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## Chasing Your (Josie) Bliss: The Troubling Critical Afterlife of Pablo Neruda's Burmese Lover

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### Introduction

If we imagine all of Pablo Neruda's poetry, his manuscripts, his effects collected in various university collections and *casas-museos*, and all the secondary literature about him to constitute a single archive, then it is an archive haunted by a lacuna in the shape of a Burmese woman. Josie Bliss, as she is commonly known, was purportedly Neruda's lover while he was stationed as a consular official in Burma (1927-1928), and the inspiration for several poems. Yet there is no contemporary record of her existence. Though Neruda called her any number of things, from "la más bella de Mandalay" to "la maligna," no one knows her real name. There are no photos of her, either. In a recent retrospective of Neruda's life in Asia during the writing of *Residencia en la tierra*, the Fundación Pablo Neruda in Santiago de Chile used a Javanese mask to represent her face.

The mask is as an apt a representation for Josie as any. Like her, it papers over an absence with the stylized illusion of presence. Neruda and generations of critics analyzing his life and work have filled reams of paper with descriptions of Josie as exotic, passionate, animalistic and homicidally jealous. Behind all these descriptions, however, is an absolute void: we lack not just the archival evidence to corroborate this particular version of Josie, but the evidence to suggest that there was ever any Josie at all.

A return to Jacques Derrida's "Archive Fever" helps us understand why scholarship on Neruda has been consistently unable to acknowledge Josie for what she is: a potentially un-fillable gap. In Derrida's original essay, the archive replete with sources creates a "compulsive, repetitive, nostalgic desire for the archive" (57), which spurs the scholar ever deeper into its study. Yet for a scholar to experience archive fever, he or she must eventually confront a moment of archival absence and become invested in "searching the archive right where it slips away" (57). Gayatri Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, speaks of her own experience of archive fever when pursuing an archival absence. Recalling earlier work in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak identifies her search for traces of the Rani of Simur as an inability to come to terms with the latter's absolute

absence from record. This seems to be precisely the condition in which Neruda scholars find themselves with regard to Josie, treating her absence merely as an occasion to relocate her in ever-more dubious “primary” sources, rather than as a conclusive epistemological limit. In her monograph *For the Record*, Anjali Arondekar picks up where Spivak left off, urging scholars to move away from the notion that every archival object “would somehow lead to a formulation of subjectivity: the presumption that if a body is found, then a subject can be recovered” (3). The present essay departs radically from current Neruda scholarship by proceeding from the assumption that Josie Bliss is an unrecoverable subject. Following Arondekar, this article demonstrates how an archival absence, when acknowledged as such, can still yield productive insights about structure in which it is housed.

Derrida also emphasizes the power of the archive to “produce” rather than merely “record” its contents (17). This idea, with roots in Michel Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge*, is powerfully taken up in Ann Stoler’s *Along the Archival Grain*, where she approaches to the archive as an ethnographic object, attending not as much to its individual contents as to the logics of its construction. In the case of Dutch imperial projects in Indonesia, she shows, the process of creating and maintaining the archive actually perpetuated racial categories that had a measurable impact on millions of people. It is this attention to archive as *producer* and *perpetuator* of racism from which the present work proceeds. It argues that the construction of Neruda scholarship as a self-referential archive, rather than merely Neruda’s own occasionally racist representations of South and Southeast Asia, contribute to what other scholars have named “Latin American Orientalism.” How can a focus on methodology and institutionalization based around the problematic treatment of an archival absence help us understand not only what the Neruda archive lacks, but also the troubling critical legacy it has created?

To address this question, the first section of this essay will trace the development of Josie’s mythology from Neruda’s poetry in 1929 to the current gold standard of Neruda biographical criticism in the 2000s. Critics’ reticence to contradict Neruda’s autobiographical writing, their general unfamiliarity with the Asian context, and their “archive fever,” or the fetishistic faith in the potential of archival material to yield new insights, have combined to perpetuate a transparently Orientalist stereotype in the guise of historical fact. The second section demonstrates how fictional European accounts of South Asia, especially George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*, have been given preference over other sources of information on Burma, such that Neruda’s experience there has been alternately obscured or co-opted into European narratives. The misplaced authority given to those texts by

archive fever combines with a prevalent misunderstanding of Orientalism within Latin American Studies to render Neruda's dark vision of Josie and her Asian milieu "realistic." The third section explores the links between Orwell's novel and Josie's legend. These connections are made especially clear in the fictional account of Neruda's Burma sojourn, Cristián Barros's *Tango del viudo*, a novel that nevertheless demonstrates the same feverish archival tendencies as more academic work. Finally, the conclusion suggests how Josie's example illuminates current problems in the way we analyze author archives, and those problems impact larger scholarly claims about the impact of these authors' international journeys.

### **The Myth of Josie**

Josie Bliss is initially depicted in the first volume of *Residencia en la tierra*, which Neruda began writing in 1925 and completed during his stint as a consular official in Asia. Comparatively, little is known about that period in Neruda's life, except that it was marked by intense loneliness, especially the first years in Burma and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). There are a few pockets of correspondence – with a lover, a sister, a friend – but there are also vast expanses of silence. His official paper trail was even scantier: Infrequent invoices for shipments of nitrate or tea, announcements of appointments, vacations and transfers (Archivo histórico Vol. 1108, No. 95-99). Neruda tantalizes future generations of scholars with one letter about a brownie Kodak camera (*Cartas a Laura*, 38). Alas, no photos of his time in Burma survive. The very lack of historical detritus has made it easy for generations of scholars ignore the impact of Neruda's Asian residence on *Residencia I*, a problem that I take up in the second section of this essay. If there is one aspect of that period that has been avidly re-imagined in the critical literature, however, it is Neruda's Burmese love affair.

The progression of poems in *Residencia I* tells the story of a passionate dalliance gone sour: in "La noche del soldado," Neruda reflects on his visits to a number of "muchachas de ojos y caderas jóvenes, seres en cuyo peinado brilla una flor amarilla como el relámpago" each of whom he possesses with "sed masculina" (56). A few pages on, in "El joven monarca," he has singled out one among them – or perhaps merely distilled the best in each – as the "la más bella de Mandalay," the one who is destined to be his "esposa" (62). This wife and the girls possess a few physical characteristics that mark her out as specifically Burmese: Long dark hair, coiled high and punctuated with flowers, little feet, big breasts, and an assortment of culturally specific accessories, including bangles, toe rings, and cigars. Still, the poem maintains an ambiguity about whether this beautiful "esposa birmana, hija del rey," is a real, individual woman, or only the ideal that Neruda hopes to

find one day (62). In either case, by the time Neruda leaves Burma, marked by the poem “Tango del viudo,” his “marriage” has dissolved, and his relatively interchangeable, idealized “esposa” has transformed into a very specific, very troubling “maligna.”

Because the images and the story of “Tango del viudo” are so enduring in Neruda criticism, it is beneficial to review them here. Neruda purportedly wrote “Tango del viudo” on the ship that transferred him from his existing consular appointment in Burma to the new one in Ceylon. Although “El joven monarca” is often read as a description of Josie Bliss in better times, “Tango del viudo” is the first of Neruda’s poems to be explicitly and unequivocally linked to her. Neruda would later write in his posthumously published 1974 memoir *Confieso que he vivido* (hereafter, *Memorias*) that he had kept his new appointment secret, sneaking out with a minimum of luggage so that Josie would not suspect that he was abandoning her for good (*Memorias* 121). The poem acts as the letter of explanation he never sent, expressing his lingering tenderness for Josie at the same time it condemns her. Most famously, Neruda uses “Tango del viudo” to accuse Josie of trying to kill him with a kitchen knife. All throughout the poem, however, even in the passages that are set up to praise Josie, the poet paints an intensely unflattering picture of his mistress that constantly ties her to the natural world. He compares her to a dog and to a bird, to water and wind. He even waxes nostalgic about listening to her “orinar, en la oscuridad en el fondo de la casa/ como vertiendo una miel delgada, trémula, argentina, obstinada” (86). If this image at first appears tender and loving, albeit idiosyncratic, its dark undertones becomes clear in Cristián Barros’s novelization of their relationship, *Tango del viudo*, examined in part three.

As we shall see, the content of “Tango del viudo” is the essential nugget of Josie’s critical afterlife. What I want to highlight here, however, is their grammar: “*habrás* insultado el recuerdo de mi madre, llamándola perra podrida y madre de perros;” “*hallarás* más tarde / el cuchillo que escondi allí *por temor que me mataras*” (84, emphasis added). Neruda’s use here of the subjunctive and the future tense give the sense, even amid such overwrought descriptions, of a distance between Neruda’s perception and Josie’s reality. He can only imagine what she will do without him; perhaps he *did* only imagine what she might have done with him. There is a sort of respect for her separate interiority that makes this poem more artful than its later elaborations.

By the end of his life, Neruda had totally collapsed that distance. Although he seems to have recounted his experience with Josie as early as the 1940s, he did not publically reveal her identity until 1962 (Loyola 342; Feinstein 65). By the time he was writing the *Memorias*, Josie was an exotic adventure and evidence, despite their violent end, of his solidarity with the Burmese people: “me

adentré tanto en el alma y la vida de esa gente, que me enamoré de una nativa” (121). He also elaborates significantly on the episodes alluded to in “Tango del viudo:” “A veces me despertó una luz, una fantasma que se movía detrás del mosquitero. Era ella, vestida de blanco, blandiendo su largo y afilado cuchillo indígena. Era ella paseando horas enteras alrededor de mi cama sin decidirse a matarme. Al día siguiente celebraba misteriosos ritos en resguardo a mi fidelidad” (121). Before continuing with the critical afterlife of the Josie myth, however, I would like to take a moment to clarify just how much of it might be myth as opposed to fact. Contemporary correspondence corroborates the assertion in Neruda’s memoirs that he was sexually interested in Burmese women, even as his letters clearly show racial animus directed at those same figures (Schidlowsky 132). It seems plausible that Neruda could have formed a relationship with one of them, and that she might have displayed the tendencies he attributes to her in “Tango del viudo.” At this point, however, is important to remember that living in Burma for a year did not make Neruda an expert in Burmese culture. Even if their relationship were one of mutual passion, as he characterizes it, it is plausible that he could have misinterpreted Josie’s performance of normal Burmese interpersonal relations. More likely, still, is the possibility that their relationship was not carried out under the conditions of mutuality that Neruda suggests. Instead, we must consider that, despite his reduced finances, Neruda would have appeared in a position of power to the hypothetical Josie, phenotypically aligned with the white colonial rulers and holding a government job. Her relationship with him, therefore, might have been motivated less by sexual passion than the pursuit of financial security or prestige; her performance of jealousy a calculation, rather than a compulsion. Finally, we must consider the possibility that the Josie myth as it appears in the *Memorias* is an outright fabrication, in whole or in part.<sup>1</sup> The perpetuation of the Josie myth, of a woman beside herself with passion for the poet, is one transparently flattering to the vanity of its creator, even more so in the retrospective gaze of his *Memorias*, where she comes to represent not only his sexual magnetism, but also his ethnographic prowess. Setting aside the obvious Orientalist tropes that infuse Neruda’s depiction of Josie, these simple facts about the conditions of their relationship should pique a healthy skepticism among scholars.

Instead, the majority of biographers have perpetuated the *Memorias* version of the Josie myth as the final authority. Merely repeating its details in the context of scholarly discourse serves to authorize them as the truth in a way Neruda’s writing cannot do alone. It is worth noting that this earlier generation of biography and criticism was written either before Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was published, or before that concept had gained the critical currency it enjoys today. I do not wish,

therefore, to anachronistically insist that these authors should have recognized the racism inherent in their elaborations of the Josie myth. Their inclusion is necessary, however, because these early texts form the backbone of Neruda's scholarly archive and perpetuate the Orientalism that later critics unquestioningly repeat.

When they do venture beyond Neruda's original myth, moreover, biographers and critics confront the place where the archive "slips away" have tended to fill in the blanks on Josie and her milieu through a very problematic use of their own imaginative powers. This is especially true of biographies of the 1970s and 1980s, many of them written by personal associates of the poet. In her book of interviews, *Neruda en Valparaíso*, for instance, Sara Vial recounts a vision she had of Josie at one of Neruda's dinner parties: "De pronto, atraída por una ventarrón cálido y remoto, estaba Josie Bliss, sentada a nuestra mesa, invisible y ardiente, con su sarong y sus pies desnudos" (52). Volodia Teitelboim takes this tendency to the extreme in his book *Neruda: una biografía íntima*, combining biography, poetic analysis and Teitelboim's own experiences, often without signaling exactly where one ends and the other begins. He opens a section titled "Soledad en Birmania" with a vivid imaginative description of Neruda's impressions upon arriving in Rangoon. Without transition, Teitelboim begins speaking about his own tour of Burma: "Allí descubrí que el Neruda de *Residencia*, que algunos consideran poesía oscura, es de un realismo claro hasta dolor" (137-38). His reiteration of the Josie myth – at times a word-for-word citation of Neruda's *Memorias* – comes right in the midst of this description of that "realism." It therefore carries the double weight of Neruda's original assertion and the corroboration of Teitelboim's belated visit:

Su página más radiante y penoso de Birmania es Josie Bliss...más de alguna vez pregunté a Neruda por Josie Bliss, seudónimo inglés de esa nativa birmana, que en la intimidad abandonaba las ropas occidentales y su seudónimo sajón para volver a lo que era. La aparición detrás del mosquitero, vestida de blanco, de la belleza enfurecida con un cuchillo en las manos, dispuesta a matarlo de celos (139).

Teitelboim may have gone all the way to Burma, but he continues to understand it as a book – isomorphic with *Residencia I* – in which Josie is merely a shining page: that place and that woman can only exist in so far as they corroborate Neruda's story. And in Teitelboim's reading of that story, a thin mask of European civility is all that separates us from what Josie really was: a monstrous, murderous phantom. If there is a consciousness among this generation of critics that Neruda's story is not the only one that exists, there is still a feeling that it is the only one worth recording. Emir Rodríguez-Monegal essentially admits as much: "la que aquí importa (la que realmente importa al



poeta) es la Josie Bliss de sus recuerdos, y de su autobiografía, esa Enemiga de sus poemas, la Desdichada que continua esperando desde la imborrable cicatriz en el pecho del poeta” (90).

In the last several years there has been a critical turn in Neruda biographical scholarship that is more concerned with the material circumstances of Neruda’s life, even when they sometimes contradict the poet’s own accounts. Best represented by the monumental and painstaking work of Hernán Loyola and David Schidlowsky, these biographies – sometimes combined with literary analysis – attempt to ground every assertion in archival evidence. For many periods of the author’s life, this evidence lies thick on the ground, such that the work of the scholar is merely to sift through it to create a coherent narrative. For much of the writing of *Residencia I*, however, and for Josie Bliss in particular, the opposite is true. A relative dearth of archival material from that period makes it impossible to corroborate or deepen Neruda’s account in the traditional way.

Schidlowsky is the more conservative of the two in his choice of sources. He renders the *Residencia I* period thinly, in strict adherence to a narrow band of written documentation comprising pockets of personal correspondence and the few, relatively insignificant official logs held in the Archivo histórico of the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores in Santiago de Chile. He limits his discussion of Josie Bliss to those details that Neruda recounts in the *Memorias*, interspersing them among anecdotes from more authoritative sources. On the one hand, Schidlowsky is the only one of these biographers to draw attention the racism Neruda displayed against Burmese women in correspondence from the *Residencia I* period. In an extended footnote, he criticizes Loyola for defending obviously racist language in Neruda’s letters to his sister (132). On the other hand, he does not make any such commentary on the Josie stories, nor is there any accounting for the additional authority leant to those stories through their juxtaposition to anecdotes based on more traditional archival sources.

Faced with the same methodological quandary, Loyola expands and deepens his archive by drawing on other written sources about South Asia, its culture and its women. A sampling of Loyola’s use of these sources in his analysis of Josie Bliss should serve to demonstrate the ways in which this form of archive fever can yield a warped or incomplete view of its subject: Neruda’s traveling companion Álvaro Hinojosa wrote about his experiences with a Burmese girlfriend who was a “buena muestra del temperamento terrible y dominante de las mujeres birmanas,” so Josie, too, must have been domineering (341). Not only that, but Hinojosa provides us with the prototype of Burmese opposition leader Ang San Suu Kyi, another proof that all Burmese women, including Josie, too, must have been molded “moldeadas por una tradición de altivez y de orgullosa afirmación

de sus derechos y exigencias” (371). George Orwell and Cristián Barros wrote novels about Burmese women with unusual sexual mores, so Josie, too, must have had an unusual sex life (363-64). Tomás Lago wrote about Chinese women’s eroticism, so Josie too must have had similar opinions because of the “ardor mongólico de los nativos birmanos” (363). Kabir, the fifteenth-century North-Indian Hindu devotional poet, wrote about self-annihilation as a path toward enlightenment; Loyola accessed his poetry as it was then cited in a translation of the *Guru Granth Sabib*, a Sikh religious text completed in the sixteenth century; therefore Josie, a twentieth-century Burmese Buddhist, too must have believed that ritualistically killing Neruda during intercourse would bring about their ascension to nirvana (411-12). This last assertion is supported, in part, by Loyola’s assumption that Josie understood Neruda’s name as *niruddha*, a Sanskrit term which he interprets as “bliss.” In fact, *niruddha*, like many Sanskrit words, is a multivalent term meaning both “blockage” and “balance,” while apparently holding an additional meaning in certain yogic philosophies, where it denotes the highest level of concentration. Despite her Loyola’s characterization of Josie as a “birmana supersticiosa y ritual” (411), there is no reason to believe that such a person would be familiar with Sanskrit generally, or a certain esoteric resonance of this term in particular.

If the previous examples are delivered slightly tongue-in-cheek, they stand as a particularly blatant and humorous example of a much subtler, more pervasive problem in this style of criticism about the *Residencia I* period. As I will show in the next section, critics not only understand and explain Josie, but the whole of South Asia through the dubious lens of English and French fiction.

### **Burma: a residence without earth**

Burma and Ceylon, Neruda’s first and most isolating diplomatic postings, have been treated in two contradictory ways by his biographers and literary analysts. In the first, Burma is the state without qualities, a blank canvas of total isolation in which Neruda perfected the “self-absorbed” stance of the early *Residencia* poems. In the second, it is the picturesque Asian landscape of so many French and English Orientalist novels, exactly conforming to existing literary paradigms, such that Neruda never experienced Asia first hand, but only as a reflection of what he or his critics had already read in Rudyard Kipling, Pierre Loti, Arthur Rimbaud, Leonard Woolf, T. S. Eliot and, most importantly, George Orwell. These perspectives, while different on their surface, both manage to project the critic’s ignorance of the Asian context onto Neruda’s attitudes toward and understanding of Burma and Ceylon.

Stylistically and politically, the three volumes of the *Residencia* series seem to stand apart from Neruda's other work. They also precipitated a shift in the critical reception of Neruda's writing, in which he became known "not simply as another good poet, but as the major new poet of the Spanish language" to borrow René de Costa's tidy summation (58). This distinctiveness is particularly true of the initial rupture constituted by *Residencia I*. Although the first and second volumes of *Residencia* were originally published together in 1933, the dates of their composition were clearly separated by the author himself and represent significantly different moments in his life. The division between the first two volumes roughly coincides with a shift from remote postings in Burma and Ceylon in the first, to more cosmopolitan postings in parts of Asia (Singapore and Java), and, subsequently, in Europe in the second (Schidlowky 130). It also marks the slow degradation and ultimate abandonment of the symbolic system that Neruda constructed in the beginning of *Residencia I*. By time the series was completed almost twenty years later, there was very little that aesthetically or politically linked all three volumes other than their shared name (de Costa 59–61). Many critics explain the stylistic and ethical fractures of *Residencia I* as a symptom of the physical displacement the author experienced in Asia during the early years of his consular work for the Chilean government. Marjorie Agosín writes, "the solitude projected in his poetry is the product of all his feelings of alienation in a foreign land" (39). Yurkievich concurs that *Residencia I* "puede considerarse una gestación provocada por particulares experiencias personales, por la enajenadora estada en Oriente" (207). Bluntly put, Neruda's experience in Burma, whatever it was, powerfully impacted the trajectory of his writing and career.

So what was that experience? "Solitude," "alienation," "isolation," and their aesthetic products, "hermeticism" and "self-absorption," are omnipresent in critical descriptions of the living conditions that produced *Residencia I*.<sup>2</sup> To be more precise, these descriptors are the *only* ones many critics use to address the Burmese context, at all. Such is the insistence on Burma's blankness, it is as if Neruda had endured a prison sentence in solitary confinement instead of being sent abroad. There is a pronounced reluctance to explore the influence of Asia, an insistence that it was unimportant as a place unto itself, such that Yurkievich can write without qualification that in Burma "el poeta no encuentra asideros, ni culturales ni sociales ni históricos, ninguna significación positiva para cubrir el vacío" (207). Inés María Cardone is even more blunt: "Su poesía en Oriente *no refleja otra cosa que la soledad*" (90, emphasis added). Note the difference from his time in France and Spain, where Neruda's surroundings are understood to affect both his politics and his poetry in direct, substantial ways.

Three methodological issues account for this difference. First, there is a much more complete record of Neruda's time in Europe than in South Asia. Neruda clearly and publicly articulated his political and artistic shift in this period, while only his letters to his Argentinean correspondent, Héctor Eandi, speak to a relationship between his time in Burma and his poetic development. Moreover, good documentation, due in part to an increase in the poet's notoriety, as well as the opportunity in France and Spain to participate in well-established literary circles, has left us with an abundance of archival material recording the relationship between Neruda's location and his poetic production. As we have seen, the newest and most well-regarded biographical criticism of Neruda makes its mark on the field through an unmatched attention to such material. This methodology naturally directs the scholar's gaze to full sections in the archive while encouraging it to unquestioningly fill in archival gaps.

Second, Neruda scholars, hailing from Latin America, the United States, and Europe, are themselves far more familiar with the milieu of Paris in the interwar period and the struggle against fascism in Spain than with Burma or Ceylon of the late 1920s. The former have well-established ties to literary history that have been described in hundreds of books and articles. No comparable literary scene existed for writers of European languages in Burma or Ceylon. Instead, critics seem to have built up their understanding of these areas and Neruda's experience in them with reference to first-hand accounts by British and French writers in novels and (sometimes fictionalized) memoirs.

In certain ways, as we have seen in Loyola's writing and shall return to in the third section, these accounts have been used in place of factual sources to establish the context of Neruda's experience. More often, however, this methodology displays itself in the tendency of Neruda scholars to attribute all concrete references to Asia to literary influence rather than first-hand experience. At the place where the factual archive of written record "slips away," as Derrida puts it, archive fever encourages these critics to reach for works of Orientalist fiction. Since such French and English texts are more likely to be accessible to these critics than other sources of knowledge about Burma, they tend to misrecognize what are arguably personal experiences of the author as references to other texts. For instance, Loyola, Teitelboim and Feinstein all spend considerable space tracing Neruda's English reading list in the *Residencia I* years. This includes attempts to recreate the contents of the personal library of a well-known Ceylon intellectual of Dutch extraction named Lionel Wendt, from whom Neruda borrowed books. They then attach any specific Asian referent to that list. Thus, in Loyola's reading, the poem "Colección nocturna" is a reiteration of famed French exoticist Pierre Loti's novel, *Mon frère Yves* (306). Feinstein understands Neruda's flight from Chile

and subsequent “hellish” experience in Rangoon in terms of Rimbaud’s poetry and subsequent Asian sojourns (52, 64). In Feinstein’s and Loyola’s accounts, Neruda’s impressions of in Ceylon follow the contours of Lenard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*, a novel written during the latter’s time as a colonial administrator for the British government (Loyola 391-94; Feinstein 68). If the cosmology of *Residencia I* seems to echo Buddhist thought, it is because Neruda was reading Schopenhauer (Loyola 429) or T.S. Eliot (Teitelboim 149), not the fact that he was living in countries where Buddhism was the religion of the majority. It must be underscored that this line of argument persists in no small part because books are a trace that can be included in an archive, one of very few traces of the *Residencia I* years that can be so recorded. By allowing these texts to have the last word on Neruda’s Burmese experience, however, scholars are reauthorizing the Orientalist assumption that Asia can only be experienced through the prism of literature (Said 156), or that such texts constitute the ultimate authority about how Asia really is.

Yet fault for the relative lack of attention to the Asian context does not lie with scholars alone. The third methodological impediment to a fuller account of Asia’s influence on *Residencia I* comes from Neruda himself. In his *Memorias*, Neruda seems unequivocal: “He leído en algunos ensayos sobre mi poesía que mi permanencia en Extremo Oriente influye en determinados aspectos de mi obra, especialmente en *Residencia en la tierra*...digo que me parece equivocado eso de la influencia” (Neruda 85). Yet it becomes clear as one continues reading that Neruda has not positioned himself against the concept of any Asian influence whatever. Instead he defends himself against a kind of Asian influence particular to the era in which the memoirs (and not the poems themselves) were written. When Neruda inveighs specifically against “aventureros occidentales, sin faltar americanos del Norte y del Sur... esa gente se llenaba la boca con el Dharma y el Yoga” (Neruda 85), he is writing in an age when interest in South Asia revolved almost exclusively around this kind of spiritual tourism. Such an enchantment with the East, which Neruda reports having abandoned as early as 1927, remained unattractive to him later in life (Loyola 304, 307). Instead, he retroactively defines his own understanding of Asia as “una grande y desventurada familia humana, sin destinar sitio en mi conciencia para sus ritos ni para sus dioses” (Neruda 85). He thus reduces the cultural difference between himself and the Asian population he encountered in the 1920s to a matter of religion—a form of false consciousness that Marxism casts off to reveal an underlying unity. Although such a characterization fits neatly into Neruda’s Marxist political leanings at the time of writing the *Memorias*, it is not, in fact, appropriate to his attitude in the 1920s.

Not long after he arrived in Asia, Neruda wrote to a friend about his experience of Burmese women: “Las mujeres, material indispensable al organismo, son de piel oscura, llevan altos peinados tiesos de laca, anillos en la nariz y un olor distinto. Todo esto es encantador la primera semana. Pero las semanas, el tiempo pasa” (qtd in Loyola 304). The charm of Asia – literally that which is “encantador” – wears away to leave an increasingly disenchanted picture in its wake. This observation and similar ones in his letters and *Memorias* imply that the process of moving from enchantment to disenchantment involves the peeling back of illusion to reveal the sordid reality beneath. This line of thinking suggests that *Residencia I*, which Neruda would later condemn as “empapados de un pesimismo y angustia atroces,” was ideally situated to observe the truth about its Asian milieu (quoted by Rodríguez Monegal 13). Certain scholars, like Teitelboim in the passage cited above, have even credited this pessimism as proof of Neruda’s clarity of vision and incipient Marxist leanings. Yet by presenting such a bleak picture of what he saw to be the real Asia, as opposed to what he had been led to expect by novels and poetry, Neruda came no closer to an unmediated conception of Asia. He simply fell in line with another common trope of Orientalist thought.

In Said’s original definition of literary Orientalism, some writers react to the disjuncture between the written and the experienced by retreating into descriptions of the Orient’s glorious past or esoteric religious practices, in short, its charms. This is the type of engagement that Neruda censures in the *Memorias*. A second set of writers, Neruda among them, focus their attention squarely on the most squalid elements of their personal experiences, thereby expressing what Said calls a “quality of disappointment, disenchantment or demystification,” and equally typical of Orientalist writing (181). Scholarship in the nascent field of Latin American Orientalism has tended to focus on authors like Octavio Paz, whose engagement with Asia clearly follows the contours of enchantment. Indeed, Feinstein and D. P. Gallagher explicitly make a contrast with Paz in order to prove Neruda’s clarity of vision. Even when identifying Neruda’s *Residencia I* poetry as potentially Orientalist, attention has overwhelmingly been paid to moments of idealism, enchantment and adventure, elements that, in fact, are relatively scarce in this deeply pessimistic work.

Unsurprisingly, descriptions of women are one of these rare enchanting elements, and one of the few places in which *Residencia I* has been linked to Orientalist thought. Patricia Vilches has laid the groundwork for a critique of Neruda’s Orientalism as it pertains to representations of women in her article “La más bella de Mandalay” (a quote from Neruda’s “El joven monarca”). Vilches focuses particularly on the portrayal of women in two prose poems, “La noche del soldado” and “El joven monarca,” and her analysis of Neruda’s descriptions of these women leads her to conclude

that Asian women are acting as a foil to Neruda's sense of self in a typically Orientalist manner. Their sexual openness, submissiveness and passivity may be aligned with Orientalist notions of Asian womanly essence. Taken together, these features create an essentialized version of Asian women in *Residencia I* that, for Vilches, can be connected to canonical European literature in general and, in particular, with Said's analysis of Gustave Flaubert and the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk (208).

Curiously, although Vilches makes Said's reading of Kuchuck the prototype from which to base her critique of Neruda's work, she has not actually captured the full scope of Said's argument when invoking her. This causes her to miss the more significant Orientalist discourse operating in Neruda's negative, disenchanted portrayals of female characters. Returning to Said's own work in *Orientalism*, it becomes clear that the Kuchuk stereotype is made up equally of features that are enchanting and disenchanting. Vilches thoroughly describes this woman in her mode as an enchantress: compliant, docile and sexually open in addition to possessing a sexual wisdom inversely proportional to her general naiveté or even stupidity. The same woman, however, has a dark side, animalistic in her hygiene and living arrangements, actually barren despite all the signs of her fertility. For the Kuchuck of Flaubert's report was not only memorable for her "learned sensuality," but also for her "mindless coarseness," and smelled as much of bedbugs as of sandalwood perfume (Said 180–86). This model also encompasses what Said calls the "Fatal Woman" whose craftiness and emotional volatility lead to outbursts of suicidal and homicidal violence (180). It is this version of the Oriental woman, moreover, that makes the most lasting impression on Neruda's work and the subsequent scholarship about *Residencia I*. It is hardly necessary to detail the ways that the Josie myth—in which Josie is homicidal, animalistic, pathologically superstitious, and yet perversely attractive to her Western lover – aligns with the Fatal Woman stereotype.

It is also this version of Josie Bliss that is key to unraveling the knotty methodological problem described above. She seems to be the only specifically Burmese experience that Neruda scholars are comfortable talking about. This is true even though her presence in Neruda's life is no easier to archive or materially corroborate than any of the other aspects of his life in Burma, aspects about which scholars are so reluctant to speculate. Instead, it is the legacy of similar female stereotypes in the archive of English and French Orientalist literature that makes Neruda's portrayal immediately plausible to these scholars as fact. The invisibility of pessimism as a form of Orientalism has allowed otherwise conscientious scholars to unquestioningly perpetuate its forms in their own writing.

The following section examines the role of George Orwell's *Burmese Days* as a specific textual model for the Josie myth, focusing particularly on the Burmese prototype of the Fatal Woman provided by the character of Ma Hla Mae. This is most evident in Cristián Barros's creative reimagining of Neruda's Burmese life, *Tango del viudo*, a novel that, despite its overt status as fiction, displays the same kind of "archive fever" as do purportedly non-fictional descriptions of that period.

### **Burmese daze: Orwell's hold on the critical imagination**

Early in "Tango del viudo," Neruda makes a list of habitual complaints: "del trópico, de los *coolies corringhis*,/ de las venenosas fiebres que me hicieron tanto daño/ y de los espantosos ingleses que odio todavía" (85). These specific maladies will be familiar to any reader of British fiction about colonial India: they are shared in Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster's accounts of North India, Woolf's version Ceylon, and Orwell's recounting of Burma. And though the line about "espantosos ingleses" seems more at home in Loti's dream of an India "without the English," alienation from the Anglo-Indian establishment is time-honored trope of British writing about South Asia. Thus, it is just when Neruda poses himself in direct opposition to the Imperial establishment in Burma that he truly inhabits their sensibilities.

If this type of self-reflexive criticism is a hallmark of descriptions of English Imperialism, however, it could hardly be taken further than in Orwell's debut 1934 novel, *Burmese Days*. Based on Orwell's time in the Burmese Imperial Police from 1922-1927,<sup>3</sup> it tells the story of a British timber merchant, Flory, whose sympathy with Burmese natives and ambivalence about the British Imperial project puts him at odds with the small cluster of Anglo-Indians his a remote Burmese town. Intensely lonely, Flory pins his hopes for companionship on the recently arrived Elizabeth Lackersteen, hopes that are eventually dashed after a public humiliation by his Burmese lover Ma Hla Mae. Like Josie, Ma Hla Mae is animalistic, compared in her pleasing moments to a kitten (as Josie is to a tiger or a panther), and in her offending moments to a dog or a worm. Like Josie, she is intensely jealous, and hurtles without warning from calm complacency into suicidal or homicidal fits. As in Teitelboim's description of Josie, Ma Hla Mae is able to put on a somewhat flimsy performance of Europeanized respectability – represented by white face powder in Orwell and Western clothes in Neruda – but these can only ever partially disguise what they really are. Even so, neither Flory nor Neruda can seem to loosen these women's hold on their erotic imagination. While the Josie myth is calculated to massage Neruda's ego, however, the character of Ma Hla Mae is designed to lay Flory's low. For Orwell, she encapsulates all the weaknesses of character brought on



by the European presence in Burma – laziness, self-delusion and cowardice – and her final claim on Flory metonymically attaches these shortcomings to him. Unlike E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, to which it is often compared, *Burmese Days* does not in the end offer human connection as a path to redemption. Instead, its cynical, knowing tone is evidence of an all-consuming pessimism about the human condition.

Beyond the parallels between Josie Bliss and Ma Hla Mae, it is this pessimism that connects Orwell’s project in *Burmese Days* to Neruda’s in *Residencia I*. It is the same false association between disenchantment and truth, between cynicism and clarity, which has probably attracted scholars to Orwell’s novel as a primary source to establish context for Neruda’s Burmese residence. Loyola is particularly guilty of this association. He uses *Burmese Days* as a through line to narrate Neruda’s time in Burma, citing the novel at least a dozen times, including extended comparisons that run for three or four pages at a stretch (329-32; 336-40; 342; 349; 352; 363).

Critics are likely also attracted by certain similarities in the two writers’ biographies in the period. Orwell left Burma just as Neruda was due to arrive in 1927. As in *Residencia I*, inertia and isolation are major themes in *Burmese Days*, but in both cases, their intense, self-absorbed pessimism is tempered by an incipient interest in and concern for others, one that will develop, in later work, into more robust socialist sensibilities. Like Neruda’s poetry, Orwell’s writing became increasingly political in the 1930s when both men were living in Europe. As with so many writers of their era, both men were drawn into the anti-fascist struggle of the Spanish Civil War, which impacted their writing in intense, though dissimilar ways. On the other hand, Orwell’s satirical angle and political interests were always relatively clear and consistent, while *Residencia I* has often been considered apolitical, including by the author himself. In recasting Neruda’s journey in Orwell’s mold, therefore, scholars may be acting out a sort of wish fulfillment in which the political and aesthetic concerns of *Residencia I* can be harmonized with later work to produce a more coherent narrative about Neruda’s poetic development. This is another theme that an examination of Barros’s novel allows us to see more clearly than any single scholarly work.

It’s worth including an analysis of Barros’s 2003 novel *Tango del viudo* in the present work precisely because it so neatly illustrates the shortcomings in many current critical strategies for talking about the *Residencia I* period, and Josie Bliss in particular. Like the earlier Neruda biographers and literary critics, Barros’s project is to imaginatively reconstruct this period about which relatively little is concretely known. Other than a few explicit references to English literature, he insists in the author’s note, the rest “es puramente falso, novelesco” (359). This final insistence, the last page of

the book, belies the degree to which Barros displays an almost academic concern for textual sourcing.

This is most evident, of course, in his framing of the narrative as a more extended version of the internal monologue Neruda presents in “Tango del viudo.” No detail from the poem is too small to escape unelaborated in the various episodes of *Tango del viudo*. As a novelist, Barros might have elaborated these episodes in any number of ways, so it is telling that his particular version only serves to reauthorize and even intensify the racist and misogynistic stereotypes that Neruda and his scholars have perpetuated over time. Barros opens with an extended reflection on Neruda’s line about Josie urinating the darkness, cited above. This takes the form of an enraged Josie, who, having just discovered that Neruda intends to abandon her for his new posting in Ceylon, spends hours crawling around the house and garden on all fours, urinating on everything she sees (11). Barros is equally assiduous in his elaboration of every Josie-related detail from the *Memorias*. Expanding on Neruda’s somewhat vague assertion that Josie “celebraba misteriosos ritos en resguardo a mi fidelidad,” Barros imagines not one, but several scenes in which Josie ritualistically bathes her vulva in a dish of milk (227, 336). It should be evident that these are, in the generous vagueness of academic terminology, problematic elaborations of Neruda’s writing. Yet it is precisely their extreme nature that helps to clarify the epistemological problems lurking in tamer, non-fictional Neruda biographies.

Like Schidlowky, Barros is eager to pin his imaginary 1920s Burma on concrete details from archival sources, even when those sources are scant or insignificant. This archive fever gives pride of place to elements like pictures and statues of the Buddha, mentioned to Eandi in their correspondence, or tea and nitrate from Neruda’s official work at the consulate, recorded in the Archivo histórico. The Colección Neruda at the Universidad de Chile holds a collection of 7,000 shells Neruda collected during his time in Asia, so naturally Barros scatters them throughout the text. He even imagines Neruda having printing a photograph of himself with Josie and then purposely abandoning it on his way to Ceylon, thus fulfilling the archivist’s dream of an independently corroborated Josie, while simultaneously acknowledging its impossibility (201).

Like Loyola, however, Barros is also ready to move beyond those sources when they prove insufficient, and like the official biographer, he finds French and British Orientalist fiction ready to hand as the most plausible textual alternative. Knowing that Neruda admired Rimbaud and studied him in university, Barros, like Feinstein, imagines Neruda reading Rimbaud and speaking about on Burma through the idiom of Rimbaud’s poetry. Similarly, Barros has Neruda conceive of his articles

about South Asia, written for *La Nación*, as a recapitulation of travel writing by Loti, an assertion later echoed in Loyola's work. Just like the many academic critics who focus on literary influence because they cannot account for the Burmese landscape, Barros has created a purportedly real Burma for Neruda to inhabit, only to fill it up with European books. Appropriately enough, this fictional Neruda periodically refreshes his book collection through the "book-wallah," an intertextual visitor from *Burmese Days*. In fact, it is Orwell's novel and Orwell himself that furnish the most references for the Burma that Barros imagines. In his laziness, his drunken self-pity, and most specifically his inability to tear himself away from Josie's charms, Neruda essentially becomes the Chilean Flory to Josie's Ma Hla Mae. In a much more literal sense, Barros's version of Neruda actually inherits Orwell's house and wait staff, and finds himself following the latter's peregrinations through Rangoon. Thus, even when the Neruda of Barros's *Tango del viudo* moves beyond his books and interacts with the world first hand, that world is totally over-determined by the perspective of a British civil servant making his way through the empire.

To Barros's credit, he ultimately acknowledges the Orientalism in Neruda's vision of Josie Bliss, even as his novel revels in its most salacious tropes. In a surprise twist ending, it turns out that Neruda's male servant, in cahoots with Josie Bliss, has been siphoning off highly explosive nitrate from incoming shipments from Chile and sending them to anti-colonial rebels. Josie was a self-conscious agent of these rebels whose sexual antics were a sort of distraction for the hapless rubber-stamper, Neruda. In one blow, then, Barros attempts to heal the racist and misogynistic insult of all those milk baths, while simultaneously making Neruda an accidental communist rebel, thereby retroactively harmonizing his late life persona with the man he was in 1928. The final twist may be a clever narrative device, but cannot counter the weight of everything that came before it. Despite the explicit warning that it was all his imagination, and his dexterous disavowal of racism in the novel's surprise ending, Barros's elaborations of the Josie myth have only served to make it stronger and more pernicious. Just three years after the novel's publication, Barros's Josie – the superstitious, sexually voracious savage – had already been reauthorized in the scholarly archive, cited as truth by Loyola in the highly respected *Biografía literaria*.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that generations of Neruda scholars have been writing about Josie Bliss in the wrong way. Not because the “real” Josie was different than how they portray her, but because the “real” Josie, whoever she may be, remains outside of the bounds of what literary and biographical scholarship can reach. Though they have not yet realized it, Josie is not properly a subject for that scholarship; she is an absence, a window that their many layers of paper have covered over, obscuring its view. The object of this article has been to peel back those layers, to peer through the gap left by that unrecoverable woman and see what it reveals about the archive in which her papier-mâché form has been so long entombed.

To do so, it has been essential to identify the alignment of certain representations of Josie with tropes typical of Orientalist thought. This work is not unprecedented; as discussed above, Patricia Vilches has already identified many of these tropes in her own scholarship on Neruda. If this essay has merely added more examples – even a whole class of examples, “the disenchanting” – to that work, then it would not fundamentally interrupt our understanding of Latin American Orientalism, or even Neruda’s place in that field. Indeed, much fine scholarship has emerged in the last two decades describing Latin American (or sometimes Hispanophone) literature that addresses the East. Some of these analyses also engage in a broader debate about whether Eastward gazes by non-European authors can properly be considered Orientalism, since they occur at a remove from the systemic violence of imperialism that undergirds Said’s original concept.<sup>4</sup>

What is missing from these studies is Said’s careful attention to methodology and institutionalization. Speaking very broadly, Said’s concept of Orientalism functions at three distinct levels: (1) real political relationships of European domination over its colonies. These yield (2) optics conditioned by those relationships, what I have been calling “methodologies.” These methodologies in turn produce (3) stereotypical tropes about colonized peoples and places. Any engagement with Orientalism would do well to respect the primacy that Said gives to this second, methodological level, recalling that the critical term “Orientalism” itself is derived from an academic discipline and its ways of seeing the East. Moreover, it is this attention to methodology that allows us to understand the significance of archive fever for studies of Orientalism. As I have shown, we should consider archive fever to inform the methodology according to which scholars, faced with apparent archival limits, nevertheless feel compelled to draw on ever more tenuous and troubling written sources that reauthorize racist representations of South Asia.

Until now, even when scholars of Latin American Orientalism have engaged in broader philosophical debates about the nature of Orientalism in the global periphery, they still conceive of their critical object as a series of tropes in individual texts. This comes somewhat at the expense of attention to the larger economic, social, and political contexts in which such texts are produced and circulated, and to the absolute exclusion of the context in which they are analyzed and archived. As this paper has shown, methodological assumptions about what Asia is and who has authority to speak about it have perpetuated and intensified the racism inherent in Neruda's original writing. As a result, some of the most abhorrent elements of the Josie myth were newly minted in books of the last decade, books that were subsequently celebrated specifically for their *methodological* triumphs. The flaws that Josie's case exposes in those methodologies should not only influence future Neruda scholarship, but also compel all future studies in the field of Latin American Orientalism to consider their own critical bibliographies as a potential site of inquiry.

In this light, it suddenly matters that Neruda encountered Josie, his violent and sensual "pantera," in Rangoon and not Paris, Buenos Aires or Valparaíso. It matters what forces brought him to Burma: his need for a job to support his writing, the political relationship between Chile and the British Imperial government, even the fact that Burma in 1928 was administered as part of India and not yet as a separate province. It matters, as Schidlowky rightly emphasizes, that Neruda materially benefited from his status as a white man in Burmese society, and that he was able to transfer his existing racial categories of light and dark from Chile to Burma with little revision. It matters that British and French Orientalist literature conditioned his understanding of Burma, but it also matters that his time there may have included experiences that countered those narratives. It matters that there are gaps between his understanding of Burma in 1928 and in the 1970s when he wrote his *Memorias*, and it matters which of those two Nerudas was more accessible – either in person or in archival forms – to the majority of scholars who would one day write his life story. Finally, as I have shown in this article, it matters immensely what those scholars wrote, what their role was in reauthorizing the Josie myth and all that it implies.

If part of this project has been to critique a set of Neruda scholars and their methods with reference to Josie, it has certainly not been my intention to cast aspersions on their work in general. My own investigations into Neruda's *Residencia I* period would not be possible without their research. Some of those authors and those strategies that have come in for the harshest critique in this context have, in other areas, yielded the greatest insights. Unlike certain scholars in "archival studies," I am not equally suspicious of all uses of archival material. Likewise, although I inveigh

against certain assertions of literary influence, I have no general quarrel with this form of criticism. Instead, it is the Burmese context, so unfamiliar to most Neruda scholars, that reveals pitfalls in these tried and true analytic strategies.

Returning to Stoler, this essay has reinforced the idea that the process of recording and cataloguing itself actively creates categories and authorizes oppressions. Of course, the governmental archives Stoler examines operate in a realm of power that more personal archives cannot hope to replicate. Yet those personal archives still have the ability to shape scholarship according to the logics of their construction, logics that are, in turn, re-formed by the scholarship that becomes a part of them. For the better part of a century, Josie's predicament within the Neruda archive has represented an epistemological limit that no one even recognized was there. The time has come to see her for who she really is, and to let her go.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The admission that Josie Bliss may *never* have been a real figure opens up many new critical avenues in addition to the one posed by this article. One reviewer suggested an intriguing Lacanian analysis in which Neruda employs the name Josie Bliss to signify a type of otherness that cannot be expressed in words, and a type of pleasure outside of the phallic function. Indeed, the suggestive power of the pseudonym “Bliss” is one on which many critics have briefly commented, without developing the idea further. A more in-depth reading along these lines might yield new insight into Neruda’s own poetic process. The focus of the present article, however, remains on Josie’s afterlife in critical texts, rather than on her role in Neruda’s psychological or poetic development.

<sup>2</sup> Amado Alonso, the author of the first book-length consideration of Neruda’s poetry, calls the *Residencia* “hermético.” Emir Rodríguez Monegal, a literary biographer, describes it as “una exploración de ser.” Literary critic Enrico Santí calls it “both self-referential and self-destructive.” Edmundo Olivares Briones, a biographer of Neruda’s time as a consular official in Asia, calls his poetry “ensimismado.” When explaining the importance of *Residencia* to Neruda’s standing as one of the founders of the new Latin American poetry (the title of his book), Saúl Yurkievich describes his attitude as “empapado de sí mismo.” De Costa actually goes to the extent of titling his chapter on the *Residencia* series “Hermeticism,” although within that chapter he cautions that, “Some critics have made far too much of Neruda’s isolation” (88).

<sup>3</sup> Just as Neruda entered diplomatic service under his given name, Neftalí Reyes, George Orwell still went by Eric Blair during his time as a civil servant in Burma.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kushigian, in *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition*, and Hernán Taboada, in “Latin American Orientalism: From Margin to Margin,” argue that the use of Orientalist tropes is strictly an expression of benign curiosity and solidarity, while other critics like Patricia Vilches portray Latin American writing about the East as an uncomplicated reproduction of European-style racism. A third stream of criticism, represented by Ignacio López-Calvo in *One World Periphery Reads the Other* and Araceli Tinajero in *Orientalismo en el modernismo hispanoamericano*, argues that Latin American representations of the East cannot be considered Orientalist by virtue of the fact that they do not emerge from the kind of political relationship that existed between Imperial powers and their colonies.

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