense as Foucault’s reading of Borges. It disregards the role the new philology plays in a pan-European Orientalism (Said *Orientalism*) or what Casanova calls the “literary and cultural capital” that major languages (like French) acquire (*World Republic* 17).

⁸ *The Politics of Literature* 13, 12. Rancière’s *Mute Speech* first lays out this argument that literature is neither organically continuous nor radically discontinuous with *belles lettres*, but his inquiries into a new aesthetic regime effectively began with nineteenth century French workers’ writing (*The Nights of Labor*). Besides Foucault, *Mute Speech* also establishes an implicit dialogue with Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *The Literary Absolute* (1978).

⁹ Rancière *The Politics of Literature* 49-63. This chapter of the book is titled “The Putting to Death of Emma Bovary.”

¹⁰ *The World Republic* 17, 86-89. Although Casanova notes that her use of “literarity” is “very close” to Jakobson’s definition—“that by virtue of which a language or text is literary, or may be

said to be literary” (359 n.20)—she clearly reinterprets it in terms of Bourdieu’s logic of the literary field.

¹¹ For an argument that this “literarity” could include forms of spoken language that can be appropriated by anyone, see Davis 107-8. Davis, however, completely misses the logic of disagreement when he argues that Rancière should have chosen another term to avoid confusion with Jakobson’s structuralist notion of “literarity” (108-9): literature opens up competing paradigms of literary equality and “democracy.” *Literatura marginal* in Brazil, as I return to in chapter one, names the new literature of marginalized subjects from the urban peripheries. As Ferréz, the writer largely responsible for the reminting of this term, puts it: “I also don’t think my community should limit itself to my literature, it has the right of access to Flaubert” (qtd. in Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda “Literatura Marginal”; but see also Ferréz “Grandes homens”).

¹² Ludmer *Aquí América Latina* 149-156; Casanova *World Republic* 345-7. Casanova adopts Bourdieu’s “subfield of restricted production” to refer to the autonomous, avant-garde pole on the fringes of mainstream publishing, and his “large-scale literary production” to refer to the heteronomous, commercial pole that now, with the loss of Paris as a transcendental measure, threatens autonomy in every national space (168-9; Bourdieu *The Field* 115-118). Ludmer’s argument assumes the horizon of the commercial pole, what she calls the “industry of language,” as now determinant (150, 156), largely following Jameson’s argument in *Postmodernism*.

¹³ Goethe 175. Goethe’s Eurocentricism, Damrosch argues, remained somewhat permeable because it competed with his elitism: a Chinese novel attained a more secure place than the *Nibelungenlied* or popular poetry (13).

¹⁴ For a collection of Latin Americanist responses, see the essays edited by Sánchez-Prado in *América Latina en la ‘literatura mundial’*, but also Siskind “Globalization” and Schwarz “Leituras,” and the essays collected in *Debating World Literature*, edited by Prendergast.

¹⁵ Harvey proposes the term “accumulation by dispossession” to account for the continued renewal of what Marx, following Adam Smith, called “original” or “primitive accumulation,” especially during periods of overaccumulation and financial speculation (141-5). To circumvent the problem of overaccumulation, Harvey asserts, capitalism requires assets like “empty land or new raw material resources” (143) that must be produced if none lie at hand.

¹⁶ In *Escribir en el aire* (1994), Cornejo Polar emphasized this as a general problem for specialists in literature who, faced by many subaltern discourses, must find “a place from which the relation with our academic practice does not end up making the discourse of the subaltern little more than the raw material of a product made in our image and likeness” (203). “Mestizaje e hibridez” (1998), the last essay he wrote before his death, implies that the combined hegemony of postmodern theory and English-language scholarship in the field ends up reproducing this placeless industry.

¹⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” 101; Bourdieu *Distinction* 190; 485-500. Although the former focuses on the object and the latter on the subject, both involve a correlation between subjective and objective: the culture industry ostensibly reproduces certain kinds of subjective conformity to instrumental rationality; and taste ostensibly reproduces certain kinds of objective class determinations and judgment (the “pure” taste cultivated by the petit bourgeois intellectual and an “impure” carnivalesque taste embodied by the popular classes).

¹⁸ Borges “El escritor argentino” 161; Saer “Tradición y cambio” 103-4.

¹⁹ “Instinto” 804. Despite the differences between the two national literatures and the difference in dates, both Borges’ and Machado’s critiques emerge against the consolidation of tradition

through a unified national literary system (Candido) or autonomous sphere (Sarlo). On the former, see the two volumes of Candido's *A formação da literatura brasileira*, which dates the completion of this process around 1870; on the latter, see Sarlo *La modernidad*, which focuses on the 1920s and 1930s in Argentina.

²⁰ On this category and the relation between intellectuals and the modernizing Brazilian state more generally, see Miceli (*Intelectuais à brasileira* 231-4; and *passim*). Although Lispector's writing emerged in the period of Miceli's classic study (1920-1945) and she worked briefly for the Estado Novo's *Agência nacional*, she does not figure among the writers studied.

²¹ Although she wrote a column signed "Teresa Quadros" for *Comício* earlier in the 1950s, the columns signed "Helen Palmer" for *Correio da Manhã* was sponsored by a face cream (the contract is among her papers at the Fundação da Casa Rui Barbosa) and ghostwrote a column for the actress Ilka Soares that appeared in *Diário da Noite*. Though she rigorously kept this writing dissociated from her literary name and persona, they have been recently reunited in the collection, *Só para mulheres*.

²² Two more, *Quase de verdade* (1978) and *Como nasceram as estrelas* (1987), were published posthumously.

²³ Wasserman uses the formulation "central at the margins" to theorize the paradoxical position of important twentieth century women writers (including Lispector) within Brazilian literature (*Central*).

²⁴ The philosophical-existential and metalinguistic-epiphanic formalist readings are well represented in the excellent critical edition of *A paixão segundo G.H.*, coordinated by the Brazilian philosopher and critic Benedito Nunes. Nunes' *O mundo de Clarice Lispector* (1966), *O dorso do tigre* (1969), and *Leitura de Clarice Lispector* (1973; expanded into *O drama da linguagem* [1989]) contributed to both lines and remain important touchstones for later work, including my own. The secondary literature on Lispector is vast. In what follows, I focus on some of the more important work as it relates to my study.

²⁵ Cixous' writing on Lispector dates from 1979; see especially "L'approche" and *Vivre l'orange*, but also *Reading with Clarice Lispector* and "Writing and the Law." For recent histories of Lispector's critical reception inside and outside Brazil, see Ferreira-Pinto Bailey "Clarice Lispector e a crítica"; Chiapinni "Clarice e a crítica"; Sousa (97-105); for her reception in the U.S., see Teresa Monteiro "The Early Dissemination in the United States"; on the translation history of her work, see the special issue of *Cadernos de literatura brasileira* on Clarice Lispector (304-307). For a brief overview of the subsequent resonance Lispector had especially within French and Italian feminist theory, see Braidotti ("Nomadic Subjects" 192-194). Both Peixoto (*Passionate Fictions* 39-59) and Klobucka present subtle feminist critiques of the way Cixous claims an ethics of openness to alterity but disavows her appropriation of Lispector's "voice"; see also Helena and Carrera.

²⁶ Chiapinni "Pelas ruas" 61. Chiapinni emphasizes an early 1963 essay by Gilda Mello de Souza ("O vertiginoso relance") and later Solange (*A barata*; "Rumo à Eva futura") as opening these questions often ignored by other critics. Although I diverge on important points with Chiapinni and Jean Franco (*The Decline and Fall* 203-211), both read *A paixão* and *A hora* in productive dialogue.

²⁷ On a reopening of the question of Jewish culture and Judaic-inflected thought on Lispector's work, see above all Vieira "A linguagem espiritual," "Clarice Lispector: A Jewish Impulse"; Waldman "Jewish Voices," "Uma cadeira e duas maçãs," "Não matarás"; Varin; Margarido; Di

Antonio; Wasserman (“Misticismo”); and Moser. For a critique of the impressionistic identity claims of some of this criticism, see Lindstrom “Patterns of Allusions” and the more measured “Judaic Traces.”

²⁸ Moser’s comprehensive biography (the first in English after Borelli, Waldman, Gottlib, Montero) reads Lispector within an “invisible stream of Jewish mysticism” that Gershom Sholem thought might emerge after the Holocaust (106) and has helped issue in a new wave of retranslations of her work into English. For readings of Lispector inflected by nomadism or deterritorialization via Deleuze and Guattari, see the excellent study of Sousa, but also Curi, Dinis, Nina.

²⁹ Sarlo “Narrar la percepción”; Stern “Juan José Saer y la construcción,” “El espacio intertextual”; Gramuglio “La filosofía,” “El lugar de Saer”; Montaldo *Juan José Saer*. I largely follow here the periodizations of Saer’s corpus both in Premat’s extensive study (*Dicha* 19) and Riera’s (*Littoral* 17-19). Bermúdez Martínez, herself author of an important study of Saer (*Incertidumbres de lo real*), provides a history of more recent critical studies of Saer (“Vislumbre”) following the period covered by Dalmaroni, both of which are included in the massive combined critical edition of *Glosa* and *El entenado*.

³⁰ For two examples of more positive readings, see de Grandis and Pons; for much more critical readings, see Chanady and Verdesio. Both Garramuño and Riera (“La ficción”) present different readings that begin to move away from the focus on history.

³¹ “Historia y novela” 145. Saer had made similar arguments about Antonio di Benedetto’s novel *Zama*, set in the eighteenth century (“*Zama*”). Saer’s quote on myth is taken from his intervention (“El valor del mito” 73) at a conference of Argentine writers on politics and history in Argentine fiction. Premat’s insightful psychoanalytically-inflected study, *La dicha del saturno*, proposes the centrality of the myth of Oedipus as a structuring element of Saer’s corpus as a whole; but see also Scavino (“Hospitalidad”) on the relation between myth and fiction in Saer.

³² Newcomb 25-43. Newcomb’s *Nossa and Nuestra America* presents an incisive comparative study of the ways central Brazilian and Spanish American intellectuals (Joaquim Nabuco, José Enrique Rodó, Alfonso Reyes, and Sergio Buarque de Hollanda) have approached these dis/connections.

³³ Candido’s classic two-volume *A formação da literatura brasileira* was first published in 1959. On the intersections between Rama and Candido, see the excellent essays of Rocco and Aguilar. For Candido’s own comments on Rama’s adaptation of his approach to the literary system, see the interview included in “Variações sobre temas de *Formação*” 114-115.

³⁴ “Fim do século” 157. Although Schwarz’s argument is restricted to the national, on these points, I suggest, it can be extended to the regional projections of Candido and Rama.

³⁵ Although the article was commissioned for *América Latina en su literatura* (1972), this Spanish version was preceded by a French version in the *Cahiers d’Histoire Mondiale* (1970). The Portuguese version was published in 1973 in the journal *Argumento*. I translate from the version republished in Candido’s collection of essays *A educação pela noite*.

³⁶ Candido “Literatura e subdesenvolvimento” 162, 161. “O que vemos agora... é uma florada novelística marcada pelo refinamento técnico, graças ao qual as regiões se transfiguram e os seus contornos humanos se subvertem, levando os traços antes pitorescos a se descarnarem e adquirirem universalidade” (161).

³⁷ On the persistently material and bodily dimension of Lispector's metaphysics or mysticism, see respectively Wasserman ("Misticismo") and Regina Pontieri (21).

³⁸ For an incisive introduction to Ortiz's theory, see especially Coronil. In what follows, I draw primarily from Rama's more book *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, published in 1982, but also his earlier essay "Los procesos de la transculturación narrativa" (1974).

³⁹ *Transculturación* 43. A particularly salient example of this minoritarian identity is Rama's discussion of *Antes o mundo não existia*, a collection of oral traditions compiled by a father and son from the Desâna tribe in the Amazonian region.

⁴⁰ For a critique of Candido's reliance in *A formação* on an "organic" conception of literary and social systems (inherited from English social anthropology), see Costa Lima ("Concepção" 156-162). Schwarz, on the other hand, argues that the unification of a national literary system around 1870, before the end of slavery, already suggests a more skeptical view of this achieved "formation," especially when compared to other progressive writers who projected a completed national formation: Caio Prado Jr., Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Celso Furtado ("Os sete fôlegos").

⁴¹ The burden of what D'Allemand calls Rama's "alternative modernizing model" (D'Allemand 133) is to show this other possibility at work in José María Arguedas' fictional engagement with Andean indigeneity.

⁴² For a more recent indictment of the "idea" of Latin America as an ideological project of the French and Latin American Creole-Mestizo elites, see Mignolo *The Idea of Latin America*.

⁴³ Cornejo Polar "Tradición migrante"; "Una heterogeneidad no-dialectica." In his own readings of Arguedas, Cornejo Polar argues that the mass migration from the Andean mountains to the city removed the utopian ground of an alternative modernization between the mountains and the coast of Peru, the idea of a hybrid rural-urban space shared by left intellectuals from Mariátegui to Arguedas and Rama. Brasília, the modernist urban-rural city in the desert interior of Brazil, provides another, more statist version of this modernizing process, as I return to in chapter one.

⁴⁴ Alberto Moreiras succinctly sums up this position in his account of Latin Americanist subaltern studies as "ultimately a consequence of the collapsed dream of Latin American nationally integrated modernizations," and a fundamentally "anti-integrationist and anticreole movement" (*The Exhaustion of Difference* 173).

⁴⁵ Sánchez-Prado 7. The quote is from Saer "La selva espesa" (7-8).

⁴⁶ "Acerca de la situación" 267. Cortázar's argument took the form of a letter responding to the inquest of the Cuban poet and critic Roberto Fernández Retamar on the "Latin American intellectual." Published in the important Cuban journal *Casa de las Américas*, in 1967, then republished in the second volume of Cortázar's *Último round* (1969), Cortázar's letter touched of a series of exchanges with Arguedas in various literary venues and Arguedas' diaries published with his last novel *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1968) shortly before Arguedas took his own life. For more recent reconsiderations of this polemic see Moraña "Territorialidad," but also Larsen "Cortázar" and Clayton (3-6).

⁴⁷ On the limited U.S. reception of Guimarães Rosa even within the context of the "boom," see Perrone. Besides frequent mention of Guimarães Rosa in Saer's critical texts, both "Alguns anos vivi em Itabira" and "Mis tíos narradores" testify to the importance of the Brazilian writer from Minas Gerais (the first in discussing the impact of another *mineiro*, the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, for Saer's generation of poets, and the second in relation to Guimarães Rosa's novella *Meu tio iauaretê*).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Siskind's "Critique of World Literature," which outlines how this logic continues to operate in influential disciplinary models like the 2007 MLA series "Teaching World Literature," as its inclusion of three token non-Euro-American texts suggests: "What lies behind the choice of *The Tale of Genji*'s eleventh-century account of the misadventures of Japanese courtesans, *Things Fall Apart*'s 1958 history of colonial unrest in Africa, and *Cien años de soledad*'s 1967 magical realist genealogical allegory is the belief that these texts can be taken to express the Japanese, African, and Latin American historical experiences" (355).

⁴⁹ "Conjectures on World Literature." In his response to critics, Moretti concedes the frailty of his initial "core-periphery" opposition between "autonomous developments" and "compromise" with foreign forms (the importance of Cervantes for the rise of the English novel is a case in point) ("More Conjectures" 79-80). However, the problem is not resolved by returning to the notion of "semi-periphery" or understanding Latin America as a "sub-system" (77, 75), since "compromise" effectively freezes all non-core literatures at a stage of functional inequality. Moretti's five volume *Il romano (The Novel)* presents a welcome widening and complication of this tendency.

⁵⁰ Saer "El valor del mito" 77; *El río* 208. In the former, originally an intervention in a conference of Argentine writers, Saer develops his point in a reading of Stephen Dedalus's famous utterance in *Ulysses*: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Olga de Sá provides the most systematic effort to read Lispector in light of the Joycean category of epiphanies in *A escritura*.

⁵¹ Santiago "Apesar de dependente, universal" 23. In recent years, Santiago has reformulated this approach in terms of a "cosmopolitanism of the poor" (*Cosmopolitanismo do pobre*).

⁵² Dussel "Beyond Eurocentricism" 22; Spivak *Death* 72, 73. Spivak originally presented her proposal of planetarity as a form of "planet-thought" and "planet-feeling" ("World-Systems" 108-9).

⁵³ Mignolo "Globalization" 45-6; *The Dark Side of the Renaissance* 90-1. Mignolo lists *antropofagia* among the contributions to his generalized "border gnosis" and "barbarian" theorizing" ("Globalization" 46), but attributes it to Haroldo de Campos and "Mário de Andrade," rather than Oswald de Andrade. Although the two central figures of Brazilian *modernismo* are often lumped together (despite the same last name, they are unrelated), Mignolo's mistake contains other ironies: in both Mário's novel *Macunaíma* (1928) and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's 1969 filmic adaptation, the cannibal figures are all white and/or European.

⁵⁴ *Tristes Tropiques* 388. Lévi-Strauss generalizes the *poemic* logic after reflecting on the decimated state of a scattered group of Tupi-Kawahib, descendants of the "cannibal" Tupis depicted by both Jean de Léry and Hans Staden in the sixteenth century.

⁵⁵ In *Cannibal Democracy*, Zita Nunes emphasizes how anthropophagy in Mário de Andrade's *modernista* classic *Macunaíma* (1928) also entails the production of the undigested "remainders" of incorporation, repeatedly associated in the novel with race.

⁵⁶ Central among the ironies of Borges' 1954 prologue to *Historia universal de la infamia*, a book of stories originally published in 1935, is that this "baroque" final stage of art remarks a transition from his earlier, more nationalist writing in the 1920s, to the work most associated with Borges as a writer. Saer's *El río sin orillas* includes several references to this work that crystallize around the subject of race, as I show in my last chapter.

⁵⁷ "e como milhões de outras pessoas sou a ele tão pertencente a ponto de ser brasileira" (152).

⁵⁸ Caetano Veloso, one of the most famous musicians associated with the movements of Tropicália and MPB (Popular Brazilian Music), provides a poignant example of this in his memoirs, *Verdade tropical*: Veloso describes himself as an assiduous reader of Lispector in his formative years, even initiating a friendship with her over the phone when he moved to Rio and before he himself was well known; then, with *tropicalismo*'s rediscovery of Oswald de Andrade's modernist aesthetics of anthropophagy in the late 1960s, he adopted a critical stance to her writing as "too focused on psychology, too subjective, and in a certain negative sense, too feminine" (260). Recalling his silent response when she approached him at a large demonstration in 1968 against police repression, he laments that *tropicalismo* cost him his "dialogue with Clarice."

⁵⁹ José Miguel Wisnik draws on the subtle logic of "saying without saying" to discuss Machado de Assis's similar approach to race, for despite being a free *mulato* intellectual writing before and after abolition, he never created any explicit male *mulato* characters ("Machado Maxixe"). Like Machado, Lispector never developed any explicitly Jewish characters, though both G.H. and Macabéa, are a part of these more subtle allusions.

⁶⁰ For early arguments about the "zone" that continue to be important for later critics, see especially Gramuglio "El lugar de Saer"; Corbatta "*En la zona*: germen de la praxis poética"; Montaldo *El limonero real*; on the continued importance of "character" for Saer, see Sarlo's influential "La condición mortal."

⁶¹ Or, we could say, between McOndo and Macondo, to invoke the Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet's negation of the magically real rural world of Macondo, juxtaposing it to the global mass culture of urban middle class life: McDonalds, Macintoshes, and condos ("I am not a Magical Realist"). See also the anthology of short stories by other Chilean writers that Fuguet edited, adopting this homophony as its title *McOndo*.

⁶² But by breaking down *tierra natal* into its constituent parts, the syntax produces a neutral limit that oddly resonates with the "true crime" story that he relates to his friends: a serial killer in Paris who ritualistically rapes and mutilates the bodies of old women.

⁶³ "Literatura y la crisis actual" 105. Saer's own writing practice also reworks the idea of "zone" as "place" within the titles of his works: from *En la zona* (1960), to *Unidad de lugar* (1967) and finally *Lugar* (2000); see Gramuglio "El lugar de Saer" 276-277; Riera 28-29.

⁶⁴ Refusing to resolve the various twentieth century debates on this question, Saer asserts that "the Reality Previous to the Text gives the impression of being of a similar essence as the First Cause with respect to the appearance of the world" ("La narración-objeto" 23). For a different reading of this assertion, one that suggests only the first as an object of criticism, see Riera *Littoral* 22.

⁶⁵ Saer "Literatura y la crisis" 105. "The difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it. If for the sake of their own concept artworks wanted to absolutely destroy this reference, they would wipe out their own premise" (Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* 103). "Play," for Adorno, is both a constitutive part of art and theory, and one way that art sought to redeem itself from semblance, which it achieves only at the price of becoming "sport" (100). Although Saer criticized "literature as play" as one of the two "concept-fetishes" of the 1970s (along with "the novel as language"), he also refuses to reduce play to either "hedonism or entertainment," opening a range of distinctions—what kind of game, how one plays, etc. ("Narrathon" 154-155).

⁶⁶ Badiou "A Manifesto of Affirmationist Art" 142; *Inaesthetics* 53.

⁶⁷ *A paixão segundo G.H.* 102. All translations from the Portuguese in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁶⁸ Although still couched within a primarily existentialist framework, Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira's *A barata e a crisálida* (1984) was the first to stress the social and class dimension of *A paixão*. On a reopening of the question of Jewish culture and Judaic-inflected thought on Lispector's work, see note 27 in the introduction.

⁶⁹ Chiapinni "Pelas ruas" 74. Almost all the essays collected in the critical edition of *A paixão segundo G.H.* edited by Benedito Nunes pass over the maid and her writing. Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna, for example, uses anthropological work on ritual to break down the ritual dimension of *A paixão* into "ritos preliminares, ritos liminares, e ritos pos-liminares" without any reference to Janair's mural, which is precisely what sets this other "ritual" in motion (243-4). Olga de Sá's essay mentions Janair's mural only in passing, reading it straightforwardly as a representation and denunciation of her employer ("Paródia e metafísica" 221).

⁷⁰ After Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira, more recent readings of the social dimension have returned to the question of race, see Peixoto "'Fatos são pedras duras'"; Villares "The Black Maid as Ghost"; and Chiapinni "Pelas ruas da cidade," which is one of the few essays to compare *A paixão* and *A hora da estrela* in some depth; for a short but illuminating discussion of both within a comparative Latin Americanist framework, see also Franco *The Decline of the Lettered City* (203-211).

⁷¹ I follow here Wisnik's analysis of the subtle logic of "saying without saying" in Machado de Assis's similar approach to race; see note 59 in the introduction.

⁷² Candido "Literatura e subdesenvolvimento" 162. Like Candido, who mentions both Lispector and Júlio Cortázar, Rama's precursor essay similarly mentions the "metropolitan values" of Cortázar in his unconvincing attempt to defuse the polemic between the Paris-based Argentine writer and the Peruvian José María Arguedas, Rama's principal case study of transculturation ("Los procesos" 233 n.24).

⁷³ Besides her contemporaneous comments about desiring a "socialist regime" in Brazil, one can of course point to examples like Lispector's published *crônica* and letter to the Minister of Education defending students during the intensification of military repression in 1968 (*A descoberta* 93, 69); or her participation in the large-scale demonstrations that followed, leading up to the *passeata dos cem mil*.

⁷⁴ Lispector's paraphrase of Mário de Andrade is from "Literatura de vanguarda no Brasil," a conference talk published in her posthumous collection of miscellaneous writings and, according to the editors, given at various places over the span of about ten years (*Outros escritos* 97-8). Mário de Andrade's reappraisal can be found in his retrospective account of Brazilian *modernismo*, "O movimento modernista" (242). For de Andrade, the difference the *modernista* movement brought to "aesthetic research" was a break with the "colonial" servility of academicism towards European culture and trends, what Lispector glosses as its program of "Brazilianization." The "movement of 1922" refers to the *Semana de arte moderna* ("Week of Modern Art"), the 1922 São Paulo exposition that grouped together various avant-garde tendencies in the arts.

⁷⁵ Lispector qualifies both José Lins do Rego and Graciliano Ramos, two very different writers from the Northeast, as "avant-garde" because they enabled a "discovery of the reality of the Northeast" that was previously unknown in Brazilian literature (*Outros* 104). Similarly, João

Guimarães Rosa's literary rendering of the interior *sertão* or "backlands" of Minas Gerais revealed that Brazilians were only "false cosmopolitans" (107).

⁷⁶ "Para nós, politicização é principalmente uma das ramificações de entendermos as nossas coisas no que elas têm de peculiares ao Brasil e no que representam necessidades profundas nossas, inclusive mesmo as estéticas" (*Outros* 105)

⁷⁷ *Outros escritos* 109. Although the "'already literalized thing'" (*'coisa já literalizada'*) refers primarily to "foreign literature" (*literatura alheia*), she also refers to the "literalization of literature" more generally as "the result already reached by other writers." This formulation follows Lispector's practice of emphasizing national literature and deemphasizing comparisons with foreign writers (Joyce, Woolf, Sartre, for example), even giving at times contradictory information about when she read them.

⁷⁸ Rancière *Aesthetics and Politics* 13. For Rancière, aesthetics as a "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*) refers to both the given partitions of the visible and the sayable, as well as the response of the faculties to this given configuration: one dictated by neither the order of knowledge nor the law of desire, but by an aesthetic neutralization of hierarchies—high and low faculties, but also ultimately, a class of intelligence and a class of sensation ("Aesthetic Dimension" 2-3).

⁷⁹ "cultura da periferia por gente da periferia, ponto final" (Férrez "Contestação" 2). "Periphery" does not refer here to the macro geopolitical sense of core and periphery, but to the poorer neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city. Ferréz stresses a genealogical link with *cinema marginal* and *poesia marginal* in the second of three special issues of the left cultural magazine *Caros amigos* that burgeoned into the journal *Literatura marginal*. For an insightful comparison of the differences between the moments (Rio versus São Paulo, marginal distribution versus a desire for legitimation conferred by large publishers), see Peçanha do Nascimento (18-21).

⁸⁰ Candido's essay, "Direito à literatura" (1988), was an attempt to think an expanded notion of "literature"—encompassing all forms of fabulation—as a human right. Although Candido stresses literature's contradictory and non-didactic nature, he nonetheless tends to think the right to literature in Enlightenment terms as a "humanization" and, more utopianly, as enabling a possible *telos* of "social equilibrium" (243). What Rocha calls a "dialectics of marginality" overlaps with and contests what Antonio Candido's "dialética da malandragem," or a "dialectic of roguery" that articulated a certain movement between the spheres of order and disorder but similarly tended towards equilibrium (Rocha 11-13; Candido "Dialética").

⁸¹ *A maçã no escuro* was held up for years with another publisher until it was finally published by Francisco Alves in 1961, one year after *Laços de família*. *Laços de família* was the first of Lispector's books to have a second printing soon after its release and *A maçã no escuro* won the Carmen Dolores Prize for best book of the year in 1962; see Gottlib (322, 342). On the importance of this period for Lispector's larger recognition in Brazil, see Moser (246-248).

⁸² Close to one hundred thousand copies of *Quarto de despejo* were sold just in the first few months; it was translated into twelve languages over the next few years (Levine and Meihy 7). Her second book, *Casa de alvendaria* (1961), narrates many of her encounters with famous people and trips that she took following the success of *Quarto*.

⁸³ My comparison here is indebted to Marta Peixoto's own suggestion that, owing to some of the factors I've outlined above, Lispector may have read de Jésus' bestselling diary ("Fatos" 115). This possibility is quite likely, and the special issue of *Cadernos de literatura brasileira* on Lispector put out by the Instituto Moreira Salles includes a photo of the two together at what

may be a book signing (27). But my argument is that the proximity of the two within the same literary space has a correlate in the interior of Lispector's novel when G.H. recognizes Janair's writing *as writing*, and not something to be dismissed.

⁸⁴ Levine and Meihy, both historians, cite the continued resistance to the diaries among Brazilian literary critics and publics (most notably, by the critic Wilson Martins, who continued to dismiss it as "precious" writing and even a fake into the 1990s) as one reason for publishing the unedited writing at the end of the 1990s (13; 12-15). For a more recent review of criticism in Brazil, see Pereira de Andrade.

⁸⁵ I here follow Jameson, who locates the positive political content of existentialist "depersonalization" in demography and decolonization, rather than in modern warfare ("The End of Temporality" 709-710). For Jameson, "depersonalization" not only remains an important precursor to post-structuralist critiques of the "so-called centered subject," but its links with decolonization also offers a certain leverage point in reading the increasing tendency, after the waning of revolutionary movements, to reprivatize this experience in terms of time and a pure present (one of his principle examples in this arc is Deleuze).

⁸⁶ Fanon *Black Skin* 99 / *Peau noire* 97. I have modified the English translation where necessary and subsequent references in the body of the text will include the English followed by the corresponding page in the original French. For a thorough tracking of the initially muted and largely Sartre-mediated reception of Fanon in Brazil, see Guimarães.

⁸⁷ Ian Baucom provides a provocative reading of the "radiophonic quality" of *Black Skin, White Masks* in a more wide-ranging account of Fanon on radio. This radiophonic dimension, its tendency to dramatize "voices" rather than strictly "quotations" of black poets, is redoubled in later writings as an "antiphonic communicative practice" of listening and retransmitting (15, 17, 34). My own argument about this ambiguous figure of the "antennae" is indebted to this analysis.

⁸⁸ *Aesthetic Theory* 310-11. Adorno is here modifying Benjamin's conception of aura—glossed as "the distance of the aesthetic object from the observing subject"—to account for the way "entertainment art" separates aura from the work and makes it consumable through standardization (its "uniform sauce"). Adorno's argument that this consumable aura presents "a contrived nearness of the distant" is an implicit counter to Benjamin's claim that the masses' increasing proximity to "things" in mass culture had ushered in a new political potential with the "destruction of aura" (Benjamin "The Work of Art" 365).

⁸⁹ The increasingly important role food plays in Jorge Amado's fiction is emphasized in *A comida baiana de Jorge Amado ou O livro de cozinha de Pedro Archanjo com as merendas de dona Flor*, by Paloma Jorge Amado Costa, Amado's daughter. Some of the more telling scenes in the international blockbuster film based on Esquivel's book, *Como agua para chocolate*, stage the disappearance of the dark-skinned *mestiza* and indigent women who prepare food for the central family's *hacienda*: they fade out and the central characters who have learned the recipes appear in their place. Both cases present forms of consumable *mestiçagem/mestizaje* where the others provide the authentic "flavors" that the narratives capitalize on.

⁹⁰ *Black Skin* 175 / 160. Fanon's quotes are from Aimé Césaire's tragedy, *And the Dogs Were Silent*.

⁹¹ *Black Skin, White Masks* 175 / 161. Fanon here is quoting the same phrase of Aimé Césaire with which Sartre ends his preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, "Orphée Noir" ("Orphée Noir" xlv; quoted from Césaire *Les armes*

miraculeuses 156). Although Fanon had cited Sartre's citation earlier in the same text (*Black Skin* 113/ 108), here he replaces Césaire's *pousser* ("to raise") in the earlier citation with *fuser* ("to erupt," "burst forth," or "gush" as its translated here) to emphasize the violent eruption that this cry takes in fiction by other black writers and anti-colonial politics.

⁹² For Fanon, it was Sartre's reception and Hellenized framing of *négritude* that not only returned to the "source of the source," but effectively dried it up: Sartre had erased contingency and chance under the sign of "destiny"; as a result, Césaire's "black scream" became the bearer of a historically necessary passage from poetry into politics (*Black Skin* 113; 111 / 108; 106).

⁹³ *Black Skin* xii / 6. For Fanon, this original "appearance" as *naissance*, a birth or natality that occurs only in the "barren" desert, relates to what some black and Caribbean feminists have referred to as his gendered denial of a Creole filiation; see Vergès.

⁹⁴ Several of the essays in the critical edition of *A paixão segundo G.H.* converge on a reading of "repetition" within the novel; see especially Tosca, but also Nunes on the essential "circularity" of the narrative as testimony to an "immutable order of things" (*Drama* 65).

⁹⁵ Although focused on Lispector's book of stories *Via crucis*, Wasserman's distinction between "understanding" alterity (an act of assimilating, clarifying, or explicating) and a "mystical" attitude in front of alterity seems to follow Lispector's formulation in *A paixão*: "the incomprehensible is precisely what needs to be comprehended as such, a force that produces anxiety because it is by definition impossible, and in this way allows a threat of dissolution to hover over whomever undertakes this task or experiment (and the experience of the dissolution of the *I* before alterity is one of the constants in the work of Lispector)" ("Misticismo" 74). The emphasis on "the incomprehensible" *as such* nonetheless tends to downplay the ways alterity and otherness is "comprehended" and even *partially* incorporated in *A paixão segundo G.H.*

⁹⁶ Nunes' description, however, quite accurately describes Rodrigo S.M.'s reactions in *A hora da estrela*, as I demonstrate in chapter two.

⁹⁷ *Reading With Clarice Lispector* 81. In her reading "with" Lispector, Cixous differentiates between a need on the side of "femininity," as being "in need of need," and a "need as lack," on the side of "masculinity." Although Cixous does not directly link "need" to "shame" and the possibilities of negating or displacing shame (of which shamelessness is only one), there are some implicit connections: in her analysis of Vitória, one of the characters of *A maçã no escuro* (80-81; 88-89); and in her suggestion that, unlike Joyce's writing, Lispector's does not fall under the "spell of transgression" nor respond "to the calling of the law" ("Writing and the Law" 32).

⁹⁸ *A paixão* 162; *A legião* 144. In her *crônica* on humility, Lispector stresses how the overemphasis on "humility" as technique can take on a somewhat ridiculous aspect and even lead to a certain "pride"; however, as she stresses in "Literatura e justiça" from the same collection, if she was to be "ashamed" of what she wrote, she would also end up "sinning from pride" (*A legião* 144, 150). For this reason, the narrator's ascetic translation of humiliation into "the lack of humility" (*a falta de humildade*) may also point to the danger of a "lack" (*falta*) that seeks to subjectively expurgate shame. Such an ideological danger becomes evident if the subject of this ascetic prescription—one who "lacks" humility—is shifted from the middle class narrator to the poor: be more humble.

⁹⁹ "Este livro é como um livro qualquer. Mas eu ficaria contente se fosse lido apenas por pessoas de alma já formada. Aquelas que sabem que a aproximação, do que quer que seja, se faz gradualmente e penosamente—atravessando inclusive o oposto daquilo que se vai aproximar"

(9). Emília Amaral elaborates on this relationship with the reader as both a “contract” and a “pact” in *O leitor segundo G.H.* (21-26).

¹⁰⁰ *Black Skin* 91-92, 203 / 89-90, 185. Fanon uses the language of the face to describe this transition in several places: caustically, as in the Antillean who finds his “true face” (*véritable visage*) when he goes to Paris to persuade himself of his whiteness (132/125); and as a way of conceiving this fixation with racial appearance itself (95/93).

¹⁰¹ Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 280-1. Spivak’s critique of this erasure was aimed at an *unintended* complicity of metropolitan theory (which she identified with Foucault and Deleuze, rather than Derrida) with an international division of labor that continued to constitute “the colonial subject as Other”—in part by assuming that the gendered subaltern could be heard by metropolitan theory as something other than a desiring machine.

¹⁰² Benedito Nunes develops this comparison in his seminal studies of Lispector’s writing (*Dorso do Tigre* 93-102). For Nunes, G.H.’s discovery of the non-human world in *A paixão* can be read as a reply to Sartre’s human-centered world: in Sartre, the experience of nausea makes the subject aware of the “absurd” contingency and meaninglessness of life, a discovery that propels him to create meaning through acts of freedom; in Lispector, nausea “takes possession of freedom and destroys it,” giving the subject brief access to “the immemorial existence of Being without name” and sending her on a mystic path to “Nothingness” and silence (101). As I point out in what follows, Lispector does not “destroy” freedom, but initially “localizes” it. Rosi Braidotti also draws attention to how the void encountered by G.H. differs from Sartrean nothingness, qualifying the former as “a site of interconnectedness and mutual interdependence” (*Nomadic Subjects* 130). Both of these comparisons, however, completely pass over the discussion of “localization” and its relation to Janair’s writing on the wall. For an alternative reading of Sartre’s humanism as bound up with the non-human object world, see Kaufman (“To Cut”).

¹⁰³ For Fanon’s introduction of colonialism and race into both Sartre notions of the Other and Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, see *Black Skin* (117 n. 24, 139 n. 25 / 112 n. 22, 131-132 n. 25).

¹⁰⁴ *A Thousand Plateaus* 171. Although the contemporary global diffusion of their concepts seems to have largely bypassed the connection, Fanon’s own descent into Césaire’s poetic image of the “black hole” is something like the silent writing on the wall of their innovation. See, for example, the authoritative *The Deleuze Dictionary*, where one can read that “the term ‘black hole’ has been sourced from contemporary physics,” one of the books many “appropriations” (29). Deleuze and Guattari’s excursus on “faciality” only names Sartre and Lacan on the gaze as the object of their critique, leaving both Lévinas and Fanon as silent interlocutors.

¹⁰⁵ In his earlier seminars, Lacan refers to the “wall of language” as the organized system that guarantees the false reality of the imaginary (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ego* 244-5). In his later Seminar XI, however, Lacan introduces a similar gazelessness with a brief and enigmatic discussion of a poem by Louis Aragon: the poem furnishes an image of the gaze as a “wall” and the eye like a mirror that is both “empty” and “blind” (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Four Fundamental Concepts* 17).

¹⁰⁶ For Deleuze and Guattari’s argument that European racism never operated by designating someone as “Other,” and that only “primitive societies” have a concept of the stranger as “other,” a claim ironically derived from European anthropology and ethnography, see *A Thousand Plateaus* (178). Rosi Braidotti’s Deleuzian-inspired reading of *A paixão* makes a similar claim in relation to an embodied female subject, and she reads Irigaray and Lispector

together against the tendency in Deleuze and Guattari to dissolve this subject (“Of Bugs and Women”).

¹⁰⁷ Although they conceive this “destiny” in the conditional, Deleuze and Guattari open themselves up to a similar critique that Fanon raised against Sartre mentioned above: rather than a historical necessity, though, they introduce an ontological one. Their privileged figure of “defacialization,” *têtes chercheuses*, can be literally conveyed as “homing devices” (rather than “probe-heads” or “guiding-heads,” as Massumi translates it): they are destined for another plane, body, and “worldwide intensity map” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 191).

¹⁰⁸ Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 340; 340-400. Following Fanon’s critique, Sartre would later employ a use of “possession” much closer to the one Lispector draws on from Brazilian *modernismo*. Sartre’s preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* appropriates Fanon’s discussion of possession and dance as forms of “canalized” colonial aggression in colonial societies (55-58), performing a stark reversal of “zombie” possession for his European readers: formerly, Europeans treated their colonized subjects as “dead souls” and “zombies” that they, the Europeans, did not bother to respond to; now, the indifference of the formerly colonized to Europeans threatened to turn Europeans into “zombies” (“Preface” 13).

¹⁰⁹ Fitz *Sexuality* 20, 1. The thesis that Lispector’s texts provide the “human face” of poststructuralism obscures the more inhuman dimension of the face in *A paixão* (Fitz 1). The latter also contrasts with Lévinas’ more humanized conceptualization of “the face” as the figure for an ethical relation to alterity, given immediately in the “expression of the face” and the possibility that “the whole body—a hand or curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (*Totality and Infinity* 213, 262).

¹¹⁰ *Descoberta* 101. Lispector develops this analogy in a *crônica* that begins with a discussion of her father’s superlative expression “He is a person” (*ele é uma pessoa*) as someone who “won the struggle” (*venceu a luta*). As Waldman notes, the phrase appears to translate the Yiddish phrase *Er is a mentsch* (“Uma Cadeira” 255). In Lispector’s drama of the mask, the “naked face” of the defacialized nonbeing must be reborn against the risk of death: “As a person had to pass through Christ’s path” (*Descoberta* 101).

¹¹¹ The composite character of Macunaíma includes, among other things, Mário de Andrade’s borrowing from Pemon indigenous legends collected in the German naturalist Theodor Koch-Grünberg’s *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco*, one of the novel’s principal intertextual resources. For an insightful recent treatment of this question, see Lúcia Sá (32-45).

¹¹² Gilda de Mello e Souza includes the macumba episode among several that not only compete for primacy with the central plot (the loss of and search for the *muriquitã* stone), but also help emphasize how “o heterogêneo, o indeciso, e o descaracterizado” become structuring elements of the novel (*O tupi* 31-2).

¹¹³ Tia Ciata was a famous *mãe de santo* or priestess of a house of candomblé in Rio de Janeiro that was also associated with early samba (Davis *White Face, Black Mask* 4-5). In this mixture of the real and the fictional, Macunaíma leaves the house at the end of the chapter with a group of national and international literati “macumbeiros” (Manuel Bandeira, Jaime Ovalle, Raul Bopp, Blaise Cendrars, Dodô, Acenso Ferreira, and Antonio Bento). In *Libertinagem* (1930), Manuel Bandeira also makes the violent possession of a *branca* or “white woman” the subject of a poem, “Macumba de Pai Zusé.”

¹¹⁴ For an analysis of *Macunaíma* and the official racial discourse of “whitening” during the period, see Zita Nunes (25-58). Nunes is both sensitive to and critical of the way Mário de

Andrade, himself one of the only *mulato* Brazilian *modernista* artists, figured blackness as a kind of remainder. The title of Darien J. Davis' lucid book on the centrality of "Africaneity" to early Brazilian popular music also invokes the reversal of Fanon's schema (*White Face, Black Mask*).

¹¹⁵ This is particularly evident in the burlesque description of the women's "friendly monstrosity": "they have the cerebrum in the pudendum parts and, as it is said so well in madrigalesque language, the heart in the hands" (Mário de Andrade *Macunaíma* 76). In *Baile de mascarar: mulheres judias e prostituição* Beatriz Kushnir details how these women brought to Brazil also formed mutual aid societies to defend their interests and religious beliefs, since they were largely ostracized from the Brazilian Jewish community. The ambiguous misogyny of Mário de Andrade's descriptions of the "clan" of women, the conventions of the grotesque/carnavalesque, and the comparison to the Amazons also registers more than just their ethnicity, as their initial introduction as an *armento nitente*—"resplendent" or "resistant herd"—suggests (75).

¹¹⁶ This Amazonian collective is revived in more militant form with both Monique Wittig's feminist novel *Les guérillères* (1969), where the women struggle to overthrow a patriarchal society, and Marilene Felinto's *As mulheres de Tijuapapo* (1981), where the Amazon-like women of Tijuapapo figure both an alternative maternal origin for the narrator and armed resistance to the Brazilian military dictatorship.

¹¹⁷ In addition to Wasserman's excellent essay on the "mysticism of material" cited above, some of the more important readings include Benedito Nunes' seminal work; Vieira "Clarice Lispector: A Jewish Impulse"; Rossoni and Owens, both of whom connect her to an "Eastern" and specifically Zen mysticism; and Moser, whose biography of Lispector reads her as an unconscious representative of what Gershom Scholem referred to as an "invisible stream of Jewish mysticism" that might emerge after the Holocaust (106). Attributions of mysticism have combined various and even competing sources, beyond just Jewish and Christian, including the strand of vaguely Orientalist "Eastern" readings and Afro-Brazilian syncretic religions, to name the most prominent. One could connect *A paixão segundo G.H.* to what Eleanor Kaufman refers to as a "perverse logic that traverses the Jewish messianic moment," one capable of entering a space of death and negativity and being transformed by it ("The Saturday of Messianic Time" 48). In this sense, her definition of this perverse logic of apostasy as a "sin without measure" suggests a political-theological reading of the phenomenon of "the deserter" as I develop it here.

¹¹⁸ Nunes reads the ingestion of the cockroach mass as an "impotent replica" or "grotesque parody" of mysticism in part because he assumes the sacred as a transcendental axis of interpretation (*Drama* 65). The narrator undergoes a "subjection to the sacred" (Nunes "A escrita da paixão" 229) that can only result in the "appearance of a profanation" (Nunes "Introdução" xxvi). Following Costa Lima's important early essay on Lispector's reverse mysticism ("A mística ao revés"), Olga de Sá emphasizes instead the seriousness of the narrative, despite its use of irony and parodic reversals ("Paródia" 216).

¹¹⁹ Peixoto considers the "proliferation of metaphors" in this vision as also a way of canceling out the *favela* "in its actual and present poverty" ("Pedras" 118-9). Significantly, Carolina Maria de Jesus' second book, *Casa de alvenaria* (1961), refers to the sun as the "king-star" (134-135) in a similar way: as a momentary relief from the presence of poverty. In one telling entry, she juxtaposes the common bounty of nature with a man asking for money to start a factory that, she projects, he would then incorporate and monopolize for his profit alone: "If nature is collective, why does man have to be so selfish? He wants everything only for himself. An

orange tree produces oranges for thousands of people. The sun is a unique star and it warms the whole world” (103).

¹²⁰ The language of Lispector’s “vision” of Brasília coincides in interesting ways with the later critique of the modernist city as an authoritarian project that exacerbated, rather than diminished, social inequality; see James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*.

¹²¹ In a provocative essay, Santiago argues that Lispector rejects a “conception of technical, quantitative progress” for a “humanitarian, qualitative conception of progress” and a notion “labor” closer to care and agricultural work (“A aula” 234, 240). Although I largely agree with this de- and re-hierarchization of labor, it overemphasizes both the lack of the technical and the privileging of the human in this second notion of unalienated labor.

¹²² Lispector herself had left her place with a “foreign legion” or “reserve” when she separated from her husband, a Brazilian diplomat, and returned to Brazil in 1959 after years abroad in Europe and the United States.

¹²³ Cixous “Poetry, Passion, and History” 128; Vieira “Clarice Lispector: A Jewish Impulse” 132. Although his focus on a “Judaic exegetical legacy” provides some real insights into Lispector’s writing (more so than the alternative language of a “Jewish impulse”), Vieira significantly leaves out Lispector as a “deserter” in the several paragraphs he cites from “Pertencer.”

¹²⁴ Adorno *Minima* 93. Adorno’s particular example resonates with Lispector’s concerns: modern women deemed abnormal or mad, a history traced to the eruptions of hysterics, understood as “the hopeless attempt to break out of the social prison which so emphatically turned its four walls to them.” To feel shame and thus recognize oneself as a “descendent” of this broken promise is thus also to expose the persistence of fissures disavowed by modern bourgeois subjects. The fragment dialogues with Benjamin’s thesis that the past has a claim on a “weak messianic power” of the present: “Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize?” (“On the Concept” 390). In both cases, women problematically serve as the conduit for this claim and the failure to recognize it.

¹²⁵ Moser, Lispector’s most thorough biographer, has conjectured that the likely source of this sickness, syphilis, was the rape of their mother, Mania Lispector, by Russian soldiers, possibly during one of the numerous pogroms in Podolia, Ukraine, before the Lispector’s family fled to Brazil (25-9).

¹²⁶ “Pertencer,” later republished in *Descoberto do mundo*, initially appeared in the June 15, 1968 edition of the *Jornal do Brasil*. The so-called “coup within the coup,” when the hard line faction within the military took over, would culminate later the same year in the AI-5, the institutional act suspending Congress and giving new absolute powers to the regime.

¹²⁷ In an interview from 1976, Lispector responded to a question about her Jewishness, criticizing the notion of a “chosen people”: “I am Jewish, you know. But I don’t believe in this ridiculousness of Jews being God’s chosen people [*o povo eleito*]. In no way. The Germans must be because they did what they did. What great chosenness [*Que grande eleição*, or ‘What great choice’] was that, for the Jews? In short, I am Brazilian, once and for all” (“Três mulheres e uma constante” 168). Lispector’s responses in interviews are often elliptical or enigmatic and at times they sharply counter her interviewers, so it is risky to make any definitive point other than registering this rejection of the logic of transcendental election.

¹²⁸ Benjamin “The Work of Art” 256-7. On Benjamin’s own oscillation between the allegorical mortification of aura and a seeming nostalgia for it (in his essays on Baudelaire and early photography, for example), see Mariam Bratu Hansen “Room for Play”; “Benjamin’s Aura.” I return to these questions again in chapters three and four.

¹²⁹ Some critics have read the modes of seeing in *A paixão* as pertaining to an “alterity to be integrated and not excluded” (R. Pontieri *Uma poética* 23); an act of “reincorporating” an otherness that had been expelled in the process of becoming human (Rosenbaum 168); or the narrator’s transformation of herself “into a undetermined other that the I contained” (*O drama da linguagem* 76; “A paixão de Clarice Lispector” 215). Jean Franco, on the other hand, reads both *A paixão* and *A hora da estrela* as at best ways of “managing exclusion” (*Decline* 211). One of the earliest readings of *A paixão* in English—and along with Assis Brasil’s essays from the 1960s, one of the most critical—presented the novel as an ideological “mystification” of the social and human world (Patai 75-110). This divide is itself telling and, in my view, one of the values of Lispector’s writing is that it helps make visible this divide through a dialectic of partial integrations as well partial exclusions.

¹³⁰ Nunes “Dos narradores brasileiros” 203. Ballan makes a similar argument in his contrast of transcendence in Levinas’ thought with “transcendence” in both Lispector’s novel and Celan’s poetry (551-554). Both Nunes and Ballan derive these terms from Jean Wahl.

¹³¹ Following a practice more frequent in her work after *A paixão*, Lispector recycles this aphorism in *Água viva*, but also makes more explicit the passional subject as a version of the non-word incarnated in phrases: “I incarnate myself in the voluptuous and unintelligible phrases that curl themselves beyond the words” (20).

¹³² Benjamin “Work of Art” 266-67; 268-9. Benjamin contrasts contemplative immersion to a state of distraction that Dadaist provocations and then film elicited through shock-like experience (*Erlebnis*). See also Adorno’s critique of distraction and his emphasis on the tension that preserves the involuntary “shudder,” the more emphatic experience (*Erfahrung*) of momentarily escaping the prison of the “I” (*Aesthetic* 319-320).

¹³³ In his “Testament,” the act of kissing a leper’s hand fulfills the message that he had received from God, inverting his former values: “When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me” (Saint Francis).

¹³⁴ As I have shown in the introduction, Harold de Campos, one of the central poets/critics responsible for reactualizing Oswald de Andrade in the 1960s, formulates the aesthetics of anthropophagy as a “critical devouration of the universal legacy, capable of appropriation as much as expropriation, dehierarchization, deconstruction” (“Da razão antropofágica” 11-12).

¹³⁵ Nunes provides a brief contrast of Lispector’s novel with Kafka’s story along different lines in *Dorso* (125-6); see also Dixon and Donizeti Pires.

¹³⁶ I here follow Stanley Corngold’s etymological discussion of “monstrous vermin” (*ungeheure Ungeziefer*) in his introduction to his English translation of *The Metamorphosis*: “*Ungeheuer* connotes the creature who has no place in the family; *Ungeziefer*, the unclean animal unsuited for sacrifice, the creature without a place in God’s order” (xix). In a long essay on *The Metamorphosis* included in *A sereia e o desconfiado* (1965), a book of essays that also included a critical essay on Clarice Lispector’s first novel, Roberto Schwarz noted these same connotations in German and proposed translating it into Portuguese as *barata*—cockroach.

Schwarz's essay emphasizes a certain deadlock in the Kafkian project in terms of a time devoid of future: "time is *spatialized* through the intervention of myth, becoming tautological: a cockroach is a cockroach, which, said of Blacks of Jews, takes on more significance" ("Uma barata" 48). Although it is not likely that Lispector could have read this essay (dated 1961 but apparently published only in 1965), she significantly avoids this trap of myth devoid of any futurity. At the same time, *A paixão* addresses (coincidentally?) the two minor critiques Schwarz had of her first novel in an otherwise laudatory analysis originally published in 1959 within the literary supplement of the *Estado de São Paulo*: insofar as the "interior vision" of the omniscient narrator also extends to other characters, the main protagonist, Joana, ceased to have "a narrative plane all her own"; and the sudden recourse to a "distant paternal inheritance" (which explains Joana's travel) connects otherwise disconnected episodes (48, 39). While *A paixão* is Lispector's first novel to take up a first person narrator, G.H. omits mention of her parents, but not the charged sense of inheritance peculiar to the deserter.

¹³⁷ Campos "Da razão antropofágica" 11. My use of a "minor" cultural legacy alters Deleuze and Guattari's influential reading of Kafka as the model for a "minor literature," *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.

¹³⁸ Badiou *Ethics* 25; Rancière "The Aesthetic Dimension" 12. For Badiou, only a "truth" is "indifferent to differences" and "the Same" in question is not what already is, but what comes to be through the process that constructs a truth (25-27); for Rancière, the *demos* is the political subject whose specific difference is an "indifference to difference," and the equivalence it stages is a "division of the same" (10). Badiou also pairs indifference with "the Same" in *The Foundation of Universalism* (110-112), and in both cases the Platonic concept emerges as an "a-religious" reading of theological thought (Lévinas, Saint Paul). If "indifference" in *A paixão* also involves a certain equivalence between the same and other, this equivalence does not necessarily lead to "the Same," but something like an exposure of the fissure in the sameness of aesthetic space, a fissure the subject traverses in her declaration of neutral love. If this again brings Lispector closer to a Judaic-inflected messianic thought, one of its most prominent thinkers, Giorgio Agamben, rigorously differentiates "indifference" from the "messianic calling" in his own reading of Saint Paul (*The Time that Remains* 23; 20-24; 52-54). Perhaps one could then reread Assis de Brasil's negative qualification of *A paixão* as "anterior" to the thought of Saint Paul (88) in a different light: its anteriority is difficult to assimilate into philosophies of either the Messianic or the Same.

¹³⁹ *Tres propuestas para el próximo milenio (y cinco dificultades)* (39). Along with Clarice Lispector, Piglia includes Juan Benet, Rosa Chacel, and Juan Gelman as the "best books of the present" that are increasingly written in what seems a "private language."

¹⁴⁰ Fausto and Devoto's conjuncturalist account of the "opening" lists a series of factors in the middle and late 1970s that precipitated it: the electoral victories of the legal "opposition" party, the MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement), in the large cities; the Catholic church's campaigns denouncing torture; the loss of support among sectors of civil society; the powerful ABC strikes at the end of the decade; and factional struggles within the armed forces (454).

¹⁴¹ I refer here to the thesis of Walter Benjamin that has gained a renewed currency in recent years: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is the norm" ("On the Concept of History" 392). Although Giorgio Agamben's *States of Exception* provides the most influential expansion of this thesis, the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Arantes

develops a similar argument about the “state of siege” in *Extinção*, part of a series of books published by Editora Boitempo that uses Benjamin’s thesis as an epigraph.

¹⁴² As Earl Fitz notes, *Uma aprendizagem* is one of the few if not only texts of Lispector that depicts an almost happy ending (78), but it also ends with the school teacher Lori leaving the philosophy professor Ulysses’ “apprenticeship,” in a way setting up the more autobiographical project of *Água viva*.

¹⁴³ On “superregionalism,” Candido’s concept for the regionally based literature that overcomes the documentary aesthetics of naturalism, see “Literatura e subdesenvolvimento” and the introduction to this dissertation.

¹⁴⁴ Portella 17; Waldman “Uma cadeira e duas maçãs” 255.

¹⁴⁵ For earlier critical accounts of the *romance-reportagem* (“novel-reportage”) as a form of recurring “naturalism” endemic to Brazilian literature, see *Tal Brasil, qual romance?* For a more recent study on the relationship between literature and journalism in the 1970s, see Cosson *Fronteiras contaminadas*.

¹⁴⁶ Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda *Poesia marginal* and *Impressões de viagem*; Süssekind *Literatura e a vida literária*. On the thesis of “cooptation,” see Miceli’s influential *Intellectuais e classe dirigente no Brasil (1920-1945)* on an earlier period and “Teoria e prática da política cultural oficial no Brasil” on the “patrimonialist” role of the State in the 1970s.

¹⁴⁷ In *Água viva*, the narrator’s task of taking an “account of the world” includes remembering the “inexpressive face” of a woman she saw on the street, a gaze that registers “the misery of those who live on the hillside above” (56).

¹⁴⁸ *Descoberta do mundo* (390).

¹⁴⁹ “Capital is dead labour, which vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more the more it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist” (*Capital* 342). For an insightful essay on Marx’s varied use of the vampire metaphor to make this crucial distinction between “living labor” and “dead” accumulated labor, see Neocleous.

¹⁵⁰ This is the interpretation Giovanni Pontieri opts for in his English translation of the *A hora da estrela*; see, *The Hour of the Star* (7), trans. Giovanni Pontieri.

¹⁵¹ The note leaves open the possibility of “J de AI” as the “supposed author” or “editor” and Paulo as the actual “author” of the previous stories. There are, in fact, strong homosocial and homoerotic allusions throughout the trilogy, which take place under female characters and masks.

¹⁵² On Lispector’s increasing concern with the possibility that her work might lose its value because of imitators, see Sousa “A revelação do nome” (168-169). Although Sousa’s expansive treatment of the question of the name in Lispector’s work suggests the pertinence of this question, he stops short of linking Lispector’s fear directly to the signature in *A hora da estrela* or to an undermining of Rodrigo’s authority.

¹⁵³ The edition published by Rocco has omitted this initial period or stop. However, both the first edition and the writer’s own notes within the text make it clear that period belongs both before and after the phrase.

¹⁵⁴ See especially Antonio Candido’s “No raiar de Clarice Lispector” and Roberto Schwarz’s reading of *Perto do coração selvagem* as a “livro estrelado” (“Perto do coração selvagem”). In his introduction to Olga de Sá’s *A escritura de Clarice Lispector*, Haroldo de Campos

emphasizes these readings as precursors to the later studies like Sá's of "epiphanies" in Lispector's work (12). My reading here seeks to reconnect them to a sense of constellation derived from the work of Benjamin and Adorno, where past and present converge in a non-linear, non-progressive configuration. For Benjamin's more programmatic statements on this materialist historiography, see "On the Concept of History" (396-7).

¹⁵⁵ Santiago's "Fechado para balanço" was originally published in the collection *O livro do seminário* as a response to João Alexandre Barbosa's configuration of the writers who established the "modernity" of Brazilian literature: Oswald de Andrade, Mário de Andrade, Graciliano Ramos, João Guimarães Rosa, with Machado de Assis as a precursor and Lispector placed, as Santiago notes, "at the back of the stage" (75). Santiago has more recently suggested that the "end of the century" in Brazil can be marked, among other cultural developments, by the end of this modernist staging, when artists like the composer and musician Caetano Veloso blur the distinction between culture and society ("A democratização no Brasil 39). One of Lispector's lessons, however, may be to give us a different perspective on both "modernity" and "postmodernity" as measuring sticks; but see also Santiago's wonderful, "A aula inaugural de Clarice."

¹⁵⁶ Franco Júnior 61-2. Franco Júnior's otherwise very illuminating comparative typology nonetheless tends to smooth out significant contradictions into a structural similarity between melodrama, the fairy tale, and *A hora da estrela*.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, her criticism of this category and her preference for what she calls the neutral term *escritor* (*A descoberta do mundo* 70).

¹⁵⁸ For a sociological exploration of this sense of "redundancy," see Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives*.

¹⁵⁹ Schwarz "Fim de século" (177). The Brazilian sociologist Francisco de Oliveira has developed the most poignant and controversial critique of this new class configuration in which coalitions presided over by segments of the former left opposition to the dictatorship—academic, in the case of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and union or worker in the case of Lula and the Workers' Party—consolidated control over both the State and key financial institutions; see especially "O ornitorrinco"; "Política em uma era de indeterminação."

¹⁶⁰ As Maria José Barbosa emphasizes, although neither Macabéa nor her boyfriend Olímpico understand the words she repeats from the programs on Rádio Relógio, Olímpico's erroneous interpretations and reactions to her inquisitiveness also appear both "brutal and comic" (102).

¹⁶¹ Lispector *A descoberta* 153. The phrase on shame and "broken promise of a new beginning" comes from Adorno *Minima* (93). For a more extended discussion of these quotes, Lispector's *crônica* "Pertencer," and the quasi-messianic charge in the figure of the deserter, see both the Introduction and the first chapter to this dissertation.

¹⁶² "On the Concept of History" 392.

¹⁶³ On the scandal this banner caused when it was displayed during the Sucata shows put on by the musicians of Tropicália in the tumultuous year of 1968, see Dunn (Dunn 143).

¹⁶⁴ *A legião* 256. Lispector's *crônica* "Mineirinho" dates from the period just before the dictatorship. Although she focuses on the excessive violence of the police response, the proposal for an "insane" justice would aim at intervening, in this case, before the initial violence against the woman takes place.

¹⁶⁵ Gershman 59. For a more detailed reading of the painting and song, see Santos (159-162)

¹⁶⁶ Gerchman 59. Veloso and Gil's song invokes a more anonymous violence shadowed by state repression: "Dismembered / Run over / Dead dogs on the street / Police monitoring / The sun beating down on fruit / Bleeding" (*Despedaçados, / Atropelados / Cachorros mortos na rua / Policiais vigiando / O sol batendo nas frutas / Sangrando*) ["Lindonéia"].

¹⁶⁷ Areas presents a brilliant but somewhat redemptive reading of how Lispector incorporates the popular world of the circus in *A hora da estrela*. Oddly, though, her examples (from the traditional popular circus to Fellini) bypass the popular Brazilian television host and clown, Chacrinha. Lispector's critical take on how Chacrinha's show allowed the popular classes—including the poor and "malnourished"—to appear on stage primarily as the object of sadistic humiliation also resonates with the more negative dimension of *A hora da estrela* (*A descoberta do mundo* 31).

¹⁶⁸ Judith Halberstam has shown how *Dracula* drew on prominent anti-Semitic stereotypes to characterize its vampire Count (86-106), while Mark Seltzer has argued that the "foreignness" of *Dracula* has as its source the new technologies of reproduction, especially new writing technologies like the typewriter (73, *passim*). Lispector arguably drew from more contemporary Anglo-American manifestations of the vampire figure—among her many translations during this period, as the editors of her *Outros escritos* note, was Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (113). Macabéa's threat is the combination of the two registers: technological reproducibility *and* the bodily stigmas associated, in this case, with the Eastern European Jew. For an argument about how "the nose" came to signify the pathology of the Jewish character for Western Jews after the "pathognomic" sign of diseased skin associated with the ghettos, see Gilman (181; 169-193). A racially epidermalized poverty also appears in *A hora*, as I show below.

¹⁶⁹ Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* 54. I am again modifying Deleuze and Guattari's argument about the more definitive transition from a "body-head regime" or semiotic to a "facial" one. This is not to diminish the power of what, in their idiom, is the "abstract machine" that produces or simply *is* the "White Man Face" (both Macabéa and Glória, for example, attempt to adapt to norms of white faciality). But it is to question their philosophical assumptions that epidermalized otherness or the body image simply disappears in a generalized "collapse."

¹⁷⁰ Arguelho de Souza's existential humanist reading of the novella largely adopts Rodrigo's position when she presents this same moment as Macabéa's "humanization" or the "epiphany" in which she finally becomes "human" (135, 134).

¹⁷¹ "Hope" is also the last word of "Canto ao homem do povo Charlie Chaplin," the final poem of *Rosa do povo* (1945). Lispector's pairing of Macabéa-Marilyn Monroe parallels the lyrical subject-Charlie Chaplin in Drummond's *Rosa do povo*.

¹⁷² Kant distinguishes between those with "preparatory culture" who feel nature's "might" and the "untutored individual" who is struck by terror at nature's "dominion" (*Critique of Judgment* 91; 94-6). Gayatri Spivak has convincingly argued for reading Kant's analytic distinction under the horizon of colonialism and the aboriginal foreclosed from the transcendental Subject (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 1-36). At the same time, Rodrigo's dismissal of the insignificant has far less to do with the foreclosure of the aboriginal "raw man" than it does with his incapacity to account for the minor or soft sublime of Macabéa's luminous constellation.

¹⁷³ "The Country of Houyhnhnms" 49. Both poems from *A educação pela pedra* with this same title (in English in the original) are found within the second of two sections denominated "Northeast," the symmetrical opposite of the other two sections designated as "Not Northeast" (49-50; 59-60). Significantly, in the letters from João Cabral de Melo Neto to Clarice Lispector

now collected in the book *Correspondências*, the poet's appreciation for his friend's writing projects "prose," rather than the genres of poetry or novels, as a point of connection: "V. sabe perfeitamente que escreve a única prosa de autor brasileiro atual que eu gostaria de escrever" (216). She writes the only prose that he would like to write, rather than the only novels, he argues, because novels are not his means of expression and his commitment to construction would make writing novels too difficult. Similarly, she does not write poems, but creates an intertextual dialogue with his poetry through prose language and forms.

¹⁷⁴ "The Country of Houyhnhnms" 49-50; 60. The perforating blade of the *facas-de-ponta* from Pajéu nicely emphasizes the ambiguity of the irony explicitly thematized in the second poem: "not a double-edged knife and yet ambiguous, / for one cannot see where it has no point" (*facas sem dois gumes e contudo ambígua, / por não se ver onde nela não é ponta* (49, 59).

¹⁷⁵ It is also worth recalling here Adorno's argument that the "phenomenon of fireworks are prototypical of artworks" (81). Yet if for Adorno artworks "promise a blocked or denied sensuality" through the sublimation of a more directly sensual "preartistic dimension" (the experience of fireworks, or the travelling circus), in *A hora* we also see the violence that can accompany this sublimating process of blocking or denying sensuality.

¹⁷⁶ The drafts included in the joint critical edition of *Glosa/El entenado*, organized by Julio Premat, have made evident this erasure of concrete references as part of the process of writing: earlier drafts named the captain as Solís and the narrator as Francisco del Puerto (Premat, Vecchio, Villanueva 510-517).

¹⁷⁷ For a postmodern reading that argues the novel parodies historical discourse and knowledge, see de Grandis; for the more postcolonial concern with how foregrounds "the historical representation of the absent other, both the Indians and the past," see Pons (169, *passim*).

¹⁷⁸ Verdesio 248-250. Verdesio aims at the "faulty" historical arguments of other literary critics who reconnect Saer's novel to the historical context. This critique coincides with a similar skepticism in anthropology about accounts of cannibalism (Hulme "Introduction: the cannibal scene" 6-26), a point I return to below. For other readings of *El entenado* that take up contemporary discourse on the cannibalist trope, see Albornoz and García-Moreno.

¹⁷⁹ Chanady 685-689. Although I do not agree with conclusions of Saer's critics, I nonetheless think they raise important points: what Chanady calls his failure to "subvert dominant historical axioms" (Western culture's superiority over a silent, static, and pre-reflexive indigenous other) helps draw attention to how Saer's narrative texts do not center on subversion, which is after all subversion in appearance; rather, they dissolve appearances and undermines certainties to interrogate representations (including the axioms in Chanady's list).

¹⁸⁰ Saer "El concepto de ficción." As other critics have noted (Díaz-Quiñones; Riera), this concept of fiction from the essay (dated 1989 and republished in *El concepto de ficción*) seems particularly apt for *El entenado*.

¹⁸¹ Jameson *Postmodernism* 21, 18. The diagnosis of postmodernism as a "random cannibalization" of past styles is, of course, a part of what Saer calls "rhetorical automatism." But Jameson's examples, ranging from nostalgia film to the novels of E.L. Doctorow, emphasize representations of the past that elide the present of their production and thus also, for Jameson, the production of the urban present—"the multinational highrise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life" (22) and new informational technologies. I do not

think the two should be conflated: as I return to below, Saer's novel begins with the narrator situated in abstract "cities" because they dissimulate the sky, as if the focus on a productionist present of "our" world depended on the forgetting alternatives to this logic.

¹⁸² Saer "Literatura y los nuevos lenguajes" 214. The possibility of experiencing a "new present" in writing and reading alike suggests the need to modify Premat's claim about an inescapable "ominous present" in Saer: "The refusal of the historical novel is the proof of a melancholic pessimism; there is nothing more than an ominous present because the past, that passes for ever, is ungraspable" (421). Saer's early critique of literature's uncritical incorporation of mass media "languages" and techniques (the essay cited above dates from 1969) extends to his polemical critique of postmodernism as an aesthetic category. In "Postmodernismo y afines," republished in *Trabajos*, what Saer refers to as "postmodern democratism"—a simulacrum of "democracy"—amounts to little more than the "ultraliberal" assumption of an "end of history" that targeted both the French Revolution and Third Worldism (11). The "normalization" performed by postmodernism adequates art to the conviction that we live in the best of all possible worlds, making it an unexpected avatar of art under Stalinism, Nazism, and, cold war-era Hollywood (13), a thesis that rehearses Adorno and Horkheimer's critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

¹⁸³ Saer "Historia y novela" 145; "El valor del mito" 73. This latter text, as I noted in the introduction, was originally an intervention at a conference on history and politics and Argentine fiction. What Saer calls the "value of myth" in the context of both *El entenado* and other Argentine novels remains fairly heterogeneous and polemical. His central example here turns on Stephen Dedalus's utterance from *Ulysses*: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (78). I return to Saer's reading of this utterance in the next chapter.

¹⁸⁴ Although this situation is only alluded to in *Caliban*, Retamar lays out the highly polarized context of the writing in "Caliban Revisited," an essay originally published in 1986. Heriberto Padilla, a Cuban poet, was imprisoned on vague charges in 1971 then released after a public confession of self-criticism that seemed to many to suggest a kind of show trial. The public letters to the regime exposed an open rift in the intelligentsia that had formerly supported the revolutionary regime. As Jean Franco argues, "the defection of the intelligentsia" was the result of both "Cuban cultural policy that privileged the militant over the intelligentsia" and "U.S. intervention in the cultural wars as the champion of modernity and innovation" (105). For a more thorough examination of the Cold War politics that framed these debates and tensions, see Franco (*Decline* 43-50; 104-108).

¹⁸⁵ Retamar retraces the social allegorical use of these figures in French, Latin American, and Caribbean thought, from Ernest Renan and Latin American *modernistas* to the more recent Caribbean writers: Edward Kamau Brathwaite and George Lemming from Barbados; Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon from Martinique.

¹⁸⁶ Retamar *Caliban* 50-52; 57-60. Retamar is referring to the opposition popularized by Sarmiento's *Civilización y barbarie* (1845). The interregional class coding of *Caliban* presents a crude line of continuity between Sarmiento and Borges, a "truly important" but "colonial" writer (60), though he later returns to correct this polemical dismissal of Borges' "irreverence" ("Caliban Revisited" 54). John Beverley presents a more recent version of this critique ("Calibán").

¹⁸⁷ The polemical attack on the literary reading of the "Boom" centers on Carlos Fuentes' *La nueva novela latinoamericana* and the "CIA funded" journal *Mundo libre*, directed by Emir Rodríguez Monegal (*Caliban* 63-75). On the centrality of "ancillary" genres in Spanish American literature and the "instrumental" relation of literature to society, see Retamar "Problems of Spanish-American Literature" (85-87). Both Retamar and the journal he edited, *Casa de las Américas*, contributed to the growing importance of the *testimonio*. On a larger

“paradigm shift” from the “boom” novels to the *testimonio* in Latin American literary and cultural studies (especially in the U.S.), see Larsen (*Reading* 2-20), but also the essays edited by Gugelberger in *The Real Thing*.

¹⁸⁸ Monegal 83. Monegal’s essay, “La metamorphosis de Calibán” was published in 1978 and Retamar returns to consider the relation between Caliban and Brazilian *antropofagia* in “Calibán ante la antropofagia,” originally published in a special issue of *Nuevo Texto Crítico* (XII, 23-24, enero-diciembre 1999) dedicated to *antropofagia*.

¹⁸⁹ I follow here Sztutman’s acute comparison of Pierre and Héléne Clastres’ work from the 1970s: the theories of chiefdom and war are central to the former’s thesis of the society “against the State”; the theory of prophetic discourse is central to the latter’s work and suggested the beginning of a priestly power (129-135, *passim*). Deleuze and Guattari draw on Pierre Clastres’ work for their own theory of a “war machine” against the state, but they replace a relation of State and counter-State societies with one of interior and exterior, a conception that would no longer posit a state of nature (*Thousand* 357-361).

¹⁹⁰ Although Jacques Rancière’s contemporary review of the book (originally published in *Les Révoltes logiques*) does not take up the cannibalist trope directly, he nonetheless suggests that the implicit political theology behind the metaphor informed the reception of Solzhenitsyn in France much more than Glucksmann’s thesis: rather than supporting a liberation from below, as Glucksmann reads Solzhenitsyn, both Solzhenitsyn and the reception of his message emphasized a liberation from above; the cannibalist trope would then correspond to a state resulting from an inherent human evil fostered by the external evil of Marxism, both in need of “divine aid,” theological as well as political (“Joan of Arc in the Gulag” 120-123). This logic uncannily anticipates the justification of humanitarian intervention that many of the New Philosophers themselves would go on to support in the following decades.

¹⁹¹ Saer “El concepto” 13-15. The essay is dated 1989. While Saer consistently rejects subjecting writing to any predetermined ideological system, including those of the left, the object of his critique here is significant. For a critique of the authority of testimonial discourse in the public sphere, but more focused on the former Argentine left, see Beatriz Sarlo *Tiempo pasado*.

¹⁹² Sergio Delgado, following a thesis of Pénélope Laurent, proposes this phrase as a version of Heraclitus’s fragment (“Lisa” 122). Although Delgado does not mention *El río sin orillas*, he does suggest the phrase’s relevance to *Nadie nada nunca*: the lifeguard who floats for hours in the river, attempting to break his previous record, experiences a subjective dissolution in the water; this dissolution includes his loss of speech and a reduction to a state of nothingness. The two initial versions of this fragment that Saer gives in *El río* are “One does not enter twice in the same river” (*No se entra dos veces en el mismo río*) and the “radical variant” of a disciple, “No one ever enters any river” (*Nadie entra nunca en ningún río*) [23]. As I show in the next chapter, the end of Saer’s imaginary treatise glosses this thesis to suggest that the river is always changing, but the subject who enters is always “one and the same.”

¹⁹³ *Totem and Taboo* 83. For readings that emphasize the connection with Freud’s myth in *Totem and Taboo*, see especially Premat (*La dicha* 68-71; 317-318; 51-53) and Corbatta (57-60), who also mentions Oswaldian *antropofagia*. Premat’s incisive interpretation of Saer’s “mature” writing under the general framework of the Oedipus myth leads at times to an overemphasis on the law of the Father, evident in his reading the captain as “father” the tribe’s ritual as the result of their incorporating him (69). The narrator, as I return to below, has a more anti-Oedipal theory of their ritual.

¹⁹⁴ Oswald de Andrade “Manifesto” 19, 18. In the context of Brazilian literature, the land of palm tress (Pindorama) unmistakably recalls the verses from the romantic poet Gonçalves Dias’ “Canção do exílio”—“My land has palm trees” (*Minha terra tem palmeiras*)—and Oswald’s own parody of this poem in “Canto de regresso à pátria”: “My land has palmares” (*Minha terra tem palmares*), a reference to the quilombo or mocambo of Palmares, a famous seventeenth century community formed by escaped slaves.

¹⁹⁵ The phrase is from Borges’ early poem, “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires.” As I show in chapter four, it also ties in to the dichotomy between moral conscience and bodily appetite that *El río sin orillas* both invokes and neutralizes.

¹⁹⁶ The identification of “mythical violence” as law-making derives from Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” where it is opposed to the law-destroying force of “divine violence” (249-250). While I agree with subsequent critical readings that have deconstructed this opposition (most famously Derrida in “Force of Law”), the crucial distinction between the two, I would argue, turns on the continued repetition of violence: in mythical violence, the violence aims not only at the guilty but also their descendents. Adorno and Horkheimer’s allegorical reading of *The Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* proceeds along similar lines, a point I return to in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁷ With Hélène Clastres’ title in mind (“land without evil”), this dash can also be read as cutting off a discourse of prophecy.

¹⁹⁸ *Tristes Tropiques*, 388. Lévi-Strauss’ critical elaboration of the trope comes after the travelogue of his own journey into the interior of Brazil and his stay with a group of Tupi-Kawahib, descendents of the historic Tupi “cannibals” who were now living in destitution.

¹⁹⁹ *Aesthetic Theory* 18; 110-112. “In their expression, artworks do not imitate the impulses of individuals, nor in any way those of their authors; in cases where this is the essential determination, they fall as copies precisely to the mercy of that reification that the mimetic impulse opposes” (111).

²⁰⁰ For other readings of Herodotus and this series of “heterological” texts on the other, see Díaz-Quiñones and especially Riera “La ficción.”

²⁰¹ In this section from *The History*, Herodotus maps out where the “Andropophagoi” are located, in between the desert (*eremos*) only inhabited by nomads and a really “desert” region that may have “no race of men in it” (18). Later, he describes the Andropophagoi as having “the most savage manners of all human beings, and they neither acknowledge any rule of right nor observe any customary law. They are nomads and wear clothing like that of Scythians, but have a language of their own; and alone of all these nations they are man-eaters” (106). The numbers here refer to the sections of the English translation on Project Gutenberg.

²⁰² Hulme *Colonial Encounters* 365-369. Hulme’s astute analysis of these competing discourses in Columbus’ journals (transcribed by Bartolomé de las Casas), more nuanced than I am able to indicate here, identifies the inconsistencies of these attempts to still situate their journey somewhere in the originally desired destination of the Orient. It is the discourse of savagery, however, that triumphs.

²⁰³ De las Casas *Historia* 13, quoted in Dussel “Anti-Cartesian” 16. The context is de las Casas’ discussion of Antón de Montesinos and Pedro de Córdoba, the two friars who first preached against the injustice of the new Spanish colonies, raising the question of both the humanity and rationality of the Indians. For Dussel, the ethico-political consciousness of this *ego clamo*

opposes the *ego conquiro* that dominates the discourse of modernity and this sleeping “dream” has remained the predominant condition of the last five hundred years (“Anti-Cartesian” 16).

²⁰⁴ “What is out there beyond what he can see? Solitude, danger, savages, death! This then is poetry: the man who moves among these scenes feels assaulted by fears and fantastic uncertainties, by dreams that disturb him while he is awake” (*Facundo* 61).

²⁰⁵ The notes to the drafts included in the critical edition of *El entenado/Glosa* now also provide further support that the connection was also intended: in Document I, the note “ROCA Y LOS INDIOS” (444) invokes General Julio Argentino Roca and the Conquest of the Desert.

²⁰⁶ For Kristal, this adaptation of the Anglo Saxon “wilderness” coincides both with Juan Manuel Rosas’ campaigns of extermination in the 1830s and the well-documented importance of the female captive narrative in Argentine letters, making the latter more comparable in this respect to North America than other Latin American countries (216-217). Montaldo provides an elucidating intertextual reading of how *El entenado* opens up a “space for representation over the repression of the indigenous peoples in Argentine literature” (“Exploración 757).

²⁰⁷ “Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so every revolution sets its sights on currently utopian goals as much as goals within reach” (Benjamin “A Different Utopian Will” 135). Saer provides a more contemporary and negative counterpoint to this image in the short story “Manos y planetas,” from *La mayor*: Barco recounts watching a newscast of the last flight to the moon when this now banal voyage took a more curious turn; the image of the disappearing territories of the Earth produced a kind of mild fascination and anxiety among those watching the screen. In this image, the Earth was also reduced to such a point that children could “play with the destiny of the world,” a possibility that for Tomatis, fixated on the shape and now the “knowledge” of Barco’s hands as he sprinkles salt, evokes tears.

²⁰⁸ “A great volcano stirs at our feet and its stirrings are not poetic or imaginary but very real” (Bolívar qtd in Lynch 244). Bolívar’s Humboldtian metaphor, as Lynch shows, had to do both the *llaneros* that served under him during the war of Independence and the specter of slave rebellions (243-45; 139-150).

²⁰⁹ Yúdice, summarizing the main criticism on *testimonio*, defines the testimonial narrative as “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation” (44). Beverley similarly emphasizes “urgency” as an organizing tone or imperative: “The situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverley “The Margin” 26).

²¹⁰ Although “Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu” was originally published on its own in 1944, one year after *Canto general de Chile* (1943), it was later included as the second canto of Neruda’s monumental *Canto general* (1950), part of a larger continental scope that also subsumed the national focus of the *Canto general de Chile* (which went from the title of the whole to the seventh canto). In what follows, I cite from the version of “Las alturas” in the *Canto general*.

²¹¹ On the use of Neruda’s poem as a contrast to *testimonio*, see the different arguments of Yúdice (42-3; 47) and Moreiras (“The Aura of Testimonio” 201-206; 210). Although both stress the break between Neruda’s representational strategy and *testimonio* as a form, for Moreiras critical discourse on *testimonio* does not itself escape the position of Neruda’s poetic subject and its prosopoeia—what he terms the “auratic practice” of Latin Americanist criticism (210).

²¹² Piglia applies this concept of the avant-garde, which he associates with Beckett, in his dialogues with Saer on the question of tradition (*Diálogo* 17-8). Although Saer neither affirms or denies this association, the emphasis on an “individual tradition” in his response also troubles automatic adherence to either a national series, or a cosmopolitan one (21).

²¹³ *Means without End* 59. Although he does emphasize the distinction, Agamben here privileges the improvisational and interruptive use of gags and *lazzi* (comic bits) in popular theater (Gordon 5), rather than the audience expectations of *lazzi* (comic bits) or their later incorporation into the plots of *commedia dell'arte* scenarios, both of which are an integral part of television sitcoms.

²¹⁴ “The aura surrounding Macbeth on the stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him. What distinguishes the shot in the film studio, however, is that the camera is substituted for the audience. As a result, the aura surrounding the actor is dispelled—and, with it, the aura of the figure he portrays” (“The Work of Art” 112). The citations that follow are from the second version of this essay, the more definitive one for Benjamin.

²¹⁵ Benjamin “The Work of Art” 127 n.22; 116-118. But see also Benjamin “Chaplin in Retrospect” (1929). Significantly, Mariátegui’s essay “Esquema de una explicación de Chaplin” (1928) makes more explicit the technological mediation of the mime as the “origin of cinematographic art,” while Benjamin’s return to the “primal” activity of the mime appears unmediated by modern industrial or “second” technology. The alternate origin of art follows the tendency of Benjamin’s essay to render beautiful semblance historically obsolete.

²¹⁶ *Hybrid Cultures* 24, 27. García Canclini borrows the idea of “denied transgressions” in art from Bourdieu’s anthropological work on the Kabyle, a critical gesture that virtually reverses the transformative potential Ángel Rama read in Fernando Ortiz’s anthropological notion of “transculturation.” Because García Canclini reads the history of art and the avant-gardes as a fairly uniform narrative of (ultimately failed) secularization, social critique assumes the task of unmasking the art’s failed “transgression.”

²¹⁷ This shift can also be considered in relation to Saer’s distancing from film after his move to France, and his continued collaborations with more experimental filmmakers, including among others both Nicolás Sarquis’ (1968) black-and-white version of Saer’s *Palo y hueso* (1968) as well as his friend Raul Beceyro, who made a film version of *Nadie nada nunca* (1998).

²¹⁸ The script of Beckett *Film* mines a fragment from Berkeley, *esse est percipi* (“to be is to be perceived”) and in the short film, the flight into the room to escape being perceived by others and the camera (which the film also implies is a part of him). In the room, he attempts to destroy all the old photographs of different stages of his life. His original choice for the role was Chaplin and the film, among other things, stages the attempt to destroy the aura of actor and role.

²¹⁹ In contrast to “classic” Hollywood narrative, Bordwell traces an alternative use of the fade-out/fade-in back to a tradition of avant-garde European and Russian film that, beginning in the 1920s, used the dissolve to “explore graphic possibilities” (Bordwell 47; cf. 46-8).

²²⁰ In a conversation with interviewers published in his *Diálogo* with Ricardo Piglia, Saer suggests that he placed a rigorous taboo on adverbs “*en mente*,” especially in his earlier writing (*Diálogo* 69-70). Although *adverbios en mente* refer simply to adverbs with the suffix *-mente* (ly in English), its additional connotation here has to do with being already at hand or automatic, what for Saer impedes “concretion” (70).

²²¹ Retamar *Caliban* 86; Cortázar “Acerca de la situación” 267. Cortázar’s formulation, written in a 1967 public letter responding to Retamar’s inquest about the Latin American intellectual, contrasted this planetary ethical vocation of the Latin American writer in Europe with the limited vision and understanding of those concerned with only a local sphere. For Cortázar this was true also for the revolutionary Cuban whose contact with the rest of the world involved a struggle for humanity that also overlapped with the “line of fire.” But there the national already extended outward to a more universal dimension.

²²² Spivak *Death of Discipline*. Despite important differences (especially concerning gender, feminism, and a totalizing vision from Europe), what Spivak similarly refers to as “planet-feeling” and “planet-thought” (“World Systems” 107) also has points of continuity with Cortázar’s earlier “planetary” vocation and feeling: from the North, both present a primarily ethical relation to the texts and contexts of the South.

²²³ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 338-342. Florencia Garramuño contrasts Saer with Benjamin’s avant-garde “euphoria” towards the divorce of art and experience: Saer’s novels instead suggest “disillusionment” with this divorce and even an attempt to “revert” it, thereby establishing a continuity with modernism (“Las ruínas” 726). This is a continuity with Adorno, as Garramuño notes, but also Benjamin himself—not the avant-garde championing of destruction in “Experience and Poverty” (or the artwork essay) as much as the more nostalgic approach in his essays on Baudelaire that construct the deep “experience” (*Efharung*) of this loss (“On Some Motifs” 342). For an incisive account of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s interpretation of the apparent impossibility of lyric aura as a starting point for its (re)construction, see Robert Kaufman “Aura, Still.”

²²⁴ Gabriel Riera’s provocative reading of *El entenado* turns this scene into an erasure of any “personified other” through an interesting misreading: he transcribes the phrase “unnarratable memory” where the text reads *presencia inenarrable*, or “unnarratable presence” (“La ficción de Saer” 388; *Littoral* 97). The “unnarratable memory” and its cognates (“a-topical memory,” “an impossible memory,” or “the impossible event of memory” better fits an “invention of the other” beyond the archive and the pure “there is” of poetry that effaces empirical objectivity, ideas respectively associated with the philosophies of Derrida and Badiou (*Littoral* 145 n.7, 145 n.28). But it oddly also effaces the gazes at stake in this scene along with the Saerian question of place as an intercrossing of the imaginary and the empirical.

²²⁵ Saer has reflected on this analog in more than one place: “Art relocates the well set diamond of the Grand Idea within the pulsional residue [*ganga pulsional*], in the same way one cannot see a literal diamond other than enveloped in the crown of blood, sweat, and tears of the African miner” (“Literatura y crisis argentina” 103-4). See also the argument that the industry of mass culture tends to “erase” both the concrete and contradictions: “The concept of class struggle resembles the conquests of poetry because it has deduced the concrete of history from labor; it is the insertion of the concrete in the interior of a history conceived in the name of a vague universality. The *mass media* present for us a society congealed in this false universality” (“La literatura y los nuevos lenguajes” 218).

²²⁶ Giordano “Saer y su concepto” 8. Giordano’s point here that Saerian fiction always shows “the sinking of any island,” its becoming strange and remote, aims at countering the claim of Sarvino that the violence of naming in Saer’s fiction, its capacity to make the invisible visible, is comparable to manifesting an island that “did not figure on the maps,” much like the action of revolutionary politics (Sarvino *Saer y los nombres* 151). For Giordano, revealing the

“deconstructive impulse” of Saer’s fiction requires correcting many of Saer’s critical formulations with a Blanchotian attention to the absolute absence of things (“Saer como problema” 257).

²²⁷ Joyce *Ulysses* 28. For the quote in Piglia’s novel, see *Respiración* 33.

²²⁸ For partial exceptions, see Premat *La dicha* (287-290) and Bermúdez Martínez (225-234).

Analía Gerbaudo proposes another link to Piglia’s novel in an article on *El río sin orillas*: summarizing several critics on Saer and the introduction of his literature into the school system, she suggests that Saer’s imaginary treatise has become a possible answer to the question posed by one of Piglia’s characters in exile: “Who among us will write the *Facundo*” (Gerbaudo 173-175; Piglia *Respiración* 77).

²²⁹ Saer “Literatura y crisis argentina” 110-112; “Tradición y cambio” 107-108. Glossing the debates about how to classify these “hybrid” texts, Saer argues instead that they point towards an end of the classical conception of literary genre. The argument brings together two writers politically opposed to each other around the question of genre.

²³⁰ General Videla’s famous response to a journalist lays out this logic disturbingly well: “a terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization” (qtd. in Caistor xii).

²³¹ “La narración-objeto” (22). I refer again here to Badiou’s argument for an “affirmationist art” that declares “the modern method of affirming the universal” as a “subtraction” through the negation of particularities (including those of self and ethnicity), see Alain Badiou (“A Manifesto of Affirmationist Art” 142; 140-148). Saer relates his concept of the “narration-object” to a similar concern with the object in philosophy, but I would suggest also an implicit dialogue with Barthes’ early *Mythologies*: for Barthes, the “metalanguage” of myth “speaks of things” by naturalizing history, erasing the contingency and fabricated nature of what it represents; the “language-object,” on the other hand, “speaks things” by showing “the human act which has produced, fitted up, used, or rejected it” (143-144).

²³² *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (14). The “expression of totality” does not simply affirm the “appearance of the whole in the particular,” as the well-known aphorism “the whole is the false”—or in the Spanish copy Saer cites from, “la totalidad es lo no verdadero”—makes evident (*Minima Moralia* 30/53). In Adorno’s aesthetic theory, “expression” (sadness, energy, longing, and suffering more generally) comes into conflict with appearance or semblance (*Aesthetic Theory* 110-113; for the link between expression and Benjamin’s sense of aura as the object’s capacity to return the gaze, see 112).

²³³ For Heidegger’s connection of “unveiling” and “unveiledness” to truth and Being—“There is truth—unveiling and unveiledness—only when and as long as Dasein exists”—see *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (219, esp. 217-224). In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” the cognate terms, “deconcealing” and “unconcealedness,” tie the appearing of truth in great works of art to a specifically collective “people”: “The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and preservers, which is to say of a people’s historical existence, is art” (78). Heidegger significantly denies “the primitive” any capacity in the “founding of truth” as a bestowing, grounding, and beginning (75, 76), much as Kant does with sublime experience, a point I return to below. For reasons that will become clearer in what follows, I diverge here with Giordano’s astute analyses of Saer’s aesthetics in terms close to a Heideggerean concern with the appearance of the nonapparent (“Saer como problema” 257-8).

²³⁴ Saer's later hybrid reworking of the detective novel, *La pesquisa* (*The Investigation*), takes place both in Paris and the Río de la Plata: Pichón Garay relates the gruesome serial murders of elderly Parisian women who are cut from the pubic bone to the neck, a wound morbidly compared at one point to a "vagina."

²³⁵ The beginning of the novel *Lo imborrable* (*The Unerasable* [1992]) also evokes the bloody "new" or "second birth" of Tomatis, whose paranoid state relates both to the recent death of his mother and a more general atmosphere of repression since, unlike Pichón Garay, Tomatis remained in Argentina during the dictatorship.

²³⁶ Saer explicitly mentions the engendering of Antaeus, the giant of Libya, by Gaia and Poseidon (*El río sin orillas* 30), who similarly engendered the sea nymph Charybdis. Charybdis was transformed into a giant mouth by Zeus after repeatedly flooding lands for her father, the sea god Poseidon (Eason). Saer's elision of Charybdis and the language of his description of Scylla interestingly follows Borges' and Guerrero's *Manual de zoología fantástica*, which only includes the latter (69).

²³⁷ I refer here to Heidegger's conception of the "thing" as "the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in the simple one-fold of their self-unified fourfold" ("The Thing" 178).

²³⁸ A gloss of the images suggest this schematic protonarrative: in the first painting, the divine intervenes in the human realm in the form of Saul's conversion; in the second, Christ's auratic transfiguration in the upper plane contrasts with the human forms below, above all the possessed boy, around whom many of the bodies are clustered; in the third, then, the upper or superior plane is split in two, with the Virgin Mary's body ascension towards God leaving the human plane below.

²³⁹ "Culture and Finance Capital" 159-160. Developing Giovanni Arrighi's account of financial speculation as a recurring stage in the expansion of capitalism, Jameson suggests that both speculation—disinvested from production to seek profits in financial transactions—and these image-fragments—saturated with stereotypical cultural connotations—are headed for a crash (161). Jameson's own speculative account draws on Derek Jarman's "painterly" film aesthetics, specifically his *The Last of England*. Jameson does not specify, but the narrativized images miming finance speculation would seem to anticipate an economic crash, as well as a potentially political clash (as Jarman's anarchic clichés suggest, several years before the fall of Thatcherism).

²⁴⁰ Heidegger "The Origin of the Work of Art" 78. See note

²⁴¹ Compare: "The culture industry endless cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually compromises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu" ("The Culture Industry" 111).

²⁴² I refer again here to Bourdieu's useful "vulgar" critique of "pure" taste. For Bourdieu, "pure" taste and aesthetics are based on a refusal of "impure" sensation (like taste and sex) that borders on disgust for the facile and simple pleasures of the senses (*Distinction* 486-7).

²⁴³ Sarmiento's presentation deploys a version of the Kantian sublime in the Argentine Pampa: Kant uses "thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals" as one of several examples that illustrate nature's "might" and dynamic sublime; similarly, the split in *Facundo* between lettered poetry and the superstitious gaucho partially recapitulates the Kantian distinction between those with "preparatory culture" who feel nature's "might" and the

“untutored individual” who is struck by terror at nature’s “dominion” (*Critique of Judgment* 91; 94-6). I again follow Spivak’s argument for reading Kant’s analytic distinction under the horizon of colonialism and the aboriginal foreclosed from the transcendental Subject (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 1-36). Unlike Kant’s transcendental subject, Sarmiento depended on the “untutored” knowledge of the gaucho that he also proposed to supplant. On the gaucho’s doubled inscription (in literature) and conscription (in the army), see Josefina Ludmer’s excellent *Treatise on the Motherland*.

²⁴⁴ I have translated Saer’s paraphrase of Enobarbus’s line in Act III, Scene 5: “Mundo, ahora sólo quedan dos mandíbulas para triturarte.” The original reads: “Then, world, thou hast a pair of chaps, no more; And throw between them all the food thou hast, They’ll grind the one the other. Where’s Antony?” (*Anthony and Cleopatra* 76). In Saer’s rendering (or citation) of this apostrophe, the “world” is directly threatened with being ground up by the jaws—a phrase that suggests here a grinding up of a predetermined world. In the play, Enobarbus has learned that Caesar imprisoned Lepidus for treason after their successful siege against Pompey. The “pair of chaps” thus registers the imminence of the conflict between Caesar and Antony, who “grind the one the other” in the battle that follows; however, with what Saer refers to as Enobarbus’s “sinister irony” in mind, the “pair of chaps” can also be read as a lucid metaphor for Caesar’s imperial appetite, prefiguring Enobarbus’s eventual defection to the future emperor.

²⁴⁵ On Saer’s glosses on Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument, see for example, “Literatura y crisis argentina” in *Concepto de ficción*; “Tradición y cambio en el Río de la Plata” (51-54) and “La narración-objeto” (20-23) in *Narración-objeto* (the latter of which includes it alongside Kafka’s story); and “El hombre que oyó el canto” in *Trabajos*.

²⁴⁶ Viñas 115. The quote is from Echeverría’s 1846 treatise *Dogma socialista* (113).

²⁴⁷ In an equally important critical essay for Saer’s generation, Rodríguez Monegal’s defense of Borges used Scylla and Charybdis to figure the dangers of his left critics (mostly the committed writers, like Viñas, associated with the journal *Contorno* in Argentina) as well as of his disciples: Borges and critics, like Odysseus, chart a path between them (“Borges, entre Escila y Caribdis” [1956]). For Saer, the literary grouping to which he belonged in Santa Fe was among the first to reclaim Borges “from the left,” diverging from the positions of *Contorno* (). Although I do not take up the connection here, Saer has also used the Scylla figure to describe the formal principle of the Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos’ singular dictator novel, *Yo el supremo*, set in the nineteenth century and originally published in 1974 (“Augusto Roa Bastos”).

²⁴⁸ In his story “The Silence of the Sirens,” Kafka represents their disappearance only from the perspective of Odysseus’ resolution, but include other alternatives: the sirens remain transfixed on Odysseus’ radiance and were not annihilated, because they did not have consciousness; and a codicil, the Odysseus knew they were silent (and did not sing), but, using his cunning, he pretended not to know that they were silent in order not to offend the gods.

²⁴⁹ “If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood” (“Critique of Violence” 249-250). Benjamin’s primary example of the former is the mythic violence of the Greek gods against Niobe, whose fault was less vanity than a challenge to fate; the primary example of the latter is the divine violence of God against the followers of Korah in the Old Testament, who are swallowed by the earth after conspiring against Moses, while Benjamin gestures in passing to Prometheus’ struggle

against fate as an impure form of divine violence (250). In this light, Adorno and Horkheimer's allegory can be read as both a response to and a reworking of Benjamin's argument.

²⁵⁰ Hullot-Kentor "Back to Adorno" (37, 39): "Self-sacrifice goes beyond itself because the self that is the internalization of sacrifice becomes the critique of sacrifice" (40).

²⁵¹ *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (47). My reading here is informed by Eva Guelen's provocative identification of a dialectic of shame and shamelessness in Adorno. Although her focus is *Minima moralia*, I think it also informs the interpretation of the Sirens in the roughly contemporaneous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

²⁵² At several points the epic hero's "cunning" is linked to a later colonial situation: "The seafarer Odysseus outwits the natural deities as the civilized traveler was later to swindle savages, offering them colored beads for ivory" (39); "Odysseus's defenselessness against the foaming sea sounds like a legitimation of the enrichment of the voyager at the expense of indigenous inhabitants" (48). Although Adorno and Horkheimer interpret the more terrible point's of civilizations's "vengeance wreaked on the primeval world" (61) as its resemblance to the "primeval world," and not to "barbarism," the latter is in keeping with Saer's use in *El río*: "the great prophets of civilization often made use of barbarism to impose it" (173).

²⁵³ *The Odyssey*, trans. Lattimore. In the translation by Stanley Lombardo, the passage emphasizes the action of judging rather than court and the formal position of judge: "About the hour a man who has spent the day / judging quarrels that young men bring to him / Rises from the market place and goes to dinner" (191).

²⁵⁴ In Adorno and Horkheimer's allegorical reading, the rationality that overcomes an "implacable nature" ends up becoming an "implacable judge": the hero Odysseus can thus be seen as "avenging the heritage of the very powers he has escaped" and they end their excursus on *The Odyssey* with "Odysseus the judge" coldly narrating an execution (38-9; 61). It would be a mistake to oppose the impunity with which Scylla and Charbydis devour everything in their vicinity to the moderation of Odysseus or the judge, who temporarily abstain from the rule of appetites; moderation and impunity are already intertwined, since the moderation or abstinence that secures Odysseus's escape is both the condition of his impunity and the standard that cruelly condemns the entire crew to death.

²⁵⁵ In *Facundo*, Sarmiento worries that the French will see the "inner convulsions" of Argentina as a mere natural phenomenon, a "volcano" (32)—a reference, it would seem, to Simón Bolívar's metaphor for the potential explosive threat of subaltern rebellion following Independence, as I emphasized in the previous chapter. The "intestinal struggle" then gives the territory a social body (or more accurately, a digestive organ) and connects, among other meanings, to the project of "civilizing" Argentina through increased European immigration.

²⁵⁶ Although it was only first published posthumously in 1871, critics generally agree that the story was likely written between 1838 and 1849 when Echeverría was in exile along with other intellectuals opposed to the rule of Rosas.

²⁵⁷ Two relevant historical points should be mentioned here: cattle-ranching as a source of regional wealth and the notion of "barbarian democracy." First, this period (after 1810 and during the wars of independence) saw the collapse of the silver-based mercantile society and the gradual rise of a cattle-ranching one. The source of regional wealth—the prized "prey" or "catch" [*preza*—is thus more literally tied to cattle in the period of the story's production (the context of the flood also suggests *preza* as "dam," reinforcing the sense that control of the cattle and the "bowels" presented the possibility of containment; or, if unleashed, the cause of a flood).

Second, the Federalist declaration of an independent *Estado Oriental* during the wars of independence, a state that included the littoral of Argentina, made the abolition of slavery and more egalitarian land distribution part of its constitution, in contrast to the Unitarian-controlled Buenos Aires. David Rock, whose historical overview I have drawn from here, goes on to argue that the Brazilian elites viewed this independent State as a “barbarian democracy” capable of inspiring slave revolts in the region, prompting the Portuguese to invade Montevideo in 1817 with the tacit support of Buenos Aires, which helped bring about the end of the Federalist League (Rock *Argentina* 96, 93; 91-97).

²⁵⁸ In *Argentina en pedazos*, Piglia reads *Facundo* and “El matadero” as the “double origin” of the history of Argentine narrative, and offers an explanation for why Echeverría’s story was never published despite a quality that surpasses most of his work and that of his contemporaries: “El matadero” was fiction and there was no “space for fiction” in Sarmiento and Echeverría’s conception of literature. In this sense, it is quite significant that Echeverría makes no space for any equivalent to the fig tree as right to leisure in his story.

²⁵⁹ I here translate from the Spanish, rather than use the English translation, which does not have as clear an economic resonance in its formulation; for a comparison, see the English translation of *Minima moralia* (41).

²⁶⁰ Borges *Historia universal de la infamia* 5. Borges’ adds this definition of “the baroque” in the 1954 preface to *Historia universal de la infamia* (1934), the collection that contains the story Saer cites from several times in “Summer,” “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell,” without specifying its source.

²⁶¹ This attack is the subject of the early short story “Paramnesia.” Several scenes in “Summer” relate this event and the narrator’s childhood memories, since he lived just across the street from where the fort historically stood.

²⁶² Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* 179. In Benjamin’s historical materialist approach to the “monad,” the sudden cessation of thought within “a constellation pregnant with tensions” gives the constellation a “shock” that “crystallizes” it into a “monad” (“On the Concept of History” 396). For Benjamin, this approach would allow the historical materialist to recognize “the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) the revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” Saer’s narrative represents this moment without completing the second part, but the elements suppressed here in an image of sameness later reemerge, as we will see.

²⁶³ Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s very illuminating argument about a “panoramic perception” introduced by railway travel in the nineteenth century draws the explicit analogy between Benjamin’s “destruction of aura” and the loss of the “spatial-temporal presence” of place along with a sense of unique local identity (41-2; 38). Like many technologically driven studies of systems and media, the conditions for this new perception—the commodification of both traveler and places visited—presume a fairly uniform “developmental stage” of technology or commodity circulation (193-194). The stagist account downplays unevenness and, more specifically here, the disjunctive temporality of memory and experience.

²⁶⁴ On the connection between images of the landscape and the face, see again the discussion of the white wall / black hole system in Deleuze and Guattari’s section on “Faciality” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 167-191, esp. 172-173). In his short story, “El interprete,” from *La mayor*, Saer literalizes this image in the fragmented ruin of a white wall, which provides a view from its “other” side. Felipillo, an native interpreter for the Spanish conquistadors during their war with Incan empire, ruminates on his previous service rendered to the “butchers”: “I think that the

butcherous language is for me like this wall, compact, useless, and without meaning, and [I think] that it blinds me when the light bounces against its corrupted and arid face [*su cara estragada y árida*]” (89). Here the white wall provides the analogy for a regime of signs (“the butcherous language”) that is also the depraved and blinding “face” of the conquerors: a “face” that he has interpreted for and interpreted; savage voices that haunt him; and a body now reduced to “ruins.”

²⁶⁵ In Saer’s *La ocasión*, the immigrant illusionist Bianco has a similar vision in the nineteenth *pampa*, shortly before the “Conquest of the Desert”: a herd of wild horses that suddenly appears on the horizon, gallops towards him, and confronts him with a confusing mass of matter. The scene not only echoes the violence at the foundation of Buenos Aires (after the attack on Sancti Spiritus, as I have indicated above, the settlers were killed and only horses remained to roam the plains). But Bianco, convinced of the primacy of the mind over the secondary “excremental” nature of matter, makes this disturbance into a business opportunity: he will sell fencing to help enclose the plains and delineate property.

²⁶⁶ The sensation of “oppression” may have its own canonical expression in the explicit political antithesis of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*: when the titular gaucho hero leaves the Indian tribe with whom he has stayed after deserting the army, he issues a series of warnings about the many dangers in the open desert, prefacing it with the exclamation: “All is sky and horizon / in the immense green field!” (*Martín Fierro* 154). Saer’s own discussion does not totally do away with the Kantian distinctions—he goes on to note the tinge of “enjoyment” produced by the somewhat anguished reflections (*El río* 123). But, in Kant’s argument, the transformation of sublime feeling from “displeasure” to “pleasure” reinstitutes reason’s power as “dominion” over nature and sensation (*Critique* 88, 95). As I show, the categories of “oppression” and “dominion” in Saer’s narrative acquire a more socio-political dimension as they are transfigured into history through the sequence of episodes from *The Odyssey*.

²⁶⁷ I draw here on Slavoj Žižek’s provocative juxtaposition of Judas’ betrayal with Hegel’s interpretation of Brutus’ and Cassius’ betrayal of Caesar: because for Hegel, the death of the individual Julius Caesar retroactively becomes necessary for the emergence of “caesar” as the title of Roman Emperor, the conspirators become part of the “cunning of reason” that, rather than defending the republic, ends up confirming the truth of Julius Caesar’s power in an already weakened Republic; Judas’ betrayal similarly retroactively becomes symbolically necessary for the institution of Christianity, as Saint Paul plays a similar role to Augustus Caesar in instituting the new symbolic law (“The Most Sublime of Hysterics” 42-43; *The Puppet and the Dwarf* 27-19). In Saer, this institution never appears secure.

²⁶⁸ The larger list—all of them important writers for Saer—includes Roberto Arlt, Martínez Estrada, Macedonio Fernández, and Antonio di Benedetto on the Western bank of the Río de la Plata, and Felisberto Hernández and Juan Carlos Onetti on the Eastern bank.

²⁶⁹ This has been a consistent concern in Saer’s readings of Borges: to undo the sacred aura around Borges work rather than destroy it; and to advance an aesthetic reading of Borges’ writing that also remains attune to its accordance with a liberalism and conception of “the West” that anticipates his notorious initial support for dictatorships in the region (“Borges como problema”).

²⁷⁰ The other representatives of this “cult”—those who rushed to exchange pesos for dollars in the midst of a crisis they then helped exacerbate—demonstrated the ambivalent desires of

obedient alter boys who secretly insult the Virgin, or of the chaste nuns who cannot stop thinking about the “ostentatious protuberance of Christ’s cloth” (203).

²⁷¹ Samuel Huntington, the most prominent proponent of the civilizational thesis, conceives the region of Latin America as a separate, but closely affiliated, “civilization” divided about whether it belongs to “the West” (*Clash of Civilizations* 46, 240-242); see also Huntington “The Hispanic Challenge”). In *The Idea of Latin America*, Mignolo offers a critique of these positions as an identity politics and an “unconscious” fear of epistemological shifts in knowledge introduced by Latino/a and Muslim thinkers (131-135). Like the proposal to “transcend” Occidentalism (or “civilization” or “modern reason”), this epistemological priority never really clarifies what factors outside of identity would change in this reconfiguration (Mignolo “Pos-occidentalismo”).

²⁷² On the double sense of *logos* as “speech” and as an “ac-count,” see Rancière *Disagreement* (26).

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