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Against Colonial Imaginaries: Rewriting Latin America in Juan José Saer's *El entenado* & Bernardo Carvalho's *Nove Noites* [REPORT]

Juliano Estrada Donatelli

In accordance with the agreement following the 2020 Summer Research Fellowship through the University of Puget Sound, I conducted a three-month investigation into the field of literature, focusing on the works of two Latin American authors: Juan José Saer, from Argentina, and Bernardo Carvalho, from Brazil. Within this report, I will briefly discuss 1) the scholarship I used to frame and develop my research, 2) the work/essay(look) of both authors, and 3) my hypothesis for further investigation. Before continuing I would like to thank the University of Puget Sound and the Office of Experiential Learning for providing me with this opportunity through the Agricola Scholar Award to pursue this project of mine; I would also like to thank my advisor Professor Harry Vélez Quiñones for having guided me throughout this journey, which has resulted in a strong start towards what I hope to be a more developed project in the future as part of a graduate program.

Before analyzing the works of Juan José Saer and Bernardo Carvalho, I first sought to understand the place of Latin America and its literature within a global setting—this led me to the scholarship of Mariano Siskind and Héctor Hoyos. In *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (2014), Siskind develops the idea of Latin America as a locus of the spectacular, which he further advances by tracking the gradual commercialization and exotification of Latin America within the global literary scene, particularly through the genre of magic realism. In *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel* (2015), Hoyos also discusses this trend of exotification as well as Latin America's disadvantaged position within the global literary scene; in addition, he discusses the resulting anxieties and efforts of writers to combat these trends and the expectations that followed, particularly from European and North American audiences, by rejecting localized themes within their own writing for more universal ones.

Between these two sources, I found a common theme of Latin America as an exotic and primitive place that is compartmentalized and consumed by Europe and North America. As such, I sought to understand the historic conceptualization of Latin America; this led me to the scholarship of Carlos Jáuregui and Nancy Leys Stepan. I chose the scholarship of these two academics, because each one deals with time periods and significant themes relevant to the works of Saer and Carvalho. In *Canibalia: canibalismo, calibanismo, antropofagia cultural y consumo en América Latina* (2005), Jáuregui tracks the origin and development of the word 'cannibal' and its close association to Latin America within the European imagination since the 16th century. In *Picturing Tropical Nature* (2001), Stepan tracks the tropicalization of the Latin American landscape and people especially throughout the 19th century by European and North American artists and scientists; Stepan also discusses the repercussions such conceptualizations of Latin America had within the different fields of science at the time. With these two scholars, I concluded my theoretical and historical investigation before moving onto the essays of Saer and Carvalho.

After having established my preliminary framework, I moved on to a chapter from Saer's collection of essays *El concepto de ficción* (1997) entitled "La selva espesa de lo real;" this chapter in particular discussed the author's reflection on fiction as well as his experience as an author from Latin America writing for a global audience. Within this essay, Saer argues that literature as narration is 1) a mode that explores humanity's relationship to reality, and 2) common to everyone. In addition, Latin America's place within world literature is based on a colonial paradigm of authenticity, in which the colonizer and the colonized both require authenticity. As such, there are three dangers to which Latin America is vulnerable: *vitalismo*, a colonial mindset that erroneously deduces that Latin America, as an underdeveloped nation, possesses a privileged proximity to nature; *voluntarista*, the idea that literature can be pre-programmed and reflect ideological ideas, particularly for social or political change; and *mala conciencia*, the belief by writers that the problems of Latin American literature can be solved by literature. For Saer, to contradict this colonial desire, Latin American literature has the same access and responsibility to universal truths that European literature possesses, and as such should turn itself towards the "selva espesa de lo real"—after which the essay derives its name.

Similarly, Carvalho discusses the purpose of fiction, as well as his experience as a Latin American author writing for a global audience within his essay entitled "Fiction as Exception." Carvalho argues that contemporary fiction has become the direct expression of the author's experience or background, which seeks to only reaffirm reality. This has occurred due to the democratization of art, which has 1) fashioned literature as a means of expressing personal experience rather than an end in itself, 2) popularized the idea that everyone can write literature—as long as it reaffirms the collective consensus, and 3) created a commodification of fiction that does not seek to create or imagine new singularities. As the title of the essay suggests, Carvalho argues fiction is an exception that is constantly driven towards new ruptures and singularities: it seeks to find the paradox of human existence, such as its self-destructive nature, and tries to explode the world, while embracing the singular, subjectivity that can only be created by an author. When comparing both of their essays, Saer and Carvalho both seem to be dealing with similar problems and themes regarding Latin America and fiction.

This leads me to the final portion of my investigation which requires further development: In terms of Saer, I hypothesize that *El entenado* (1983) subverts a literary genre that was specifically made to understand Latin America—that of colonial history. Not only does it avoid any real portrayal of Latin America, it also problematizes the idea of an authentic representation. The protagonist's anxiety over representing the world around him is prominent within the novel, as well as his estrangement from the characters around him—natives and Spaniards alike. In addition, his two attempts at representing the world around him result in 1) a farce catering to colonial desire and 2) a failure deriving from his incapacity to represent. As such, *El entenado* transitions from a simple colonial narrative to a reflection on reality that is not particular to the Latin American experience.

In terms of Carvalho, I hypothesize that *Nove Noites* (2002) subverts the genre of ethnographic writing, which has normally sought to understand and represent Latin America, as well as other genres of representation, such as journalism and autobiography. Though the premise of the book is based on historical events, Carvalho uses these historical actors and

autobiographical experiences as a premise for deception, which creates a sense of constant confusion and paranoia, as different stories and versions of events conflict with one another. In addition, the narrator himself is characterized as unreliable, obsessive and delusional with no defined motive for his fanatic search to understand the real Buell Quain, a U.S. ethnographer who committed suicide during a research expedition to the Brazilian Amazons. As the search for the truth takes the narrator from Brazil to the United States, the unreason and frenzy extends beyond the border of Latin America, concluding with an ironic event on an international flight that seems to nod at the continued, futile efforts of those trying to understand Latin America.

Drawing from my aforementioned framework and scholarship, my hypothesis by the end of the summer regarding *El entenado* and *Nove Noites* is the following: Saer and Carvalho challenge the conventions of Latin American literature, both domestically and globally, through these two works of theirs. In specific, these two authors I hypothesize challenge the commodification of literary practices, experiences and the essentialization of Latin American writers. Two of their goals regarding these works seem to be to reposition Latin America within global literature and to continue to push fiction further towards new singularities.

With this initial summer research, I hope to continue to develop this investigation as a future graduate research project. Once again, I would like to thank the University of Puget Sound and the Office of Experiential Learning, as well as my advisor Professor Harry Vélez Quiñones for supporting my efforts towards understanding Latin America, both its literature and history, within a global setting.