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Argentine Afterlives: Race, Hemispheric Comparison, and Translation in Benjamín de Garay's *Los sertones*

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Abstract

This article considers Argentine Benjamín de Garay's 1938 Spanish translation of Brazilian Euclides da Cunha's 1902 *Os Sertões* as a transnational meditation on racialized processes of nation formation in South America. The translation paradoxically frames the linguistic and historical relationships between Brazil and Argentina in terms of both similarity and difference. While de Garay stresses the parallels between Brazil and Argentina in his translator's prologue, he also includes a glossary of supposedly untranslatable Portuguese terms, suggesting incommensurability between the two national experiences. Tellingly, many of the glossary's terms refer to racial categories. In this way, the de Garay text acts as a reflection on the divergent paths that Argentina and Brazil take in treating racial heterogeneity in their respective national narratives.

Keywords: Benjamín de Garay, *Los sertones*, translation, race, Afro-Argentines, South-South comparison.

During a June 9, 2021 meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Argentine president Alberto Fernández proclaimed, “Escribió alguna vez Octavio Paz que los mexicanos salieron de los indios, los brasileros salieron de la selva, pero nosotros los argentinos llegamos de los barcos” (Centenera).¹ Aside from the fact that Mexican writer Octavio Paz never said anything of the sort, the statement generated controversy for its racist overtones; regardless of whether or not it is true that Mexico's population is primarily indigenous and *mestizo*, Brazil's is 50 percent Afro-descended, and over two-thirds of Argentines are of Italian origin, “arriving on boats” sounds more dignified than “stepping out of the jungle.”² Fernández eventually recognized the offensive nature of his words and apologized over Twitter. Nonetheless, his comments point to commonly held beliefs regarding national identity in Latin America: that Mexico has its origins in the country's indigenous peoples, that Brazil is the “Black” country in the Americas, and that Argentina is a nation of European immigrants. All three constructions represent received ideas that scholars have questioned in recent decades.

Working within the emerging field of comparative Luso-Hispanic literatures, this article considers how Argentine Benjamín de Garay's *Los sertones*, a 1938 Spanish translation of Brazilian Euclides da Cunha's 1902 *Os Sertões*, intervenes in the racialized othering of Brazil in the Argentine public sphere that Fernández's comments represent.³ *Os Sertões* represents a curious, though rich,

choice for an Argentine translator. Narrating the story of an 1897 subaltern rebellion against the Brazilian republic, the work dialogues critically with *Civilización y barbarie*, an 1845 Argentine foundational text by future president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento that describes the armed conflict between supposedly “barbaric” traditionalists and supposedly “civilized” modernizers in early-nineteenth century Argentina. The Brazilian work inverts the terms of Sarmiento’s classic, positing the traditionalist rebels against the Brazilian government as civilized and the modernizing republican army as barbaric through its description of the repression of the revolt. Thus, a counterdiscourse to *Civilización y barbarie*, the translated *Sertões* would appear uncannily familiar to de Garay’s readers as they recognized its source text while also surprising them by the very different conclusions that da Cunha draws concerning civilization and barbarism in South America.⁴

This relationship between da Cunha’s work and its Argentine predecessor would prove pivotal to the process of translating *Os Sertões* into Spanish. In his translator’s prologue, de Garay praises the Brazilian work as “sólo comparable al *Facundo*, de nuestro genial Sarmiento,” an Argentine national figure whom, as I will explain below, intellectuals at the time were working to rescript as the founding father of a Southern Cone-based inter-Americanism that would rival Washington’s Pan-Americanist designs. This framing would influence the text’s reception in the Hispanic lettered sphere. In his review of the translation in *La nueva democracia*, Gastón Figueira would claim that the the Brazilian classic “tiene —a veces— en su construcción, algunos tonos recios y hasta violentos que pueden evocar, en cierta manera, al ‘Facundo’ de Sarmiento, con el que más de una vez ha sido comparada” (28).

This question of the “comparability” between Sarmiento and da Cunha’s canonical works (and, by extension, the countries and cultures that produced them) plays a constitutive part in de Garay’s translational project, which paradoxically – and problematically – frames the linguistic and historical relationships between Argentina and Brazil in terms of both similarity and difference. While both de Garay’s contemporaries and subsequent scholars have lauded his ability to render Brazilian regionalisms into Spanish, I want to take a comparative regional studies approach and consider what the translator’s linguistic choices mean for his views on the racial paradigms that the two republics – inspired by Sarmiento and da Cunha, respectively – were developing as each sought a hegemonic place in the fledgling inter-American state system.⁵

This question of “race-making as something that has occurred both within national frames and also within an uneven transnational social field” is particularly palpable in *Los sertones*’s paratexts (Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof 294).⁶ Although de Garay mentions the parallels between Brazil and Argentina in his translator’s prologue, he also includes a glossary of supposedly untranslatable

Portuguese terms, many of which refer to Brazilian racial categories. I argue that the apparent need to explain this terminology to an Argentine audience suggests an incommensurability between the racial histories of the putatively white Argentina and the avowedly *mestiço* Brazil that de Garay ultimately reveals to be specious. Perhaps self-consciously, *Los sertones* acts as a reflection on the divergent paths taken by Argentina and Brazil in treating racial heterogeneity in their respective national narratives at a time when US imperial pressures were driving both countries to defend their regional superiority in racial terms.

On Tradução and Traducción

As is often the case with translators, little is known about Benjamín de Garay. He lived for a time in Brazil, was involved with the *modernista* literary movement in that country, and returned to Argentina, where he published some thirty translations of Brazilian literary texts.⁷ Notably, in addition to *Os Sertões*, he also translated Gilberto Freyre's 1933 *Casa Grande & Senzala*, a foundational work of the Brazilian discourse of *mestiçagem*, or race mixture, into Spanish. Beyond his translations, however, de Garay left few of his own words to speak for him when he died in 1943 and receded to the margins of literary history. What did he think of the texts that he translated and the cultures that they represented? How did he understand relations between Argentina and Brazil on fields wider than the publishing projects in which he was involved? How does his Spanish translation of *Os Sertões* intervene in the racialized geopolitics of early twentieth-century South America? We will probably never have clear answers to these questions, but a sojourn into translation theory can help us arrive at some provocative possibilities.

Translations between Portuguese and Spanish were relatively rare before 1940 (Tenorio-Trillo 67-68).⁸ Perhaps this is because they were largely redundant. After all, the two principal Iberian Romance languages are mutually comprehensible in their written forms, allowing ideas and information to be transmitted relatively easily across the Portuguese-Spanish divide. As Sarmiento notes in his intellectual autobiography, Portuguese “no requiere aprenderse;” as a Spanish speaker, one already knows it (*Recuerdos* 152). Even as de Garay was drafting his translation of *Os Sertões*, the December 1932 edition of *Cursos y Conferencias* featured a review of César Osorio's Portuguese-language *Onde o Proletariado Dirige: Visão Panorâmica da U.R.S.S*, which, “no obstante estar escrito en portugués puede ser leído sin ninguna dificultad por los lectores de habla castellana” (Laurencena 668). The following year, the reviewer of another work by the same author would find it unnecessary even to comment on the fact that the text was written in Portuguese, taking the language's intelligibility to

an Argentine reader for granted (Río 112).⁹ De Garay acknowledges this translingual legibility in his translator's prologue (40) and exploits it throughout *Los sertones*, sprinkling the Spanish-language text with excerpts from legal documents and popular poetry in the original (84 and *passim*).¹⁰

The scholar Anthony Pym has postulated that, in situations of near-universal bilingualism (such as fluency in Castilian among speakers of Catalan), translation serves a socio-political – rather than practical – purpose, placing the target language on equal footing with the source language. Indeed, interlingual translation is predicated on the idea of equivalence.¹¹ That is to say, the Spanish word *libro* is equivalent to the Portuguese word *livro* and performs the same function in a Hispanic context as its counterpart does in a Lusophone context. At the same time, however, as we all know, equivalence through translation can only ever be partial. The Portuguese “livro” and Spanish “libro” are not really “the same,” despite what bilingual dictionaries may claim; among other factors, literacy rates were dramatically lower in Brazil than they were in Argentina during the early twentieth century, lending different cultural connotations to the concept of “bookness” in each country (Diniz and Rangel 359-60).

What implications does the paradox of simultaneous equivalence and non-equivalence between the Iberian Romance languages of Portuguese and Spanish have for South-South comparative literary and cultural studies of “Latin” American regions such as Brazil and Argentina, where, as I will discuss, the comparability of racial realities is subject to debate? While Claudio Guillén and Gayatri Spivak have probed the possibilities of comparative literature among radically different cultures, George Steiner has argued that, when a translator works with “a source-text from a language and/or a cultural milieu proximate to his own,” cultural and linguistic familiarity becomes more of a hermeneutic hindrance than a help, as the heightened awareness of both what is shared and what is not shared culturally “make the text to be translated denser, more opaque,” as translators become hyperaware of the limits of their own language and cultural understanding (380-81). In the rest of this article, I will consider these dynamics of proximity and distance in de Garay's translation of *Os Sertões*.

Race and South American Geopolitics

Brazil

The “racial factor” has been “ever present . . . in the dynamics of Brazilian-Argentine mutual perception” (Preuss, *Bridging* 156). In his 1908 *Sociología argentina*, Argentine positivist philosopher José Ingenieros would claim that it was his country's destiny to “restaurar en Sud América la grandeza de una raza neo-latina” and exert a “función tutelar sobre las otras repúblicas del continente.” He adds

that Brazil and Chile, the only other two countries “que podrían disputarle esa hegemonía,” are blocked from imperial greatness by “condiciones étnicas o geográficas poco propicias á su engrandecimiento” (100). For Ingenieros, chief among Brazil’s disadvantages was “la enorme masa de negros que forman el substratum de su población,” as “un país donde lo corriente es el negro ó el mestizo, no puede aspirar á la hegemonía sobre países donde el negro es un objeto de curiosidad.” Fortunately, he claims, as a result of the European immigration promoted by Sarmiento and other liberal statesman of his generation, Argentina is “libre ya, ó poco menos, de razas inferiores” (111-12) – a belief that twenty-first century historians have problematized, as I will explain. In a clear reference to the growing power of the United States, Ingenieros proposes that his country engage in an “imperialismo pacifista,” a sort of cooperation “para la grandeza común y de salvaguardia contra la posible penetración de otras razas que asechan su debilidad” (100).¹²

Surprisingly, many early-twentieth century Brazilian thinkers shared this racially exclusive vision of South American progress. The diplomat Manuel Oliveira Lima, for example, felt that

o progresso latino-americano surge mais pronunciado onde . . . como na Argentina e no Chile, foi notavelmente inferior a proporção de mestiçamento, sobretudo com o fator negro, mais baixo na escala social, mais subserviente na degradação servil e portanto mais aviltante como cruzamento. (61)

Later, the 1920s would see a shift in Brazilian attitudes towards race mixture, as intellectual movements such as *modernismo* and *regionalismo* vindicated mestiçagem as the wellspring of national authenticity. However, some scholars have argued that the official reverence for Afro-Brazilian culture found, for example, in institutionalized celebrations of carnival, the heightened acceptance of popular music among the country’s bourgeoisie, and the modernista literary movement represented the cultural corollary of a particular Brazilian variation on eugenics, which sought to promote race mixture as a means of whitening the country, submerging nonwhite populations in an increasingly European gene pool. Through this selective mestiçagem, populations of color would live on in culture even as they disappeared physically.

In the 1930s, the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas began to take an interest in the cultural sphere, scripting the Northeast as the mythical origin point for Brazil’s interracial nationalism, a notion that anthropologist Gilberto Freyre had promoted eagerly in his 1926 “Manifesto Regionalista.”¹³ Euclides da Cunha’s canonical 1902 *Os Sertões*, which identifies the mestiço Northeast as a locus of *brasilidade*, provided a respectable genealogy for the nationalist construct of “racial democracy” rendered hegemonic by the Vargas regime (Abreu 205-67). Instituted as required reading in public schools

(Johnson 39), *Os Sertões* was republished as part of a series of special collections aimed at “la sistematización de obras de literatura genuinamente brasileña” (Sorá 105).¹⁴

Yet, while the figure of da Cunha served as an ideological bulwark of Brazilian nationalism, the author also would take on hemispheric dimensions for the country’s thinkers. In a September 6, 1939 article for the *Jornal do Commercio*, organic intellectual Carlos Maul argues that da Cunha’s writings about the border conflict between Peru and Bolivia or the frontier between Brazil and Peru in *Relatório da Comissão Mista Brasileiro-Peruana de Reconhecimento do Alto Perus* (1906) and *Peru versus Bolívia* (1907) articulate an early Pan-Americanist philosophy. The mestiço nationalism implicit in the cult to Euclides can thus be viewed as part of an effort to elaborate a Brazil-based inter-American ethos – not coincidentally, at the very moment that the United States was attempting to draw Latin America into its colonial sphere of influence through the “Good Neighbor Policy” of the 1930s and 40s. Indeed, the term “racial democracy” was first applied in reference to Brazil by ethnologist Arthur Ramos in a 1941 article for the *Journal of Negro Education* contrasting Brazilian and North American race relations (Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof 277).¹⁵

The notion of Brazil as a racial democracy would be key to Vargas’s particular Pan-American vision, and his ministry of foreign affairs would turn to none other than anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, who, in 1926, had postulated regionalism as a counterweight to North Atlantic racial imperialism (“Manifesto”), to assist in elaborating a Pan-Americanist cultural policy (Paz dos Santos n.p.). Continuing with the vindication of mestiçagem found in his 1933 *Casa Grande & Senzala* (a work that de Garay would translate into Spanish), Freyre elaborates a counterdiscourse to the ideas of thinkers such as Ingenieros. If the Argentine sociologist suggests that his country’s supposed lack of race mixture renders it ideally suited to the role of regional leadership, Freyre inverts the terms of the argument to propose that Brazil’s relatively open attitude towards racial others renders the nation “a maior civilização moderna e, socialmente, a mais democrática nos trópicos” (“A propósito” 45). Embracing the diversity endemic to the Americas in a way that Argentina and the United States have not, Vargas’s Brazil, according to Freyre, “bem pode tornar-se o animador de uma política de cultura interamericana que seja ao mesmo tempo um movimento unionista e pluralista, ecologista e universalista, continentalista e regionalista” (“A Propósito” 45). As I will explain, these hemispheric considerations would form part of the ideological context of de Garay’s *Sertones*.

Argentina

Argentina, too, would articulate an alternate Pan-Americanist philosophy during the 1930s and early 1940s as the country resisted US efforts to form a hemisphere-wide alliance against the Axis powers in Europe. Suffering social unrest under a string of reactionary dictatorships during the “Infamous Decade” of the 1930s, the country’s fraught geopolitical standing – neither a world power like the United States nor racially and economically “backwards” as much of Latin America appeared in the eyes of the Global North – was rendered increasingly complicated as World War II severed Argentine access to European trade. Buenos Aires now was forced to export to other Latin American nations and the United States (Nállim 135).¹⁶ Long considering itself to be, as Ingenieros’s remarks make clear, the most European nation in the hemisphere, Argentina suddenly found itself economically embedded in the Americas. Unfortunately, the United States’s protectionist policies banned the importation of most Argentine agricultural goods by the hemisphere’s principal consumer.

Disagreeing with Washington over trade issues, Buenos Aires took a tepid stance towards US Pan-Americanist organizing. Instead of joining Washington’s Pan-American defense alliance, Buenos Aires proposed a non-belligerency policy for Latin America (Sheinan 76-79) as an effort to garner “regional, economic, strategic, and diplomatic leadership, at the expense of the Americans” (82). In retaliation, the United States favored its ally Brazil in the 1941 Lend-Lease Act (Rock 243). Argentina then turned to Germany for arms, prompting the U.S. to impose trade sanctions (251). The situation only improved in late 1944, when newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State for American Republic Affairs Nelson Rockefeller changed course and began to relax restrictions on Argentina. The Southern Cone nation finally signed the Act of Chapultepec, an inter-American trade and defense agreement, in February 1945, declaring war on the Axis powers in March of that year (259).

In this context of inter-American tension, liberal thinker Domingo Faustino Sarmiento would be resurrected as a transnational figure.¹⁷ An unsigned article in the November 1938 issue of the *Boletín de la Unión Panamericana* reports on the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Sarmiento’s death in the Pan-American Union Building in Washington on September 11, 1938. The text portrays Sarmiento as the founder of a particularly Latin American hemispheric tradition. A quote from a speech by Pedro de Alba, subdirector of the Pan-American Union, notes Sarmiento’s “intellectual cooperation” with Chile during his exile in the Pacific country, pointing to a nineteenth-century network of knowledge circulation in the Americas not centered in Washington (ctd. in “Homenaje” 645). Similarly, Alba relates that, when Sarmiento’s remains arrived in Buenos Aires from Asunción, Paraguay, where he had died, “iban cubiertos con las banderas del Uruguay, Brasil, Paraguay, Chile y

Argentina; esta noche en homenaje a su memoria las banderas de las vientiuna [sic] repúblicas que forman la Unión Panamericana le hacen guardia de honor” (648). Adorned at his obsequies in Buenos Aires with many of the same flags that later saluted the statesman in Washington on the fiftieth anniversary of his death, the repatriation of Sarmiento’s corpse is transfigured in this anecdote into a precursor of an alternate inter-American alliance based in the Southern Cone. Sarmiento is represented here as a regional leader, a position that the Brazilian Vargas wished to occupy. Yet, while Brazil in Freyre’s hemispheric philosophy has earned its place in the continental order through the mestiço culture that marks its difference from other nations, Sarmiento in this article has converted Argentina into a regional leader through his successful adaptation of Northern modernity, his “proficua labor de periodista, universitario, educador y hombre de gobierno” (Espil ctd. in “Homenaje” 640). As can be seen, the figure of Sarmiento was deeply entwined with conversations on Argentina’s place in the Americas at the time that de Garay was publishing his translation of *Os Sertões*, a work that questions the legacy of the liberalism for which Sarmiento advocated in South America.

Predictably, much of Argentine hemispheric discourse reflected a belief in the country’s racial superiority to its South American neighbors, particularly Brazil. In the Introduction to a special issue of *Nuestra Revista* dedicated to Brazilian literature, the editor expresses hope that the magazine will contribute “a que el espíritu de dos pueblos – el brasileño y el argentino – separados más que por sus fronteras, por la diferencia de idiomas, pueden mejor comprenderse y amarse, ya que lo harán por intermedio de lo que tiene de florido toda raza: sus artistas” (“Liminar” 5). These goals are lofty indeed, yet the editor is sure to identify Argentines and Brazilians as members of two different “razas,” a notion with which one presumes Ingenieros would have agreed. Jorge Romero Brest, founder of the Museo de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, clarifies what these supposed racial differences are when speaking about a 1945 exhibit of contemporary Brazilian painters: “*Hagamos un esfuerzo, pues, los hombres del sur de este continente, los que tenemos raíces hispánicas y una arborescencia italiana, francesa, inglesa o alemana, para comprender con emoción esa realidad indígena, lusitana y negra que comienza a expresarse con facundia feroz en todos los planos de la cultura brasileña*” (ctd. in Paz dos Santos n.p., emphasis in the original). For Romero Brest, as for so many Argentines of his day, the fundamental difference complicating “comprehension” lies in the mixed “Indigenous, Lusitanian, and Black” roots of the Brazilian population. These views would influence de Garay’s translational decisions in *Los sertones*, as I now will show.

Babel and the Binational Bibliotecas

The geopolitical changes that I have been discussing in this article led Argentines in the 1930s and 40s to pay increased attention to the rest of the Americas, particularly Brazil. This interest can be seen in *Claridad: revista de arte, crítica y letras, tribuna del pensamiento izquierdista*, with which de Garay was affiliated. Left-wing and Latin Americanist in orientation, the journal shared the skepticism towards US-led pan-Americanism common in the Argentine public sphere of the time. A 1933 article by Ernesto Giudici, for example, criticized Washington's efforts to leverage Latin America against imperial competition from Japan in the Pacific. Similarly, in 1937, Liborio Justo denounced the Pan-American peace conference in Buenos Aires as an attempt to bring Argentina into the US imperial orbit. Not unlike the Argentine diplomats mentioned in the *Boletín de la Unión Panamericana* article discussed above, the editors of *Claridad* interpellated the memory of the republican ideologue Sarmiento to combat “servidores del capital extranjero” (Zamora 1).

Importantly, Brazil occupied an increasing number of the anti-imperial pages of *Claridad* as the 1930s progressed. A 1938 article by Carlos Buchental, for example, alleged that Getúlio Vargas's rise in the country was the result of US imperial interference —an accusation that forces a consideration of the cultural exchanges that I am describing in the context of inter-American power brokering. Importantly, at the same time that it critiqued Northern imperialism, *Claridad* increasingly featured discussions and translations of Brazilian literature. This interest in the neighboring country's lettered sphere extended beyond the journal and into the work of the Editorial Claridad. In 1937, the publishing house launched a series of Spanish-language renderings of Brazilian texts (Sorá 112). Directed by de Garay, who translated and edited many of the books published in the series, the works were accompanied by a critical apparatus “que intenta dar a la cultura de llegada un texto que explicita lo exótico a través de las estructuras de representación de la cultura y lengua de destino” through prologues and glossaries (Gomes, “Reescrito” 7). The Biblioteca de Novelistas Brasileños proved popular, introducing Brazilian literature more deeply into the notoriously Eurocentric Argentine literary polysystem (Gomes, “Em busca” 92).¹⁸

This popular initiative soon was “co-opted” by the Argentine government (Dinz and Rangel 361) which, on July 16, 1936, issued a decree to “difundir el conocimiento de obras sintéticas para estrechar las relaciones amistosas intelectuales entre escritores y profesores de Brasil y Argentina” through a binational editorial project (Pasero, “Representaciones” 527). In 1937, the Biblioteca de Autores Brasileños Traducidos al Castellano was established for the purpose of disseminating Brazilian literature in the Hispanic country (Sorá 107; Dinz and Rangel 361).¹⁹ Coordinated by the Comisión

Revisora de Textos de Historia y Geografía Americana and financed by the Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, the Biblioteca distributed its publications free of charge to Argentine schools, cultural institutions, and periodicals (Sorá 120). Between the Claridad collection and the government series, a total of eighteen of de Garay's translations from Portuguese were published in Argentina between 1937 and 1946.²⁰

In Search of “Sertão”

The Biblioteca de Autores Brasileños Traducidos al Castellano has met with a mixed reception among scholars. While Carlos A. Pasero praises the project as a “‘diplomacia del intelecto’, que tiñe el discurso referido al portugués y sus culturas como resultado de una perspectiva liberal . . . de apertura integradora con el Brasil” (“Límites” 99), Gustavo Sorá takes a more critical stance, calling the seemingly innocuous act of cultural exchange “una acelerada competición entre aparatos de ‘propaganda’” (139). These tensions manifest themselves in the dialectics of linguistic and cultural equivalence and non-equivalence mobilized in the translation. While, as I mentioned above, de Garay comments on the linguistic similarities between his target and source languages and between canonical writers Sarmiento and da Cunha in his translator's prologue (40), *Los sertones* also acknowledges and draws attention to the differences between the two languages and their respective national communities. De Garay explains that, when faced with an untranslatable turn of phrase or direct quotation, he preferred to leave it in the original Portuguese rather than alter the spirit of the sentence by bending it into Spanish. For example, the word *jagunço*, which originally referred to an armed bandit and later became the term for the *canudense* rebels, appears in untranslated and italicized Portuguese throughout the Spanish-language text (25 and *passim*). The geographic designation *chapada* (29 and *passim*), a sort of plateau formation found in Brazil, and the demonym *paulista*, designating a person from the São Paulo region (80), receive a similar treatment.

The most intriguing of these decisions not to translate can be found on the title page of the Biblioteca de Autores Brasileños edition, which reads *Los sertones (Os Sertões)*, with the Spanish words followed by the original title in Portuguese, a seeming cognate. Yet, while “sertón” may look like an obvious gloss for “sertão,” the word is a neologism in Spanish, invented by de Garay for the express purpose of serving as a title to his translated text. De Garay justifies the decision in his translator's prologue, in which he claims that the original title is “untranslatable.” Arguing that the word “sertão” represents a corruption of the Portuguese *desertão*, or “big desert,” he explains that “el vocablo regional *sertão* no tiene equivalente en nuestro idioma. Ni en ningún otro. Expresa una particularidad de la

geografía física de determinada zona de Brasil, que participa de singularidades geológicas, topográficas y biológicas; vale decir, cosmorámicas” (28).

Curiously, in the glossary of foreign vocabulary that appears as an appendix to the translation, de Garay includes an entry for the Spanish neologism “sertón,” as though it, too, were a Portuguese word. Inverting the order of the book’s title page, the entry is listed as “sertón: (sertão),” such that the supposedly untranslatable Portuguese term serves as a gloss for the Spanish neologism in an appendix ostensibly written for non-Portuguese speakers. In his review of the Spanish translation, Brazilian Plino Barreto claims that the “reverencia e carinho” that this translational strategy represents gives the *sertão* “carta da cidadania, no castelhano” (Barreto) by naturalizing it as Argentine.

Yet, the translation is not natural at all: the *sertão/sertón* dyad of the title page and glossary suggests an equivalence between the terms, but the translator readily admits that it is a false equivalence, a cognate that he had to fabricate in the absence of preexisting linguistic and cultural comparability. On the one hand, the translator’s ability to create the term “sertón,” which looks like it should be the Spanish cognate of “sertão” but is not, points to the underlying genealogical relationship between Spanish and Portuguese and reinforces the idea of Brazilian “legibility” by an Argentine audience upon which the translation is predicated. On the other, by openly inventing a neologism to translate the title of the book and feeling obligated to explain it in his preface and glossary, de Garay reveals this notion of easy interlingual and intercultural transferability as too facile and inadequate to deal with the question of South American geopolitical diversity.

De Garay’s assertion of the untranslatable specificity of the *sertão* seems particularly puzzling in light of the way that he chooses to define the term:

sertón: (sertão) Grandes extensiones de terreno cubierto de vegetación salvaje y achaparrada y espinosa (*caatinga*). Lugares generalmente abruptos, de aspecto agresivo por la naturaleza, tanto de las formaciones geológicas, peculiarísima, como por la misma vegetación enmarañada que desafía a veces cualquier intento de penetración intrusa. (432)

Except for the *caatinga*, which only grows in Northeastern Brazil, there is little in de Garay’s explanation that is exclusively Brazilian, and many countries of the Americas – including the United States and Argentina, the other (actual or aspirational) powers in the hemisphere – contain vast, seemingly inhospitable terrains that people of European origin have, with great difficulty (and depravity), colonized.

Nonetheless, *Los sertones* insists repeatedly that the Brazilian *sertão* has no equivalent in Argentine Spanish. In his Introduction, series editor Mariano de Vedia explains that, despite the shared etymology of the two terms, the “sertón brasileño . . . no corresponde ideológicamente a nuestro desierto.” Rather, “el sertón . . . es una entidad activa, actuante, que representa la esencia de su nacionalidad. El desierto nuestro fue dominado; el sertón es fuerza dominadora” (18). De Vedia’s assertion that the *sertão* “does not correspond ideologically” to Argentina’s “desierto” is significant. Literally meaning “desert,” “el desierto” is the term that Argentine historiography uses to designate the regions of the Pampa and Patagonia, which were conquered from the country’s Native peoples in the nineteenth century in a genocidal campaign inspired, in part, by Euro-American aggression against Indigenous peoples in the North American West. Tellingly, de Garay subtitles the second edition of his translation *Los sertones: la tragedia del hombre derrotado por el medio*. For de Garay, Brazilian backlanders are “defeated” by the particularities of the American continent. The connotative difference that the translation identifies between the etymological cognates “desierto” and “sertão,” then, points to a perceived fundamental difference between the Argentine and the Brazilian national characters: like their North American counterparts, Argentine Whites dominated the New World’s racialized wilderness, while the Brazilians were dominated by it.

De Garay attributes the divergent fates of the Argentine *desierto* and the Brazilian *sertão* to what he sees as the two countries’ distinct racial compositions. Explaining the etymology of *sertão*, the translator states that, “por la ley del menor esfuerzo, tan común a todas las razas indolentes de los trópicos, el habitante del interior del Brasil redujo el vocablo *desertão* a sus últimas sílabas: *sertão*” (28). If Brazilians have failed to achieve the same level of civilization as Argentines, he suggests, it is because of the racial inferiority of the Portuguese-speaking nation, with a population of persons of mixed European, Indigenous, and African ancestry, when compared to the Argentines, thought to be largely “descended from boats” after the disappearance of the country’s populations of color in the years following Sarmiento’s presidency. It is perhaps not coincidental that the term “ley del menor esfuerzo” also figures prominently in José Monteiro Lobato’s 1918 “Urupês,” which de Garay had translated. In the short story, the Brazilian writer uses the phrase “lei do menor esforço” twice to condemn what he sees as the laziness of the mixed-race population of São Paulo state (3-4). Through this intercultural intertext, de Garay presents race mixture and the degeneracy that it allegedly causes as non-Argentine phenomena that can only be articulated in Spanish through borrowings from Portuguese.

Thus, through the notion of *sertón*, which, de Garay would have us believe, only exists in Spanish to name something that only exists in Portuguese, the translation echoes the racial-imperial

attitudes of Ingenieros, positing Argentina as similar but superior to Brazil, having followed the US example in overcoming a racialized “wilderness” that the Brazilians have not. There can be no Argentine *sertão*, the text suggests, because the Argentines have conquered their *desierto*. In this way, the government-sponsored translation substitutes the self-aggrandizing hemispheric vision of the Vargas regime for an inter-Americanism based on Argentine supremacy at a moment when the two rival countries were adopting opposing strategies as they negotiated their respective places in Washington’s Pan-American plans. If de Garay and his reviewer Figueira insist on da Cunha’s “comparability” to his literary predecessor Sarmiento, it appears that the intertextual reference only serves to establish the Argentine apostle of racialized “civilization” as a “model” that da Cunha’s “barbaric” Brazil has failed to follow.

Glossing over Blackness

The “Notas lexicológicas del traductor,” in which de Garay elucidates the Portuguese terms in *Los sertones* that he deems “foreign” to Argentine culture, problematize the presumed non-equivalence between Brazilian and Argentine national realities that the neologistic “translation” of *sertão* as *sertón* postulates. The presence of a glossary of source-language words in a translation proves counterintuitive, as the point of translation, as traditionally conceived, is to render those terms into the target language; the acknowledgment of “cultura não compartilhada” that the glossary necessarily entails undermines the notion of “equivalence” upon which the translation is predicated (Gomes, “Em busca” 91). Significantly, many of these culturally “untranslatable” words refer to Brazilian racial categories. Afro-Brazilian culture was a particular area of interest for de Garay, who had corresponded with ethnologist Arthur Ramos – who later would coin the term Brazilian “racial democracy” – about slavery and Afro-Brazilian religion (Ramos). The copy of *Los sertones* housed at the Biblioteca Nacional do Brasil tellingly includes a handwritten dedication from de Garay to Ramos, whom the translator calls a “cerebro y corazón siempre al servicio de la reivindicación de uno de los elementos esenciales de la civilización brasileña,” pointing to the centrality of blackness and *mestiçagem* to the Argentine’s vision of Brazil (n.p.).

De Garay’s decision to select Afro-Brazilian themes as a “foreign” element to introduce into the Argentine cultural polysystem through his translational labors somewhat problematically paints blackness as alien to *argentinidad*. After all, the vision of an all-white Argentina, so important to Ingenieros and other thinkers of the period, “*fue ideológica, cultural y literariamente construida, antes que propiamente demográfica*” (Segato 255, emphasis in the original). According to historian Ricardo Salvatore,

in the nineteenth century, people of color constituted the majority of the Argentine population, as registered in literary texts ranging from Esteban Echeverría's 1838 "Matadero" to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 1845 *Facundo* to José Mármol's 1851 *Amalia* to José Hernández's 1872 *Martín Fierro*.²¹ While popular tradition long has held that the Afro-Argentine population was wiped out by the Paraguayan War and Yellow Fever epidemic in the second half of the nineteenth century, historian George Reid Andrews has proven that the relative absence of African phenotypical traits among the present-day Argentine population is mostly the result of intermarriage with European immigrants. The progeny of these marriages were characterized as "white" by Argentine census takers, thus creating the discursive illusion of a Euro-American nation (*Afro-Argentines* 64-92). Contrary to popular belief, then, the country's turn-of-the-century *aluvión migratorio* diluted, rather than destroyed, the population of color (Rodríguez) as the country's elites embarked upon a homogenizing project that would equate full citizenship with "el abandono de los trazos idiosincráticos de esa pertenencia u origen" (Segato 245, emphasis in the original). Thus, "even though the process of creating a homogeneously white nation out of a diverse population relied on processes that elsewhere in Latin America would be recognized as *mestizaje*, in Argentina, the production of whiteness required that processes of *mestizaje* not result in the creation of *mestizos*" – as it would in Fryre's questionable racial-democratic formulation of Brazilian identity– "but of 'whites'" (Rodríguez 127-28).²² And, as in the Brazilian case, in Argentina, too, "the twentieth-century structure reproduced inequalities persisting since colonial times, when society was more visibly divided into groups that measured purity of blood, origins, colors, status, and so on," naturalizing a racialized conception of social class "as the only admissible paradigm of difference" (Geler 215). As scholars increasingly argue, then, Argentine whiteness represents a national variation on the regional racial paradigm of *mestizaje*.

Abjected from the national project but central to nineteenth-century foundational texts, blackness exercised a spectral power in an Argentina that was simultaneously aware of and in denial about its Afro-New Word history (Gordillo 245). The left-wing *Claridad* was not above indulging in this discursive disavowal; in the same year in which the press released de Garay's *Sertones*, the journal published an article by Omar Viñole despairing that Europeans see Argentina as "una 'Abisina' con tranvías eléctricos," a complaint that equates the country with blackness only to dismiss the comparison in an act that some might see as protesting too much (16).²³

Not coincidentally, by the time that Viñole penned his defensive comment, the "White legend" of Argentine national identity was finding itself challenged by the arrival of phenotypically darker *campesinos* from the countryside to the self-consciously Europeanizing city of Buenos Aires as a result

of the Great Depression.²⁴ This demographic shift consolidated the conflation of non-white racial descent with lower-class identity already underway in Argentine society (Adamovsky 155-56; Geler). The migrant *cabecitas negras*, as they derogatorily (and revealingly) were called, later came to constitute populist politician Juan Perón's working-class base – and the readership of many books published by Editorial Claridad (Sorá 109). This influx of provincial *cabecitas negras* into the capital would have redirected the eyes of Buenos Aires cosmopolites to the racial realities of their periphery. In this way, the social, economic, and demographic entropy that marked the second quarter of the Argentine twentieth century “made the nonwhite visible in ways that undermined the implicit homogenization produced by the discourse of a white-European nation” (Adamovsky 157).

As an active participant in the Argentine and Brazilian cultural scenes, de Garay would have to have been aware – at least subconsciously – that, like Brazilian *mestiçagem*, Argentina's “all-embracing whiteness . . . could simultaneously be inclusionary in theory and hierarchical and exclusionary in practice,” a technology for containing the heterogeneity within the nation's borders (Andrews, “Epilogue” 321). This knowledge would not have been uncommon among his readers, many of whom would have numbered among the *cabecitas negras* recently migrated to Buenos Aires and presumably been cognizant of the racial realities of the Argentine hinterland.

It is illustrative to envision the scene: a reader turns around from a kiosk where he has just purchased a newspaper scoffing at the idea that Argentina might be mistaken for Ethiopia or exited a bookstore where she has bought a book with a glossary claiming that Argentine Spanish has no “equivalents” for Brazilian racial categories only to encounter, walking down the street, the *cabecitas negras* whose existence writers such as Viñole and de Garay disavow. This reality reveals the unstable dynamics of equivalence and non-equivalence underlying the translated *Sertones*: If Viñole sees no meaningful relationship between Argentina and Africa, why does he find foreigners' misperceptions so offensive? If de Vedia fully believed that the *sertão* is “obviously” not the *desierto*, why bother to say so? If de Garay saw Brazilian *mestiçagem* as incomprehensible to “white” Argentines, how can he explain its operative terms in his glossary? How can he give readers a point of comparative reference from which to understand?

The sort of cognitive dissonance at which these questions gesture indicate *Los sertones*'s ambivalent stance on the question of equivalence between Brazilian and Argentine racial categories. For example, in his glossary, de Garay defines “cafuz” as a “producto racial del cruzamiento de *mameluco* y negro. Puede derivar del mulato y del indio. Entre nosotros su equivalente, acaso, sea el zambo” (380, emphasis in the original). In this explanation, the translator looks for “equivalents”

between the Brazilian and Argentine situations, but, as his use of the adverb “*acaso*” indicates, he is not sure that the two situations really are equivalent. Yet, “perhaps equivalent to the *zambo*,” “*cafuz*” would not seem to be alien to Argentine culture – at least not entirely.

Similarly, the glossary defines the Afro-New World “*samba*,” which the cultural policy of the Vargas dictatorship soon would adopt as the quintessential Brazilian sound, as a “*danza popular del noreste brasileño de la que participan ritos fetichistas indo-africanos. A veces, el samba equivale a nuestra expresión milonga*” (de Garay 389). By equating *samba* somewhat improbably with *milonga* (an early form of tango), de Garay acknowledges the importance of Afro-descendants to Argentine culture, but weakens that statement with the qualifier “sometimes,” as though to note the lesser importance of *Afro-latinidad* in Argentina, once again articulating a sort of non-equivalent equivalence.

At first glance, these dynamics of disavowal undermine the vindication of Latin American subalterns for which da Cunha’s *Sertões* is known. For example, “*candomblé: Entre nosotros: candombe. Es un vocablo africano, con el que se expresa cierta práctica de brujería de los negros africanos, intercalada de danzas, merienda y libaciones. Es una de las manifestaciones fetichistas de los negros*” (381). By acknowledging that the Spanish “*candombe*” is derived from the same “African” word as the Portuguese “*candomblé*” (even as they refer to different cultural phenomena), de Garay presents an example of the sort of intercultural equivalence that he disavows through his translation of *cafuz*.²⁵ The value of that equivalence, however, is compromised by the racially condescending terms with which he describes the “*manifestaciones fetichistas de los negros.*” The translator’s definition of “*cabra*” is equally disparaging:

Dicción frecuente en el norte brasileño, para designar el mestizo de negro e indio, de negro y mulato, siendo éste a su vez un producto del cruzamiento euro-africano. No hay, sin embargo, concordancia de opiniones entre los etnólogos brasileños. Generalmente es un individuo recio, de malos instintos, bozal y sanguinario. En Bahía se llama *cabra* o *cabrocha* a todo mestizo oscuro, de color tiznado, motudo, de labios abultados. En sentido figurado, es el tipo audaz y valiente. El traductor entiende que Euclides da Cunha lo explica en este sentido. (380)

De Garay’s casting of the *cabra* in terms of barbarism – “*recio, de malos instintos, bozal y sanguinario*” is curious, given da Cunha’s efforts to problematize the Sarmentine discourse of civilization and barbarism in the source text. While Euclides seeks to intervene critically in the República Velha’s racial paradigms and elaborate a particularly Brazilian race discourse that will situate the mestiço masses as the nation’s “*rocha viva*,” de Garay seems intent on upholding the Argentine white legend upon which

Ingenieros bases his claims of regional supremacy (da Cunha 390). Thus, if *Os Sertões* ultimately condemns the Argentine Sarmiento's liberal racism, *Los sertones* reinscribes the very values that da Cunha critiques, rejecting the mestiçagem that the Brazilian state was championing at the time.

Conclusions

Walter Benjamin has described translation as a text's "afterlife," that is, its "stage of continued life" (254). Liberating ideas from the limits of their linguistic corporeality, "translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm," uncovering meanings hiding beneath the flesh of the source language (258). If that is the case, de Garay's reincarnation of *Os Sertões* reveals da Cunha's classic to be a versatile soul indeed, interceding in the causes of both regional integration and Argentine aggrandizement. On the one hand, the translation takes part in a larger project of "intellectual diplomacy" between the two leading countries of South America. On the other, de Garay in his preface is careful to equate the source text with "nuestro *Facundo*" while editor de Vedia is sure to echo Ingenieros and remind readers of Argentina's supposed racial superiority – due largely to the European immigration and whitening efforts in the Argentine desierto that Sarmiento supported. Inverting the counterdiscursive genealogical relationship between *Os Sertões* and "nuestro *Facundo*," de Garay's *Sertones* reappropriates da Cunha's *Sertões* – written as a critique of the Eurocentric liberal nation-building project that Sarmiento represents – for the "guiding fiction" of a white Argentina racially superior to Brazil in which Ingenieros revels.²⁶ De Garay's reinscription of the metanarrative of Argentine whiteness in his translation of da Cunha's counter-discourse to racial coloniality thus represents "a transformation and a renewal of something living"—a negative afterlife if ever there was one (Benjamin 256).

That said, by explaining supposedly untranslatable Brazilian racial terms in his glossary, de Garay paradoxically demonstrates just how "translatable" they really are to an Argentine worldview – how else would his readers understand the glossary's definitions? Along the way, he asserts that Brazilian *cafuzes* may "perhaps" be "equivalent" to Argentine *zambos* and draws attention to the Afro-Latin origins of candombe and milonga. Importantly, the decision to deploy comparison to Afro-Argentine cultural manifestations to demystify Afro-Brazilian cultural references is predicated on de Garay's awareness of blackness in the Hispanic country and his expectation that that knowledge will be shared by his Spanish-language readers. This begrudging recognition of equivalence disrupts the claims to racial superiority that both countries were making in a quest for regional supremacy on the basis of their supposed differences from one another.

Thus, in choosing to include a glossary that “*acaso*” may not be necessary, de Garay inscribes his *Sertones* – understood by the Vargas regime as a foundational work of racial-democratic *brasildade* – as a foil within the metanarrative of Argentine whiteness at the same time that he destabilizes that very racial-nationalist construction. By obscuring Argentine blackness, de Garay conceals da Cunha’s critique of *Civilización y barbarie*, transforming the Argentine work from a problematic predecessor into a “model” that Brazilian intellectuals may adopt uncritically, further bolstering the hemispheric standing that Argentine inter-Americanists of the time hoped to achieve for Sarmiento. Yet, by invisibilizing Argentine blackness in a very visible glossary, de Garay’s translation reenacts in literature the discursive disappearance of Afro-Argentine populations then underway in society even as his ability to write the glossary belies the very disappearance that it performs. A South-South analysis of the translation thus exposes the “functional equivalence” of Argentine whitening and Brazilian *mestiçagem*, revealing to readers what they already knew: that both paradigms represent shaky structures supporting the unstable national identities that the two countries were constructing as they attempted to broker their respective positions in the emerging hemispheric order.

Notes

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² For a discussion of the origins of this quote, see Fuentes. For demographic information on the countries mentioned, see Mercado, “Brazil: Afro-Brazilians,” and Spinder.

³ See Candido, Schwarz, Fitz, Foster, Croce, Newcomb, and Reis for comparative studies of Brazilian and Spanish American literatures.

⁴ On the genealogical relationship between *Civilización y barbarie* and *Os Sertões*, see Maul, González Echevarría, Bernucci, and Genova.

⁵ See Gomes for critical-translation considerations of de Garay and “A Literatura Argentina no Brasil” and Figueira for period assessments of his translation. My comparative regional studies approach is inspired by Ette’s theorization of “transarea” studies and work by Spivak and Tötösy de Zepetnek on the place of area studies in comparative literature. On regional lenses in comparative literary studies of Latin America, see Rama and Pizarro.

⁶ For a theorization of “paratexts” (prefaces, glossaries, etc.), see Genette. For a discussion of the place of paratexts in translation studies, see Batchelor.

⁷ For succinct biographical information on de Garay, see Maia 85-86 and Diniz and Rangel 361-363. On de Garay’s activities as an “importer” of Brazilian literature into Argentina, see Sorá 114-20.

⁸ For a comprehensive history of Argentine translations of Brazilian texts, see Sorá.

⁹ Candido and Preuss (*Transnational*), meanwhile, have studied the circulation of Spanish-language texts in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Brazil.

¹⁰ References are to the 2003 edition.

¹¹ For a theoretical discussion of equivalence in translation studies, see Toury.

¹² Ingenieros’s views were typical of a strong strain of Argentine thinking on race and inter-American issues at the time. Historian Eduardo Elena locates an alternate tradition in the writings of Ingenieros’s contemporary Manuel Ugarte, whose anti-imperial project identified Argentina’s economic and social development at the time as an example of the capabilities of the “raza latina,” a formation that he understood in terms of white-dominated *mestizaje*.

¹³ On the Vargas regime’s cultural interventions, see Candido, Levine, Abreu, and Johnson.

¹⁴ For a classic study of the racial exclusions underlying the discourse of *mestiçagem*, see Skidmore. On Latin American eugenics, see Stepan. For a history of the discourse of “racial democracy,” see Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof. This last article also insightfully outlines “the limits of the myth-of-racial-democracy thesis” (299), detailing “the struggle of Afrodescendants” across the hemisphere “to accentuate [racial democracy’s] more inclusionary meanings” in the face of the paradigm’s notoriously exclusionary applications (267).

¹⁵ On relations between Brazil and the United States during this period, see Levine and Minella.

¹⁶ On the 1930s in Argentina, in addition to the sources cited here, see Luna and López.

¹⁷ On debates concerning the legacy of nineteenth-century liberalism in Argentina during the first half of the twentieth century, see Nállim.

¹⁸ On literary polysystems and translation, see Evan-Zohar.

¹⁹ The Biblioteca’s Brazilian counterpart was the Coleção Brasileira de Autores Argentinos, directed by Pedro Calmon and financed by the Brazilian foreign ministry (Diniz and Rangel 361). The collection published nine translations by J. Paulo de Medeiros between 1938 and 1951 (Paz dos Santos n. pag.).

²⁰ Diniz and Rangel explain that, while “la colección de Claridad tiene un perfil más poroso a la cultura popular brasileña, constituyendo un espesor mitopoiético del que se alimentan los tópoi regionalistas del canon nacional [...] las colecciones oficiales . . . optan por textos más herméticos, producidos por juristas-legisladores o polígrafos de dicción sociológica o historiográfica, tendientes a inter-comunicar a las élites intelectuales de ambos países” (Diniz and Rangel 363).

²¹ On nineteenth-century Afro-Argentines, in addition to the works cited here, see Borucki, Grandin, and Alberto and Elena. For explorations of Afro-Argentine literature of the period, see Lewis and Solomianski.

²² For comparative discussions of Argentine and Brazilian racial constructs, see Graham and Segato.

²³ On “disavowal” and racial alterity in the Caribbean context, see Fischer.

²⁴ On the Argentine “White legend,” see Alberto.

²⁵ The Spanish word *candombe* designates certain Afro-Hispanic musical and dance forms practiced in Uruguay and Argentina, while the Portuguese *candomblé* refers to an Afro-New World religion originating in Brazil and related to Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodun. On candombe, see Andrews, *Blackness*. On candomblé, see Murphy and Segato.

²⁶ On the “guiding fictions” of Argentine nationalist discourse, see Shumway.

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