Modernist Poetry and the Poetics of Temporality: Between Modernity and Coloniality

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation weaves a twined theoretical framework, and engages a group of poets and poetics from both the center and the margins through the lens of the “Modernity/Coloniality” school of thought. My introductory chapter compares the Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío’s modernismo to W.B. Yeats’s modernist aestheticism, and critiques the way poetics have been used to manage global history, or what I call the “literary management of temporality.” The aim behind this concept is to decolonize not just the history of literary studies, but the conceptual framework on which it rests. More broadly then, my inquiry concerns the historicity of poetic inquiry; of how humanistic inquiry has changed and mutated with the passing of time.

After this initial critique, I revisit the 20th century debate between modernist and postcolonial scholars around the figure of W.B. Yeats. Beyond a purely modern or postcolonial reading, I argue that Yeats’s poems can be read as meditations through which the Irish poet both anticipates the promise of a postcolonial, modern world, and yet remains attached to the lasting structures of its twinned dark excess, coloniality. While I remain skeptical of the utopian dimensions of a total decolonization or de-linkage, I believe it is necessary to read Yeats as a poet confronted by a modernity that disguises its coloniality, or put another way, to conceptualize a heterogeneous reading of Yeats that goes beyond the purely emancipatory readings offered by previous readers of his oeuvre.

The following chapter of *Modernism and Poetics of Temporality* reevaluates the impetus that drives the young Nicaraguan poet Salomón de la Selva to write his first poetry collection, *Tropical Town*, while living in the United States. I assess why he writes in English, a borrowed tongue, and eschews modernist techniques, going instead for an outmoded neo-gothic, late Victorian mode. I conclude that *Tropical Town*’s exoticism and stylistic deficiencies are the product of political and cultural asymmetries. The third chapter, “Modernist Acceleration and the Poetics of the Instant” engages in several readings of poems around the discourse of temporality—from the post-romantic mode of Wallace Stevens, the confessional poetics of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, to Derek Walcott’s postcolonial poetry. This chapter’s operative hypothesis is that as a literary mode the poetics of the instant affords novel ways of conceptualizing rhythmic mediation, individuation, and literary representation beyond the strictures of standardized critical protocols.

In short, this dissertation gravitates around a crucial question: to what extent does the West maintain the Third World as a temporal and cultural standing reserve? This is a huge question, and my dissertation’s conclusion, “The Gothic Third World: Photography and the Poetics of Superimposition,” constellates Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer’s theories of photography and the accelerated processes of modernization that took place in the Third World during the last decades of the 20th century. Reading photographs in constellation with Benjamin and Kracauer’s theories, I examine how critics and poets re-inscribe cultural products, and I elaborate a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image.
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Introduction

I. The Poet as Medium and Cultural Re-configurator

“With the very least residue of superstition within oneself, one could hardly know how to rid oneself of the idea that one is mere incarnation, merely a mouthpiece, merely a medium for powerful forces.”

Finding the full record of a life in the poet’s studio the day after they die, this is the literary critic’s imagined space. This attempt to find the writer’s body, his peculiar rhythm, (“a certain drive, hidden and permanent, which sustains him and devours him…”) remains at the center of the contemporary critic’s ultimate goal. No matter how much philological or doxographical progress the discipline undertakes, it seems as if the uniformity and permanence of this forensic drive—both in its morbid and scientific dimensions—might actually contain some clues about literary criticism’s formation and re-formation; about the way the triumvirate of critics, artists and societies sort out the reading assignments of the past. At any given contemporary time, the monuments of the two immediately preceding generations are often the most endangered by the violent reconfigurations of their descendants.

For some poets, especially those born after the advent of photography, it is possible for the critic to inspect and corroborate ‘what they actually looked like,’ their physiognomy, and to even witness the banality of their dying days—their portraits as consumptive bodies captured by the prying lenses of their times. In the case of the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, for example, the photograph of his agony is almost vulgar

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, (KSA, 6, p. 339). Qtd. in Peter Sloterdijk, Thinker on the Stage: Nietzsche’s Materialism.
in its dimensions. Beyond the protests voiced by Federico García Lorca and Pablo Neruda, (who complained about the ‘gaudy marble lion’ chosen to adorn Darío’s resting place after his death in 1916), the photograph—stamped with the copyright of the local photographer—is an actually lurid, gawking, reprehensible affair. And while it is easy to respond indignantly upon viewing this spectacularly undignified image, it is also hard to look away. Insofar as we recognize both the finitude and the tabloid-like curiosity which would lead someone to take such a portrait, the photograph of this dying, diminished bard is absolutely modern.

Rubén Darío on his deathbed, 1916.

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In the concluding remarks to his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” Walter Benjamin quotes the poem “Loss of Aura,” adding the following preparatory remark:

“When Baudelaire’s literary remains were first examined, this piece was rejected as
unsuitable for publication …” (SW, Vol. 4, 342). His comment is meant to highlight the volatility of Baudelaire’s poetry—yet it also reveals a recurrent motif in Benjamin’s own critical writing. The phrase ‘literary remains’ present Baudelaire’s body of work as a corpse, a corpus on the critic’s table, ready to be examined and mortified. Benjamin here advocates a mortification of the literary work to remove its ephemeral semblance—a corrective to the uniform paeans typical of 19th century criticism—to reveal—along the familiar theme of its true, fragmented nature.

He applies to Baudelaire and his work, in other words, the theory of critical mortification that he first elaborates in his study of the German Trauerspiel. In synthesis, Benjamin transposes—or to use a surgical term—grafts, the mortified ossuaries left behind by the Baroque and by Baudelaire, and salvages their remains in order to elaborate a modern conception of allegory, and a politico-theological conception of criticism. “Every fashion,” he writes in the disjecta membra now known as the Arcades Project, “stands in opposition to the organic. Every fashion panders the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse” [B, 9,11]. Between the creaturely and the transcendent, and between the false division of the organic and the inorganic, the Baroque Trauerspiel and Baudelaire mortify their respective historical periods by turning them into the motley cadavers of their reconfigurative allegorical operations.

Yet, beyond Benjamin’s interest in mortification as a critical tool (one whose negativity and deconstructive hermeneutics remain very much with us) what attracts me about his critical move is the emphasis on the transposition of temporality; on grafting the past onto the present, more specifically the willfulness underlying the foundations of
this movement; a movement, or photographic flash, which in the following pages I will later conceptualize as the poetics of the instant.

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While Darío was on his deathbed in 1916, there were rumblings of war on the other side of the Atlantic; rumblings which would eventually bring Ireland to the brink of an unprecedented revolution; this fight for self-determination would even enlist a poet, one who typically had been allergic to politics, to write perhaps the most famous political poems written in the English language in the past one hundred years, “Easter 1916.”

William Butler Yeats and his wife Georgie in the late 1920s. Photograph: Bettmann/CORBIS

And yet in a number of poems, from his early symbolist phase up to his more mature works, the Irish poet W.B. Yeats boisterously expresses his contempt and indifference towards politics and the fight for Irish Independence. In “All Things Can Tempt Me,” for instance, Yeats describes his political concerns as mere distractions, as
base and trivial as his sexual needs, though he admits being tempted by “The seeming needs of my fool-driven land” (Selected Poems, 36). The poem poses a serious conundrum, however, since the poet recognizes that these are distractions (“All things can tempt me from this craft of verse…”), and yet, divorced from Irish political collectivity, he feels “colder and dumber and deafer than a fish.” It is the dream of the poet to write of things ethereal and divine, and yet he depends on the profane, a “woman’s face,” and a “fool-driven-land,” to mediate the sacred.

It is difficult not to conclude that Yeats and Darío—both of them still tied to the aestheticism prevalent during the late 19th and early 20th century, yet simultaneously modernist pioneers in their own idiosyncratic ways—are ultimately driven by a paradoxically immanent search for transcendence. And it is for this reason that they stand as markers, —along with Baudelaire— both for the convulsive historical period they inhabit and address, as well as for the liminal, post-romantic/modernist poetic tradition they both end and inaugurate. In other words, they are the last truly ‘canonical’ bards; poets still fully animated by the classical idea of a land of pure poetic forms, both in its Platonic dimension, and in the deflated secular version of a zone of free play and poetic experimentation.³

Lastly, and in the same vein as our introductory temporal markers (Yeats and Darío), the group of poets, writers, and photographers discussed in the following pages are characterized by an ambivalent, dysangelic, yet nonetheless all-together present, redemptive aesthetic impulse. Consequently, the following chapters focus on dialogic

pairings of so-called post-Romantic (or reticent modernists) poets. Figures like Salomón de la Selva, Wallace Stevens, Carlos Martínez Rivas, and Elizabeth Bishop; figures who despite being fully modern, both in form and content, also seem to retain an atavistic strain which binds their aesthetics to the ambivalently heroic and destructive character exemplified by Baudelaire’s embeddedness in his time. For lack of a better term, they are liminal figures—mediating voices who become embroiled in thorny questions of politics and modern society, though often despite themselves.

Nevertheless, as Peter Sloterdijk points out in his materialist reading of Nietzsche’s paratactic (Apollonian/Dyonisiac), and performative enactment of Greek tragedy, the functional staging of subjectivity undertaken by poets, philosophers, and critics, and their subsequent discursive formation as media of cultural resonance and reflexivity should not simply be understood as the triumph of the apollonian *principium individuationis*, or merely as the heroic apotheosis of a well-defined modern poetic subject. Their role as collective media should be framed concurrently as almost unconscious embodiments of the individuated *socius*:

[Nietzsche’s] idea of being a medium, of performing the function of a mouthpiece, is not merely a superstitious mistake. It is tantamount to the insight that, in advanced culture's bathing of the body with the radiation of language, a compulsion and seduction are at work that do not stem from the speaker and which cause him to say things that he does not say of his own accord (*von sich aus* in the most precise sense. The spoken language is, indeed, not my own, or at least not entirely my own; it is always the others who have made me speak and listen to a language.5

4 Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 4. Fenves writes: “The task around which Benjamin’s work comes to revolve does not consist in accomplishing the reduction of the natural-mythological attitude through a heroic exertion of philosophical will but, rather, in discovering the tension between the nondirectionality of time and the unidirectionality of history. This tension itself has a direction, which can be discerned in certain works of art and stretches of time: “toward the messianic.”

5 [My emphasis]. Compare, in this regard, Engels’ counter-intuitive interpretation of Balzac as a writer who unconsciously writes against his class interests, as well as Adorno’s similar conclusion about the aestheticizing German poet Stefan George. More tentatively, Keats’ conception of ‘negative capability’ in
As I have hinted above, and as I hope to show in the following pages, it is ultimately up to critical posterity to decide the future interpretations, configurations and re-configurations of mortified poetic remains. In fact, the task of reconfiguring past interpretive frameworks, (as Nietzsche’s dramaturgical hermeneutics exemplifies in the previous passage), is more often than not taken up by philosophers and literary critics. Whereas poets typically embrace their mediating function, critics tend to re-combine and salvage mediating figures from the past, in order to bring about new interpretations and constellations of thought and aesthetic engagement. Paraphrasing Badiou’s reductive conclusion, whereas philosophers and literary critics engage thought, and in interpretive salvage operations, “the poem exposes itself as an imperative in language, and in so doing produces truths.”

To be sure, Benjamin himself has been used productively—copiously some might say—as a resonating medium by contemporary critics, and even his own methodological constellations are often heretical in usage. Indeed, one of the aims of this study is to investigate how poets and critics become re-configurative media structures—how their disjecta membra are transplanted and superimposed onto new climates and repurposed in new literatures.

I. Brought Under a Rule: Modernity as the Modulation of Space

Shakespeare could be read as an earlier—though in important ways more generous—iteration of this counter-intuitive hermeneutical framework. Peter Sloterdijk, *Thinker on the Stage: Nietzsche’s Materialism*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1989) p. 69.

Modernity cannot sit still. It is a concept at odds with itself, paradoxically constituted by gaps, dislocations and disorientations. To channel once more one of the first prophets of this yawning restlessness, Charles Baudelaire, modernity oscillates in between the dialectic of the transitory and the eternal. Transposing Baudelaire’s poetic treatment of the modern condition, Benjamin’s philosophical modernism combines the French poet’s aesthetics of exclusion and isolation with the analytical rigor of Marxist sociology, and crucially, his own idiosyncratic blend of art-historical anthropology and theology. The result is a virtual space populated by a collection of virtual social types, all equally restless and unstable figures—the flâneur, the passer-by, the prostitute, the commodity—traversing similarly intermediary phantasmagoric spaces in an urban zone which is inherently metamorphic and amoebic; it is always under construction and consumption. As David Frisby observes, “the phantasmagoria of the world of commodities is precisely a world in motion, in flux, in which all values are fleeting and indifferent.”

If, as Nietzsche famously pronounced, “modernity seems to be afflicted with a terrible sickness,” that sickness is an ever-increasing pandemic of restless movement and dis-placement. Similarly, Joseph Frank’s seminal analysis of what was then the dawn of modernist studies in the United States, “Spatial Forms in Modern Literature” (1945), highlights the transition of literary expression from episodic sequences in time, to the preponderance of a space-logic as the pivotal, structural locus of modern poetry, narrative and visual culture. Since it demands a re-orientation in the reader’s attitude, in the modern text “the meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups which, when read consecutively in time, have no

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comprehensible relation to each other (Frank, 229). This transition leads from timely, traditional conventions, when “people have to be trained to read the smooth and continuous flow of ink on paper as the manifestation of an equally continuous flow of personality”\textsuperscript{8} to contra-punctual spatial forms characterized by gaps and disjunctions, irruptive movements and semantic parataxis.

This change in the syntax of literary modernity is part of a symptomatology which Foucault characterizes as a kind of diasporic \textit{episteme}, since he argues “that the twentieth century was dominated by concepts of space and spatial organization…” and their attendant “geographic metaphors: position, displacement, interstice, site, field, territory, geopolitics” (Young, 395). Described by Robert Young as “one of the greatest examples of an ethnology of European institutional practices of power,” Foucault’s \textit{The Order of Things} criticizes classical anthropology as a practice placed in front of a normative, Anglo-European hierarchical background wherein different cultures are tabulated, translated, and reified as objects of Western knowledge. As such, the development of anthropology as a discipline works in tandem with the Imperialist transformation of European hegemony, and the thorough institutionalization of colonialism. The foreign, peripheral landscape is exoticized, in a kind of prophylactic\textsuperscript{9} exchange, since “the European traveler is disconcerted by the landscape which does not correspond to any of his traditional categories.” And yet, what precisely is ‘the exotic’? For Levi-Strauss, “the


\textsuperscript{9} Discourse around the territorialization of illness and immunology is a case in point, i.e. ‘Tropical diseases.’
search for the exotic boils down to the collecting of earlier or later phases of a familiar pattern of development.”

In other words, the exotic implies displacement, movement, and modulation. The colonial exot, therefore, is the constitutive underside of modernity and its ideological discourse, since, if the exotic is inherently peripheral and marginal, it is constituted in unison—and in opposition—to the metropolitan, the central, and the interior. These three concerns are intertwined, and they will necessarily inform each other as my argument progresses.

In synthesis, I am interested in framing the question of poetic mediation, functional asymmetry and superimposition, by grappling with a variety of questions, such as: - Why do cultures deal with their own (social, epistemic) contradictions in an indirect way? Through short-circuits, mediating avatars, purposively invisible transferences, and repurposed ideologies? Does the ‘dynamic of trans-culturalism’ necessarily presuppose relations of subordination and resistance? - How does the discourse of anthropology interact or change the literary landscape of peripheral modernities? - How does the presence of technology, particularly photography, change the poetic configuration of space in modern and postcolonial cultures? These set of questions, too, will be subject to change and revision, but they are important elements of my methodological approach. An approach which is essentially constructivist in nature, merging as it does a postcolonial framing of modernity along with a modern framing of the postcolonial, and which gives primacy to relational as well as comparative concepts. In addition to spatial forms and postcolonial temporality, I will focus and conceptualize on a set of interrelated formal

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categories, such as, functional asymmetry, and crucially, the poetics of grafting, overlay, or superimposition.

II. Superimposition as Poetic form

About forty years ago a doubt was lifted from our minds. Conclusive proof dismissed as an illusion the ancient ambition Of squaring the circle. How fortunate are the geometers, who can from time to time resolve this kind of nebula in their system; but the poets are less fortunate; they are not yet assured of the impossibility of squaring every thought in a poetic form.

-Paul Valéry, The Art of Poetry

A poem, literary text, or visual medium may be read as an allegory of subjectivity, and conceptualized through the poetics of superimposition, if and when they manage or stage the mediational topology of lived experience, grafting it onto an imagined historical, spatial or orbital vantage point; a view from above and in the round. Allowing that the exigencies of academic writing might be allowed some measure of figurative liberty—at least from time to time—the following progressive emblem might be said to summarize my conceptual framework thusly:

> Modernist figuration [space] <Postcolonial configuration [temporality]
> Global re-configuration [superimposition]

Rephrased in more traditional terms, this figurative arrangement is meant to evoke the cultural reconfiguration of modernity’s unstable spatial boundaries, the redrawing and salvaging of borders both real and conceptual; the rearrangement of divisions once dreamt up by Anglo-European historical teleology, by the reverie of its idealized, Other-worldly poetics, and by the idealization of its Platonist aesthetics. For it is precisely this
pastoral *locus amoenus* which the nemesis of postcoloniality entirely breaches, misappropriates, or even entirely disavows.

The early 20th century marks a moment when postcoloniality slowly starts returning the favor in substantial cultural dividends; re-purposing both cultural borders and spatial arrangements, changing things around in parts or in parcels, pointing out the nakedness underneath modernity’s civilizational filigree, and noting the folly of its historical *Passio Chisti* towards an ever-postponed utopian arrival in secular space.11 Sloterdijk eloquently frames the retributive temporality of this postcolonial repayment of incurred debts:

> Globalization has been saturated in the moral sense since the victims began reporting the consequences’ of the perpetrators’ deeds back to them from all over the world—this is the essence of the post-unilateral, post-imperial, post-colonial situation. … It has been saturated in the systemic sense since the carriers of this reaching out into space were forced to acknowledge that all initiatives are subject to the principle of reciprocity, and most offenses are connected back to their source after a certain processing time” (11).

Despite attendant functional asymmetries between centers and peripheries the heterogeneity of postcolonial temporalities breaches the epistemic interior of Anglo-European secular history. The proto-modernist exhibition halls of the Crystal Palace cannot hold, and the marginal finds itself within the halls of that most metropolitan “immunological structure,” the world interior.12 (Perhaps not surprisingly the exoticizing

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12 Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital* (Malden: Polity, 2013) p. 25. See his discussion of Benjamin and the world interior: “This meant the continuation of the *vita contemplativa* by bourgeois, and thus ultimately consumptive means. If humans wanted to be ‘moved’ and ‘deeply feel the monstrous,’ they now had to seek this in their own interior. It was Walter Benjamin who summed up the meaning of bourgeois solitudes: ‘For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre.”
works of Paul Gauguin are prominently exhibited in a former Paris train station—in the ornamented ironworks of Art Nouveau.)

At the microcosmic level, this cleavage leads to a tipping point in the modern subject’s consciousness, since the very epistemological structures responsible for taking over the globe, also operate internally, ceaselessly grinding the gears of epistemic distortion, and re-configuring the ever-mobile allegorical relay between modernity’s unilateral signifying regime, and postcoloniality’s overdetermined rhythmic surplus. To quote Fredric Jameson’s felicitous mistranslation of Benjamin’s enigmatic pronouncement (taken from his collection of aphorisms, “Central Park”): “In commemoration there finds expression the increasing alienation of human beings, who take inventories of their past as of lifeless merchandise. In the nineteenth century allegory abandons the outside world, only to colonize the inner.”

The superimposition of spatial modern forms and postcolonial temporality should not only be understood as a rich metaphor for this process of rendering place intelligible via a kind of literary staging or willful simulation. The focus on superimposition in modernist and postcolonial poetics is anthropologically revelatory insofar as it conceptualizes art as a modality; as a cultural technique with a penchant for interior spectacle (or in the negative sense, phantasmagoria), as well as science’s quest for visual externalization (i.e. photographic) and factual rendering. Considered more broadly as an aesthetic, the poetics of superimposition also display the facies hippocratica of nature devoid of meaning, that is, a time before the origin (Ursprung) of secular history, which

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is the same preoccupation Benjamin identifies in the baroque staging of the mourning-play or *Trauerspiele*.

This repurposed allegorical framework is both modern in the willfulness of its staging, and anti-modern, or at the very least, skeptical about modernity in the way it contorts into an inverted universality which, while being revolutionary heroic (hubris), its atavistic reconfiguration of the past also heralds the contingency of its destruction and the triumph of Ananke, or natural history. Not coincidentally, Walter Benjamin attempts time and time again to evoke an air of unprecedented farcical tragedy in the figure of Baudelaire; grafting, or superimposing, as he does in his Baudelaire essays, the figure of secular malaise which underpins his reading of the Baroque *Trauerspiele* onto the semblance of the modern *poete maudit*. In other words, there is a Falstaffian dimension to his act.

The poet, in this sense, is the producer of interiors, of simulated, imaginative spaces. Insofar as these constructions are political they propose a break in history in the name of alternative sovereignty for “imagined communities,” while retaining at the same time the possibility of both intimate and expansive ‘imagined poetic domains,’ poetic vistas and spaces of both collective and artistic—one might even say bourgeois—sovereignty.  

This self-reflexive process of poetic superimposition is also analogous to James McFarland’s recent conceptualization of a trans-historical process of mediation between

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14 One may draw an analogy between current conservation theories in ecology, such as island biogeography, which takes the oceanic model and applies it to the few ‘islands’ of biodiversity zones left on dry land. One might hazard that in this regard there are element of bourgeois preservation in the Frankfurt School’s critical and dialectically negative initiative; one whose goal is to save punctuated pieces of social perception as rarefied aesthetic preserves surrounded by the overwhelming tempest of mass culture.
As McFarland suggests, Nietzsche’s influence was not the result of Benjamin’s own considered assessment of his problematic forebear but a certain impression he himself made, one that characterized his entire intellectual physiognomy, his theoretical commitment, his expressive style, his moral and political posture in the world. Such an affinity involves Benjamin’s explicit understanding of Nietzsche but cannot be reduced to it. … Benjamin mediates Nietzsche into the future; Nietzsche mediates Benjamin into the past.  

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To recapitulate, by poetics of superimposition, I mean the unstable reconfiguration, or overlay of two schemas:

- **Modernist figuration of space**: spatial forms (Frank), borders and enclosures, cognitive mapping (Jameson) / management of temporality: the now-time of history, unreal city, Parisian Arcades, ontological disinheritance, monologic, homogenized time, eternal return.
- **Postcolonial figuration of time**: exotic peripheralism, superimposition, mimicry, city as palimpsest, ontological asymmetry vis-à-vis the metropole, emphasis on difference, under-development, dialogic, the carnivalesque, interstitial and heterotopic.

By situating the origin of my narrative in Ireland, I gesture towards its status as an “internal European colony” (Mignolo), and I attempt to show how these two spatio-temporal configurations do not follow but rather commingle with each other. That is, postcoloniality is already present in the modern interior space of the European territory. In economic terms for instance, in the exotic surrealism brought about by the fetish character of the commodity, as well as historically, in Imperial Europe’s civilizational

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anxiety; a generalized Copernican malaise cogently explored by 19th century novelists like Joseph Conrad, himself an “internal exile” of the European periphery.\(^\text{16}\)

But more compellingly, in the following case, taken from the sea-faring, New Hemispheric’ perspective encompassed in Hermann Melville’s epic *Moby Dick*. Here, a weary Ishmael falls asleep, only to rise in the middle of the night and feel confused by the superimposition of another body’s hand—‘Queequeg’s pagan arm’—grafted onto the qualia of his figure:

I opened my eyes, and the before sun-lit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. Nay, to this very hour, I often puzzle myself with it.\(^\text{17}\)

Attempting to replicate Melville’s masterful description of ‘superimposed subjectivities,’ the case studies addressed in the following pages emphasize the dialogic dimension of postcolonial temporalities and modern spatial forms. The following list provides brief expressionistic descriptions of their contents:

1- W.B. Yeats, E. Said and interpretation of his work as functionally asymmetrical construction through the postcolonial/modernist debate
2- Salomón de la and the functional asymmetry of transcultural Literary Knowledge between the U.S. and Latin America before the Cold War.
3- Modernist acceleration and the poetics of the instant—Construction of the global view “from above” or ‘from the outside’ and the poetic treatment of temporality.

\(^{16}\) See for instance his short story “Amy Foster.”
4– Baudelaire/Carlos Martínez Rivas – photography, and the superimposition of peripheral modernities as alternative to functional asymmetry; willful constellations of poetic genealogy.

Each of these case studies tackle the functional asymmetries of transnational literary culture which characterizes the enduring legacy of Anglo-European Imperialism, its unilateral division of geographical space, and its hierarchical organization of territories through distinct temporal stages of secular historical development. By looking at the work of early 20th century poets, artists, and intellectuals emerging out of both canonical and peripheral modernities—liminal figures caught in between the promise of modernity and the shadow of coloniality—my thesis tells a punctuated narrative; one which traces the development of modernist spatial aesthetic forms, the reconfiguration of historical time brought about by postcolonial historical subjectivity, and their subsequent superimposition as mutually reinforcing political technologies for the management of global temporality and transnational cultural knowledge.

Paratactically, my argument undertakes an archaeology of both concepts: modernist spatial aesthetics, on the one hand, and postcolonial temporality on the other, and posits their superimposition or overlay as aesthetic and political technologies; as a multidirectional management system of heterogeneous cultural arrangements. In other words, their convergence as a conceptual ‘global rule’ (“classical Latin rēgula, rod for drawing straight lines or measuring, ruler, basic principle, rule”), as an “apparatus of obligatory principles, and as a coercive normative reality” (Sloterdijk, “Nomotop). What new perspectives can be gleaned from conceptualizing modernity and postcoloniality as mutually intersecting and re-enforcing modalities? This study comprehends them in
tandem, through their conceptualization as second-order cultural techniques\textsuperscript{18}—as modalities of crisis and disinheritance, forms which build order out of distortion by superimposing the foreign onto the familiar in order to salvage that which is most willful and contingent.

\section*{III. Postcolonial Politics—Notes on the Modernity/Coloniality Debate}

When one holds that thought is the center of everything, one ends up saying, like the Marxists, the neoliberals, and the decolonials, that we must switch consciousness, mentality, and episteme. They coincide in holding thought as the solution to everything, and this unites them before it distinguishes them, when thought is actually—we don’t get tired of repeating—the root of the problem.\textsuperscript{19}

While remaining deeply skeptical of modernity/coloniality (M/S) as an ‘exit project’ from Western modernity, since it positions itself as a prelapsarian schema for the utopian production of \textit{alter-modernities}, my thesis nonetheless maintains that as a critique of Anglo-Eurocentrism, and more importantly, as a theory which accounts for postcolonial elite epistemic structures as residual structures of Imperial control (or what I would half-jokingly call ‘ambassadorial elites’), it provides a window into the lasting legacy of colonial partitions in current postcolonial arrangements. More importantly, coloniality is particularly conducive for a comparative analysis, and for drawing relations between, on the one hand, Ireland and the United Kingdom, and Latin America and the United States, on the other. For instance, it is precisely because of his poetic articulation of these

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Macho, Second-Order Animals: Cultural Techniques of Identity and Identification,” \textit{Theory Culture Society} 30.6 (2013): 30-47.

\textsuperscript{19} Freddy Quezada, in conversation.
contradictions at the heart of modernity, more so than for his participation in the Irish struggle, that Yeats is highly conversant with the literary voices of an increasingly multipolar world.

In fact, the debate between Anglo-European modernity and an autochthonous ‘alter-modernity,’ as well as the broader debates between decolonialists and postcolonialists, moderns vs. postmoderns, etc. echoes more contemporary debates around posthuman—and more recently—even non-human centric speculations. Somewhat surprisingly, both the radical-minded neo-indigeneity of Walter Mignolo, the libertarian-minded anti-modernism of the posthumanists, and even new iterations of reactionary nihilism, seem to converge, insofar as they read modernity as an inherently Anglo-European project; one which cannot be uncoupled and which actually should be identified by the flawed coupling which constitutes it: modernity/coloniality.

This is further evident in that most of their critiques seem to conclude that the very imposition of the Imperial language, as the demand to enter into the European historical system, both amputates the local perspective and shackles it, inscribing it in a continental hierarchy and a foreign record; a foreign historical code, one whose strictures to the past make it difficult to create an alternative, future-oriented perspective. One might counter that forms of regulation and power differentials might need to exist for information to be sufficiently arranged into salvageable modalities. Or to borrow a characteristically enigmatic statement by Michel Serres, “The parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the

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atomic form of our relations. Let us try to face it head-on, like death, like the sun. We are all attacked, together.\textsuperscript{21}

More speculatively, the relation between the western world and the East, or between the Anglo-European North and Global South—or whatever name one chooses to call the jungle waiting for ‘history’ to start outside the European enclosure—operating as the copula modernity/coloniality, might be compared to W.B. Yeats’ wildly poetic theory of the self and the anti-self. In other words, modernity’s conception of space, and the heterogeneity of postcolonial temporality are imbricated, from the start, as cultural modalities with a common, generalizable function: to iterate a self which can be superimposed on another. Ultimately, my project sustains a sympathetic yet doubtful stance towards the messianic, particularly in its formulation as a radical decolonization of the mind, insofar as any ‘utopian exit’ re-iterates, in structural terms, the European promise of Christian redemption, even as conceptualizes itself though a supposedly de-Christianized, Heideggerean break from Kant’s anthropological enframing and the Western intellectual tradition. The task is not so much to undo epistemologies as much as it is to recognize their inevitable, mutually re-enforced, mediation and superimposition.

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In short, 20\textsuperscript{th} century culture teaches us that the legacy of colonial dispossession—once presumed vanquished by the emancipatory forces of secular modern history—still functions as a stubborn, constitutive sediment within modernity itself. Reading the cultural work of the last century from the vantage point of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century—a time when the inequalities of patrimonial capitalism have become too asymmetric and

\textsuperscript{21} Michel Serres, \textit{The Parasite}, p. 8.
blatant to ignore, and when the project of neoliberal multiculturalism threatens to burst at
the seams—means that our poets’ past ambivalence becomes legible as our present
reticence; it emerges from a residual inability to deal with the dispossession demanded by
seemingly new, and yet all too familiar, economic and political contradictions. As such,
the postcolonial dimension of Darío and Yeats’ work, in this introductory case, read
through the critical prism of coloniality as a tendency within modernity itself, acquires
different tonalities since it begins to frame a space where the post-romantic poet’s
seemingly historical (i.e. dated, past, passé, etc) anxieties can be read in tandem with the
intellectual partitions of his contemporary readers, and with the residual anxieties still
vibrant in the guts of the living, inhabitants of the increasingly perilous valleys of the
contemporary world.
In recent decades, mostly since the early 1980s, several critics have studied Yeats’s poetry through the lens of postcolonial theory and criticism. Yet, the idea of Yeats as a postcolonial poet is much more tenuous and opaque than postcolonial critics are willing to consider, and their work has often been met with skepticism, usually from scholars of Irish Studies. The purpose of this article is not to replicate their arguments. It argues that instead of labeling Yeats as a ‘postcolonial poet,’ it is much more productive to consider Yeats’s imbrication in both coloniality and modernity. After a brief discussion of the term ‘coloniality,’ the essay goes on to conceptualize a number of Yeats’s occasional or public poems as meditative spaces in which the poet’s ambivalence towards modernity mirrors his ambivalence towards the lasting presence of colonial structures.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

– W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1939)

“For poetry makes nothing happen,” Auden famously writes in his elegy to W.B. Yeats, a poem that both commemorates and criticizes the Irish poet and his indubitable influence on the poetics of twentieth century literature. Auden commemorates his predecessor for his artistic achievement and for his revitalization of form and style—particularly for his use of contemporary events as poetic spaces for occasional yet powerful meditations. In fact, Auden’s subject matter is self-consciously apt, insofar as he uses a contemporary event—the death of W.B. Yeats—to ponder the poetic grandeur

† I am indebted to Rajeev Patke, Hugh Haughton, and Terence Brown, whose lectures and seminars at the Yeats Summer School helped elucidate the intricacies of Yeatsian poetics and criticism.
and concrete limitations of the poet’s literary achievement. But Yeats was also a man of
eyebrow-raising politics, a vituperative, affected aristocrat and recalcitrant aestheticist
who often failed to engage with the social and political degradation of war-torn Europe.
Which is why Auden’s brutally honest elegy is also the indictment of an atavistic poet
who retrenched himself from inconvenient social realities. Now that Yeats’s body—his
“is scattered among a hundred cities,” Auden prophetically foresees a time when
the poet no longer has agency over the meaning of his words. Yeats pays the price of
canonization: his poetry will change according to the reception of future audiences; his
poetic lines will be “modified in the guts of the living.”

Commemoration and indictment then, both celebration and accusation, Auden
initiates with his liminal elegy a pattern of extremes that runs through the reception of
Yeats’s oeuvre. In a prose piece written the same year, Auden uses a wry, forensic style
to further dissect the legacy of the Irish poet. Titled “The Public v. the Late Mr. William
Butler Yeats,” the essay is structured as a court proceeding wherein the indictment of ‘the
public prosecutor’ is followed by the arguments of the ‘counsel for the defense’. The
prosecutor’s argument is centered on what he considers the requirements to be considered
a great poet: “…a profound understanding of the age in which he lived, and… a working
knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time”
(Auden 1939). Yeats, he argues, celebrated the life of peasants from the lofty heights of
his tower, all the while ignoring their croaking stomachs and the very real needs of their
material existence. In short, he was a petit bourgeois with a “feudal mentality,” careful
not to offend “neither the Irish Republican nor the British Army…. In response, the
defense trounces the prosecutor’s trenchant critique with one seemingly simple question:
do we read poetry in search for social policy? Despite Yeats’s conservative temperament, he concludes, his poems “express a sustained protest against the social atomization caused by industrialism” (Auden 1939).

Auden’s conclusion synthesizes a Marxian reading of Yeats’s poetry, one that echoes Engels’s reading of Balzac as a writer who “was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices;” a writer who portrayed social reality despite his own idiosyncrasies. This view, while inherently reductive, is indicative of the way literary reception can accommodate a poet’s eccentricities for the sake of periodization or even ideological adjustment. Auden admires Yeats’s diction, his occasional verse, but eschews his regressive politics and esoteric interests. He thereby builds a model of Yeats as a Modernist poet that fits well both in his own poetic genealogy and in his own socially engaged poetry.

Yet, it is not only poets who weld and meld the canon with their artistic tools. It is most often literary critics with their analytical armamentarium who give shape to a poet’s features and construct spaces of interpretation designed to fit their own critical, political, even professional interests. In recent decades, mostly since the early 1980s, a number of critics have studied Yeats’s poetry through the lens of postcolonial theory and criticism. Their project has enlarged the corpus of Yeatsian studies and it has revealed important elements in his poetic work that engage with issues of political agency, the legacy of colonial rule, and the paradoxes of independence and cultural sovereignty. All of these issues are resonant in postcolonial literature, and considering Yeats’s, indeed Ireland’s, postcolonial status affords unexpected resonances and important contrasts with writers from decolonized and peripheral spaces. Yet, the idea of Yeats as a postcolonial poet is
much more tenuous and opaque than postcolonial critics are willing to consider, and their work has often been met with skepticism, usually by scholars of Irish Studies. Alas, their debates have become as reductive and judicial as Auden’s forensic essayism. My purpose here is not to replicate their arguments. I will argue that instead of labeling Yeats as a ‘postcolonial poet,’ it is much more productive to consider the implications of Yeats’s imbrication in both coloniality and modernity. After a brief discussion of the term ‘coloniality,’ I will conceptualize a number of Yeats’s occasional or public poems as meditative spaces in which the poet’s ambivalence towards modernity mirrors his ambivalence towards the lasting presence of colonial structures.

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The library of Yeatsian criticism is vast, and the scope of Yeatsian criticism in a postcolonial key is also expansive. The works of Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd are usually acknowledged as important primers, though as Conor McCarthy notes, the conversation was further cemented by Edward Said and his essay “Yeats and Decolonization,” published as a Field Day pamphlet in the late 1980s (McCarthy 2007, 312). In synthesis, Said views Yeats as a national poet, the artist whose voice serves as the foundation of political and cultural independence. Crucially, the postcolonial critic situates the Irish poet in a colonial matrix and argues that his use of Irish place names should be understood as a poetics of recuperation, wherein the act of naming displaces the hegemony of imperial space. “Before [anti-imperialist resistance], there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land,” he writes, “which, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination” (Said 11).

Identifying Yeats as an anti-colonial poet, Said reads his early work as an effort “to seek
out, to map, to invent, or to discover, a third nature, which is not pristine and pre-historical… but one which derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present.” Said calls this impulse towards recuperative naming “the cartographic” (Said’s italics, 12).

Said’s prescient analysis of the role of names in Yeatsian poetics affords a new understanding of his early poetry, but it also elides and sublimates a number of complexities. In an early poem, “The Ballad of Father O’Hart,” Yeats uses the figure of a provincial Catholic priest who is expropriated of his lands during the “penal days,” referring to the period of the penal laws (1695 – 1727), which forbade Catholics from owning land in Ireland (CP, 10). Respected and loved by the townspeople, the priest’s death is cause for great sadness and spiritual consternation. The natural geography wails its usurpation:

And these were the works of John
When, weeping score by score,
People came into Coloony;
For he’d died at ninety-four.

There was no human keening
The birds from Knocknarea
And the world round Knocknashee
Came keening in that day. (CP, 11).

In order to reprieve the historical appropriation of the land, the poet foregrounds the Gaelic names of Irish localities by building rhythmic patterns out of their assonant qualities. However, the role of these names is more complex than mere nationalist posturing or historical reprieve, since Yeats also depends on legibility, translatability, and as such he Anglicizes the Gaelic geography in a move that mirrors the Imperial conquest of space. This is particularly evident in what is perhaps Yeats’s most famous poem, “The
Lake Isle of Innisfree,” wherein the poet yearns for the rural landscape of his native Sligo, encapsulated in the metonymy of the small island of Innisfree. But Yeats does not use the Irish name—*Inis Fraoigh*—and perhaps more crucially, he is said to have been inspired to write the lyric while living in London, after seeing a fountain in the urban setting of the Imperial metropolis.

Which is to say that perhaps Said is too quick to consider Yeats as a *national* poet of decolonization. He was definitely involved as a nationalist poet of the Irish revival, and he was intimately concerned with the project of the Irish Free State, but he also cultivated the *pose* of the nationalist poet for his own artistic goals. Moreover, he was keenly aware of his English readers and he was not conversant in the Irish language. As Said himself admits,

> For Yeats, the overlapping he knew existed between his Irish nationalism and the English cultural heritage that both dominated and empowered him as a writer, was bound to cause an over-heated tension, and it is the pressure of this urgently political and secular tension that one may speculate caused him to try to resolve it on a ‘higher,’ that is, non-political level (Said, 13).

But Said makes this distinction when he analyzes Yeats’s late period, with the aged poet’s colorings of Byzantium and the abstruse, esoteric systematics of *A Vision*, and he fails to recognize that the poet’s nationalist project is intimately tied to his ambivalence towards modernity and the prevalence of a colonialist mentality even in his early poetry.

Said cites in his reflection on “Yeats and Decolonization” a revealing quote from Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> . . . colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon, 1961)
These same lines serve as epigraph to Walter Mignolo’s essay “Delinking,” and the parallelism with Said is revealing since they arrive at different conclusions with regards to the legacy of colonialism on the colonized cultural landscape. Echoing the work of Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, Mignolo grants that postmodern and postcolonial critics have initiated the critique of Totality, but he argues that it is necessary to critique Totality “from the perspective of coloniality and not only from the critique of post-modernity.” Crucially, and I would argue problematically, Mignolo argues that their own “critique of the modern notion of Totality doesn’t lead necessarily to post-coloniality but to de-coloniality.” It is in this threshold towards a utopian alternative—a de-linkage—from western modernity, he argues, in which “the analytic of coloniality and the programmatic of de-coloniality moves away and beyond the post-colonial” (Mignolo 2007, 452). It is also at this juncture in which my analysis parts ways from Mignolo’s de-coloniality, insofar as I agree with his conception of coloniality as the “invisible and constitutive side of ‘modernity,’” but I view his program of ‘de-linking’ with suspicion, since it seems more performative than programmatic.

In other words, I disagree with Mignolo’s de-colonial futurity but I find his conceptualization of ‘coloniality’ engaging since it describes the formation of elites that remained imbricated in the metropolitan or Imperial project while inhabiting—and in Yeats’s case—even furthering the decolonization of the periphery. Thus, coloniality affects both power and knowledge structures since they become instruments of colonial control. Expanding on Quijano and Mignolo’s conceptualization, Nelson Maldonado-Torres adds that if “the coloniality of knowledge had to do with impact of colonization on the different areas of knowledge production, coloniality of being would make primary
reference to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language” (242).

Separate yet emanating from colonization, coloniality is the obverse or constitutive other of modernity, and it is this ambivalence, I argue, which is an important presence in Yeats’s poetics.

As a member of the Anglo-protestant ascendancy in Ireland, Yeats’s poetry is imbricated in the discourse of coloniality, and it therefore bears the “marks of a temporality stranded between the time of a dying colonialism and a stillborn nationalism” (Gikandi 2011, 176). In Yeats, this bisected or fractured temporality is transplanted onto real spaces, such as the ancestral houses of the Anglo-protestant ascendancy. This conflation of temporal and spatial axes is most palpable in Yeats’s poems on public and political events. For instance, in an atavistic gesture, Yeats revives the British tradition of 17th century country-house poems when he writes “Upon a House shaken by Land Agitation” in order to defend the landed state of his benefactress, Lady Gregory, from redistributive land reform. The poem is both a celebration of large ancestral houses as symbols of aristocratic cultural values, and a skeptical prodding of the dynamics of political change. It takes the form of a questionnaire directed at modernity:

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one
Time out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best? Although
Mean roof-trees were sturdier for its fall,
How should their luck run high to reach
The gifts that govern men, and after these
To gradual Time’s last gift, a written speech
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease? (CP, 95 – 96)

With three rhetorical questions Yeats indicts modern political change and argues for
genealogical continuity. Aristocratic dwellings are presented as timeless places of gaiety and non-productive yet spiritual reveries. These are spaces from whence civilizing values emanate to the rest of society. To be cultured is to come from ancestral states, “where wings have memory of wings,” that is, from places that have long cultivated higher values for their own sake. To be cultured, in other words, is the process of a long process of cultivation, a word which comes to us from the Latin colere, and which is intimately tied to the semantic mappings of colonization. By arguing against the debasement of aristocratic “high laughter, loveliness and ease” Yeats betrays a sensibility that is both skeptical of modernity and imbricated in the structures of coloniality.

Returning to the ballad form with savage irony, Yeats writes a trenchant poetic critique of Irish society in “September, 1913.” Courting controversy, and perhaps public notoriety, the nationalist poet publishes his polemic in The Irish Times, a publication with notorious Unionist allegiances. In a vituperative and acerbic tone, the poet addresses his readership with inquisitive yet indignant irony:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone… (CP, 108).

Exploiting the ambiguities of an unnamed addressee, “you”, the poet formulates a condescending speech directed at the whole of Irish society. The skeptical speaker questions the value, currency, or even viability of the nationalist project to a people without aspirations. He portrays them in pathetic spaces, such as the metonymical “greasy till,” lowering their visages from larger emancipatory projects in order to count meager coins and bead after lacquered bead in mercantile and Catholic prayer. These are
men who “were born to pray and save,” and as the tragic refrain concludes: “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave.” In the end, the poem serves as Yeats’s valediction to the nationalist cause, since the fallow consciousness of Ireland is far too meager to pay the price of sovereignty.

Nevertheless, a yearning for the hopes of the nationalist cause flutters under the surface of Yeats’s critique, since his tone reveals a real striving for change amid the static suffocation stifling Irish society. In fact, Yeats rescinds his defeatist valediction in what would become one of the most famous political poems of the twentieth century, “Easter, 1916.” Returning to the static atmospherics of “September, 1913,” the poet depicts in the first stanza a series of urban spaces populated by unassuming characters, socialites, businessmen and dilettantes. They come from the same metonymical spaces as “the greasy till,” they come “From counter or desk among grey Eighteenth-century houses” (CP, 180). Crucially, they belong the Catholic high caste of Dublin, and Yeats passes them in the street, regarding them with gestures, “a nod of the head,” or “polite meaningless words…. ” The ambiance conveys a repetitive quotidian reality, with no sense of an immediate change in the air. And yet, the quantity of days leads to an utter transformation, a momentous qualitative change, “A terrible beauty is born.”

Interestingly, in the context of a poem about urban spaces, the most dramatic, synergistic images are presented in a rapid procession of rural motifs and rural spaces:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brime,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone’s in the midst of it all.     (CP, 181)

The rapid succession of images and the foregrounding of time (“minute by minute”) create a poetic photomontage, a dizzying cinematic effect that operates as a formal metaphor for revolutionary change. The procession of images also functions analogically, insofar as they all share a certain trace, a wavering in between permanence and impermanence: “the shadow of a cloud on the stream,” and the imprint of a “horse-hoof” on a country road are momentary moments that create a kind of legibility on the changing landscape. In other words, these tiny changes accrue on the medium of the landscape and they slowly lead to irrevocable and momentous change: a stone muddying the waters of the stream, or what Benjamin would call a whirlpool, an eddy on the river of becoming.

In synthesis, it is an image of the postcolonial instant. By re-focusing a poem about urban spaces and human, political change onto the expressionless features of the urban landscape, Yeats both celebrates and dislocates the momentous arrival of historical change. Modernity is displaced and mediated by the longue durée of natural history.

This particular stanza (in what is arguably Yeats’s most discussed poem) has received a considerable amount of critical attention. As Marjorie Perloff points out, critics have often attempted to trace philological resonances back to specific moments in Yeats’s life and archive (for instance, his descriptions of childhood in rural Ireland, his correspondence with Maud Gonne, etc.), without entirely removing the opaque halo surrounding the stanza. Indeed, an overtly marked paratext to “Easter, 1916,” namely
Yeats’s play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (“Time—1916”) contains an important number of stylistic and thematic similarities, but it does not entirely settle the dislocation of the poem’s climactic stanza. One of three dramatic works known collectively as “the Cuchulain cycle,” the play can be read as an overtly nationalist document, and despite the “Young Man’s” ambivalent wanderings in rural Ireland, this reading seems to be entirely warranted.

It is important to point out then that the most crucial point about this stanza is precisely its dislocation. In other words, it is not only a matter of reading or peeling back the superimposed sources of Yeats’s multifarious thematic framework, but also of accounting the way the stanza depicts the mobile experience of change in both historical time and natural history. Or in figurative terms, the allegorization of change both inside and outside the spaces of human dwelling. It is in these dislocated images, seared by their historical time, where the allegorical mode displays the nakedness of the postcolonial instant. As Benjamin observes, “The wrenching of things from their familiar contexts… is linked to the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention” (Benjamin, 173).

The overall effect of this succession of images can be characterized as one of arrested or petrified change. In Benjimnian terms, we might say the stanza as a whole unfolds as a dialectical image, an Ur-Image [*Urbild*], “that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the river of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis” (1998, 45). By refocusing a poem about urban spaces and human, political change onto the expressionless features of the primordial landscape, Yeats both celebrates and dislocates the momentous
arrival of historical change. In other words, the jolt of revolution, the postcolonial instant, is ultimately allegorized; it is displaced and mediated by the *longue durée* of natural history. Additionally, the poem foregrounds the allegorical schematizations of History, given that its commemorative title—steeped in the resonant, regenerative rhythms of Easter—can be characterized as a willful adoption of genre and convention. Yeats uses allegorical representation, in other words, as an expression of convention (Benjamin 1998, 175). The poet both names and allegorizes the uprising in an elegiac mood of collective mourning. He uses the allegorical mode not merely as a conventional expression, but rather, he uses the sterility of allegory to encase a seemingly unprecedented, singular event. As Benjamin astutely observes elsewhere: “To write history means giving calendar dates their physiognomy” (2003, 165).

Retrospectively, Yeats himself seems to echo this characterization. As he later describes his poetic view of the rebellion in the brooding lines of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion:”

It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of (CP, 28-32).

This poignant stanza memorializes the allegorical schemas elaborated by the poet’s younger self as he mediated in between the urgency of the historical situation, and the misanthropic rewards of aesthetic reverie and poetic transcendence. Crucially, Yeats distinguishes between the actual, concrete “things,” the facts and details about the rebellion, and its allegorical transfiguration, “the dream itself:” the emblematic face superimposed on the event. Looking back at his youthful poetry from the perch of his old
age, he limns his art as a bestiary of senescent emblems, mere symbolic husks, “allegorical dreams …” (CP, 10-11). Yeats, in other words, seems to atone for his aesthetic-political myopia in the face of historical change. But whereas here the mature poet recognizes the allegorical valences of his earlier poetry, the younger Yeats had quite explicitly divorced his *ars poetica* from mere ‘allegorical amusement’ and had emphasized instead the unity of the symbolic mode.

Yeats’s retrospective meditation in “The Circus Animals’s Desertion” points us to the much-discussed *volte-face* in his poetics, and to the crucial recalibration of his fin-de-siècle aesthetics after *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). As the young Paul de Man concludes in the elucidating pages of his dissertation on “Mallarmé, Yeats, and the Post-Romantic Predicament,” and in its subsequent, revised version (“Image and Emblem in Yeats”):

… Yeats never really abandoned the emblematic style of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Learning from the failure of this book, he now becomes much more cautious, strategically avoids some of the stylistic pitfalls and masks his real predicament behind a screen of ambiguities which has succeeded in convincing a majority of readers that he is much more assertive and self-confident, though a much less considerable poet than he really is” (1984, 184).

Thus, in one eloquent statement de Man identifies the ambiguous kernel of Yeats’s aesthetic revolution. With great perspicuity, his critical analysis focuses on the poet’s ambivalent gesture of changing seemingly everything about his art, only so that it could remain basically unchanged. “The style is not really new,” de Man observes capaciously, “because the underlying problem has not changed… the emblems are in reality pseudo-emblems, dead allegories that cover up the defeat of the natural image” (1984, 172). And yet, this is one of the few instances in de Man’s reflection in which he uses the more accurate concept of allegory to describe Yeats’s poetic ambivalence, and he replicates
instead the confused categories of ‘image and emblem’ conceptualized by the poet himself. While de Man’s later work would develop a multi-level understanding of allegory and its importance in modern literary expression and criticism, his dissertation on Yeats (written under the guidance of Reuben Brower) is still embedded in a New Critical paradigm, with its attendant, orthodox dance around the ‘unity’ of the literary symbol (Waters 1999, 140).

Like Yeats’s poetics, in other words, Paul de Man’s critical framework would undergo its own palinodic recalibration. After discovering Walter Benjamin’s important yet forgotten allegorical analysis, he would take heed of its theoretical conclusions, in however adulterated form. As Lindsay Waters points out, “Benjamin had already traveled in the 1920s the route de Man was to travel much later…” (1999, 149). In figurative terms, the German critic’s allegorical conceptualization would indicate to Paul de Man a way out of the confused forest of symbols enclosed in the parcelled lands of New Criticism. As such, the young critic is on the right track when he uses the category of ‘emblem’ to describe the multifarious valences of Yeats’s allegorical framework. But despite his eloquent description of Yeats’s ambivalent poetics, de Man’s vague conceptual framework ends up muddying his analytical insights. By remaining close to the organic vocabulary of ‘image’ and ‘symbol,’ de Man’s early work on Yeats evidences the residual influence of romantic criticism and its emphasis on wholeness, continuity, and immediacy. As Waters concludes, it would take “the added power of Benjamin’s critique of the organic symbol and his positive notion of allegory…” for Paul de Man to move away from a conception of the “symbol as the fusion of image and idea,” and
towards his own post-structural theory of language and interpretation as allegorical constructs (1999, 149).

To be sure, there is no textual evidence of Yeats himself ever coming into contact with the critical work of (the much younger) Walter Benjamin. Conversely, the Jewish critic does invoke Yeats’s work in his book on the German Baroque mourning-play, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [*Trauerspiels*]. Conceptualized as a study of the early modern allegory as a literary figure shot through by the arrival of secular history, Benjamin’s ‘habilitation’ thesis (or *Habilitationsschrift*) is also a polemic attack against what he considers to be the prevailing confusion in the critical concepts of his contemporaries—artists and scholars who celebrate the ‘organic unity’ of the symbol and simultaneously debase the supposed turgidity of allegorical conventions. “Even great artists and exceptional theoreticians, such as Yeats,” he writes,

> still assume that allegory is a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning. Generally authors have only a vague knowledge of the authentic documents of the modern allegorical way of looking at things, the literary and visual emblem-books of the baroque” (1998, 162).

Benjamin cites in this passage the German translation of Yeats’s *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1904), specifically his essay on “William Blake and His Illustrations to The Divine Comedy.” In it, Yeats sets out to explain the symbolic power of Blake’s images, even as he feels obliged to include a few prefatory remarks against allegorical modes of expression. For the Irish poet, the symbol is “the only possible expression of some invisible essence,” and he describes its organic radiance—“a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame”—in a paradoxical formulation that more accurately describes the dialectical play of shadows typical of allegory, instead of the transcendental synthesis feigned by the symbol.
Seemingly unaware of this paradox, Yeats argues that compared to the uniqueness of the symbol, “allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or a familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement” (1904, 176). Symbols are otherworldly, super- or supra-natural emanations conveyed to the soul; allegories are mere conventional correspondences, the equivalent of a lantern projecting captioned images to amuse and instruct a child in his insulated room. For Yeats symbols are more immediate, pure vehicles of expression because they are poignant images aimed at the complex screens of our emotional lives.

While allegories also use images and correspondences to convey a particular expression, they emphasize ideas instead of emotions since they direct their fanciful amusements at the schematizations of the intellectual faculty. In short, Yeats’s essay on Blake—with its exultant celebration of the visionary bard and its complimentary dismissal of the allegorist—recapitulates a post-Enlightenment conceptualization (and re-valorization) of the symbolic mode as the primary medium of poetic expression.

In a related essay from *Ideas of Good and Evil*, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” Yeats characterizes two distinct orientations which constitute the symbolic mode. Namely, he makes a distinction between the symbol’s emotional and intellectual tendencies. The intellectual tendency of the symbolic mode is the more prevalent, Yeats argues, since “outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols.” In other words, the more general, intellectual notion of symbolic apprehension defuses the potential of the symbol and transforms it instead into a mere a literary convention. Instrumentalized and codified “according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them…”
intellectual symbols gradually become “associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke.”

According to Yeats’s fragmentary symbolic theory, the intellect’s measuring instruments ultimately transform the emotional resonances of the symbol into “the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away” (1904, 250).

What is crucial here is that this symbolic division of labor—between emotions and ideas—betrays the supposed unity of the symbol. Consequently, this intractable, bipartite distinction slowly bogs down Yeats’s analysis. In short, Yeats dismisses the trappings of allegory, and his aesthetics remain attached to the apotheosis of the symbol. Contrastingly, Benjamin seeks to overcome this misguided dance around the salvific symbolic mode, “this distorted conception of the symbol… a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism” (Benjamin 1998, 160).

This brief comparative excursus between Benjamin’s allegorical aesthetics and Yeats’s more conventional celebration of the symbol shows both the potential and the limits of reading the one against the other. Despite these crucial differences, if one examines and compares each of their occult and mystical interests, specifically their Gnostic eschatological configurations, —in figurative terms, Benjamin’s backward-facing angel and Yeats’s slouching beast—a veritable constellation of early 20th century anxieties about history, temporality, and spatiality unveils itself in the gray skies of an incipient modernity. Yeats, for instance, in an abstruse footnote to “The Second Coming,” explains that unlike the ‘narrowing gyre’ before the birth of Christ the ‘widening gyre’ presaging modernity “has almost reached its greatest expansion.”
Importantly, he goes on to describe the advent of this epoch dialectically, using imagery and concepts that come exceptionally close to Benjamin’s own messianic formulations:

The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated… *(Variorum, 825)*.

And here is Benjamin, simultaneously distinguishing and eliding differences between secular–profane time: erected on the order of happiness—and messianic time, in his recondite “Theologico-Political Fragment:”

It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, encompassing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points towards which the secular dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the messianic direction *(2002, 305-6)*.

The question of how two very different writers from such dissimilar cultural and political backgrounds could reach such similar conceptions around myth and history is ultimately beyond the scope of this essay. However, a quick examination of their interrelated ideas affords one a space in which Benjamin’s revitalized allegorical theory and Yeats’s poetic allegorizations can be viewed in tandem—through the prismatic push and pull of the dialectical image.

The dialectical image rehearses both the promise and perilousness—the “terrible beauty”—of modern change. Yeats portrays the Easter rebellion as an event that changes the configuration of the past and signals the constellation of a new future. It is what Fredric Jameson defines in the tropological contours of *A Singular Modernity* as a promise within a present of time… a way of possessing the future more immediately within that present itself. It is in this sense something of a Utopian figure, insofar as it includes and envelops a dimension of future temporality; but then in that case one would also add that it is an ideological distortion of the
Utopian perspective, and constitutes something of a spurious promise intended in the long run to displace and replace the Utopian one. (Jameson 2002, 35)

As a writer obsessed with historical change in the form of his cyclical theory of changing epochs and “widening gyres,” Yeats uses the concept of a total transformation (i.e. modernity) as a rhetorical strategy. He grafts the structure of his transformative trope onto the narrative of history and the natural landscape, and since the tropological structure can be applied to dissimilar spaces and temporalities, the cycle will always begin anew; the gyre will keep ceaselessly turning. This leads to Yeats’s ambivalence towards the utopian yet tragic possibilities embedded in the project of modernity. In this formal sense the beauty, the promise, of the revolutionary event is intimately tied to the tragedy of its ceaseless repetition.

Yeats’s ambivalent stance towards modernity, and its obverse, its constitutive other, coloniality, is particularly palpable in his “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” his long poem about the Irish internecine conflict (1922-1923). Structured in seven parts, the poem calls attention to a dislocated consciousness that ambivalently veers in time and space. The first part, “Ancestral Houses,” returns to the Yeatsian celebration of large states as places of continuous aesthetic cultivation. The poet describes these as spaces where “Life overflows without ambitious pains… / And never stoop to a mechanical / Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call” (CP, 200). Yet, in the context of generalized conflict, when the prerogative of the Anglo-protestant ascendancy are rapidly declining, the houses have become mere husks of their glorious past, an “empty sea-shell flung / Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams…. ” These spaces that had once served as sites of creativity are now in a rapid stage of degradation. Returning to an old trope, Yeats uses
the form of the rhetorical question as a space for the indictment of modernity:

O what if leveled lawns and graveled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?

In the same manner as “Upon a House shaken by Land Agitation,” Yeats worries that dynastic degeneration has lead to cultural degradation, and the violence that surrounds him is a palpable symptom of his worst fears.

Bringing the themes of the first poem closer to his spatial vicinity, the second movement is titled “My House,” thereby creating a semantic congruence with “Ancestral Houses.” This is—in concrete terms—the poet’s working space and is therefore a kind of ars poetica, a *myse en abyme* of Yeats’s meditations. Tellingly, he returns to the poetics of photomontage and depicts space in the process of accruing change:

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,
Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,
The sound of the rain or sound
Of every wind that blows;
The stilted water-hen
Crossing stream again
Scared by splashing of a dozen cows… (CP, 201).

Unlike the dizzying succession of images of “Easter, 1916,” here the effect is much more controlled. The images rapidly succeed one another, but they are caught in a state in between movement and stasis. The “ragged elms” and “thorns” are not alive; they are old, part of a senescent landscape where the only movement is one of primal fear. Like a civil war in which everyday life is static, the landscape that surrounds the poet’s house is in a state of senescence and regression. This degradation is palpable in the poem’s fourth
movement, “My Descendants,” which depicts how “the torn petals strew the garden plot; And there’s but common greenness after that” (CP, 203). For Yeats, a new commonness reigns over a degraded Irish State.

Which is to say that in these spatial meditations the poet’s ambivalence towards modernity and coloniality reaches metaphysical dimensions. If he once celebrated the utopian possibilities of Irish sovereignty, he is now deeply skeptical, and this leads to a poetic tone that veers in between vituperative rage and dejected anomie. In a passage that could serve as an imagistic primer for the whole of his “Meditations,” he yearns for destruction:

May this laborious stair and this stark tower
Become a roofless ruin that the owl
May build in the cracked masonry and cry
Her desolation to the desolate sky. (CP, 203)

Like a destructive character tearing down the structural beams and foundations of his poetic abode, the poet threatens to destroy the very space that houses his expression. It is a yearning for ruination that echoes a romantic plea for the elements to paradoxically continue the poet’s aesthetic project after his—and human society’s—inevitable demise.

In the most hauntingly honest and immediate section of the poem, “The Road at My Door,” Yeats presents himself as a pathetic, anachronistic figure; as a poet caught in between the threshold of an aestheticist interior and the exterior political realities that pass by his door:

An affable Irregular,
A heavily built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.

A brown lieutenant and his men,
Half dressed in national uniform,
Stand at my door, and I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,
A pear tree broken by the storm.

I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
To silence the envy in my thought;
And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream.     (CP, 204)

With effortless descriptions and deflationary language, Yeats is here beginning to
approach the aesthetics of commitment favored by Auden. The poet stands in the midst of
quarrelling factions, and yet he does not pass judgment. In fact, he is almost sympathetic
of them, and there is even jealousy in his description of warfare as “the finest play under
the sun.” Instead of criticizing the violence around him, the poet self-consciously turns
his violent language on his own expression, and he describes himself in pathetic terms: a
figure complaining about meaningless things to men caught in the grips of a real human
conflict. This effect is reinforced by the poet’s identification with a “moor-hen,” a
warbling bird swimming on a stream strewn with the debris of war. The poet retires to the
protection of his ivory tower, envious of the action, dejected by his own fallow
pensiveness. As he closes the door, perhaps he thinks about the poems he had written
celebrating revolutionary violence, or perhaps, for once, he surmises that poetry, being so
distant from the world of action, makes nothing happen.

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By conceptualizing Yeats’s public poems as meditative spaces I have attempted to
show not only the elements in his poetics which should be studied in the context of
decolonization and postcolonial theory, but also the limits and limitations of this strategy.
Indeed, as I read the corpus of postcolonial criticism on Yeats I began to suspect that
critics often elide the ways in which the poet remained skeptical of modernization and how he often refused to let go of a colonial mentality obsessed with land and ancestral houses. Edward Said, for instance, sublimes Yeats’s more embarrassing and ethically compromised politics—“his outright fascism, his fantasies of old homes and families, his incoherently occult divagations”—as “a particularly exacerbated example of the nativist (e.g. négritude) phenomenon…” (14). By foregrounding the more complex, indigestible features of Yeatsian poetics, I have shown that it is necessary to take stock of these features, and to conceptualize Yeats as a poet ultimately ambivalent about the project of modernity, and consequently, its residual and constitutive other: coloniality.

Nevertheless, the debate over Yeats’s status as a postcolonial poet does not take place in a vacuum, and the question has often been tied to the idea of Ireland as one of the first spaces marked by the narrative of postcolonization. As Colin Graham observes:

Basic to the problems inherent in Said’s notion of Ireland’s place in the post-colonial world is his unquestioned assumption that Ireland was colonised and decolonised in the same way as all other nations which have been formed from the demise of the British Empire (and those other nations too may find Said’s all-embracing model problematic)

(Graham, qtd. in McCarthy 2007, 320)

There is a larger, general argument underlying Graham’s critique of postcolonial studies: its supposed tendency towards homogenization. While this notion is generally problematic, it is indeed true that Ireland, as a metropolitan colony, should be considered a peculiar space that nonetheless bears the traces of the postcolonial moment. Peculiar because of two reasons, first because after the Act of Union (1800) Ireland had some semblance of representation in the House of Commons, and secondly, a large contingent of its population participated in the colonizing project in peripheral places like India and Africa. As Edna Longley writes, “although Ireland was… variously caught in imperial
systems, the Free State left the UK before it left the Commonwealth,” and she points as evidence a passage from Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Stephen Dedalus’s university classmates entering the exam for the Indian ‘civil’” (Longley 79). Consequently, postcolonial studies should consider the complexities of the Irish experience as both an aggrieved colonized space and a problematic participant in the Imperial project of colonization.

Longley is deeply skeptical of postcolonial studies, and as such her reflections tend to be reductive and dismissive of the valuable contributions postcolonial scholars have made to Yeatsian criticism. Nevertheless, her polemics elucidate some of the blind spots and aporias of postcolonial theory. Chief among these is the tendency to not properly historicize the context of literary creations and to elide the complicated ways authors remain deeply imbricated in coloniality. These regressive elements are present even as authors participate and advocate nationalist projects, since “coloniality survives colonialism” (Maldonado-Torres 243). Ironically, critics and theorists from radically dissimilar political camps, such as Walter Mignolo, usually coincide in Longley’s skepticism and critique of postcolonial theory. While Mignolo is a keen analyst of the resilient structures of colonialism and their imbrication in the modernist project, his merely gestural emphasis on an alter-native utopian project tends to opaque his larger critique of postcolonial studies. Part of the problem, as evidenced in Said’s seminal essay, is the tendency to focus on the emancipatory potential of a writer’s oeuvre, and to subsume the more unseemly traits of their artistic expression. Yet, it is in the contrast between these two poles, in between the spaces of progressive meditation and regressive ambivalence, where the real work of interpretation ultimately takes place.
Bibliography and Works Cited


While previous studies have provided immeasurable contributions towards the aesthetic appraisal of *Tropical Town and Other Poems* (1918)—a poetry collection which, like the ‘colossus of the north’ in which it was written, is both simple and complex—the collection nonetheless remains a truly rare document in both Nicaraguan and North American literatures. It is the product of a precocious poetic mind, written in an adopted tongue, in an incredibly labored style; one seemingly stuck in the stylistics of the Nineteenth century. Salomón de la Selva pens this collection while he witnesses the neocolonial marine presence in his native Nicaragua, living as an exile in the northeastern United States—an incipient empire undergoing one of its periodic isolationist fevers marked by bouts of racism and xenophobia. *Tropical Town* is a book written in between two lands and amid two warring cultures. It is a poetic document which evidences an incipient cultural *entre-choc*, and its exoticism and stylistic deficiencies are the product of political and cultural asymmetries.

In one of his most successful intertextual poems, the Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas enumerates and critiques a series of his fellow poets and their respective poetry collections. With the revealing title “Vade mecum,” the poem is a series of humorous aphorisms which synthesize the poetic essence of each collection using the language of the market; the idiosyncratic lingo of store vendors seeking to entice would-be shoppers. Salomón de la Selva’s second poetry collection, *El soldado desconocido* [*The Unknown Soldier*], is the first to receive this aphoristic treatment:

> Against ticks, mites, lice; for personal and/or domestic use (hair, armpits, the most intimate spaces, scissors, cots): powders of The unknown soldier. With a longer lasting effect than the most modern, volatile and dangerous sprays, its efficiency dates back to 1922. (*Poesía* 468-470)

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It is not surprising this incisive description is the first to receive Martínez Rivas’s humorous treatment. In fact, the language and ‘anti-poetic’ style he employs to describe

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22 Unless otherwise stated, all translation from the Spanish are my own.
this collection emanate, genealogically speaking, from the influence which de la Selva’s poetry collection exerted over Latin American literature. The lowly references to ticks and armpits echo the diaphanous, plain language used by de la Selva to describe the filth, the putrefying odors and the overall smell of death of the First World War. As he writes in one of the poems, “Poilu,” wherein he recreates the tired soldiers’ bodies after battle: “When I’ll remove my shoes / my feet will stink, and I will have humid and green-like / sores on the soles of my feet…” (8-10).

Published in Mexico in 1922, after his return from the bloody European trenches of WWI, The Unknown Soldier took some time to be fully appreciated and celebrated by the Spanish reading public. In fact, as Jorge Eduardo Arellano observes, the book received few reviews, and was even denounced as vulgar in his native Nicaragua (Arellano 25). Nonetheless, after some time it was recognized that the book is truly a pioneering example of the literary current of Vanguardismo in Latin American literature; a book which plainly anticipates the anti-poetic, realistic, pristine and committed language of the avant-garde. It has been praised by such luminaries such as Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and countless critics who attribute its originality to the influence of American poetry at the turn of the century. Thus, over the years the importance of this original collection has been cemented, and many underline the fact that The Unknown Soldier first appears in 1922, key year in world Modernism, with the publications of Joyce's Ulysses, "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot, and Trilce by Cesar Vallejo (Flores 21).

Although it is undeniable that The Unknown Soldier is indebted to the forms of an incipient American Modernism - indeed, the Selva personally met Ezra Pound during his stay in London - we would fall into tautologies if we overlook the first poetry collection
of this poet; a product of his residence on the east coast of the United States. Written in English, his adopted language, and published in New York in 1918 under the title *Tropical Town and Other Poems*, Salomón de la Selva's *opera prima* has fallen into oblivion. Critical studies in Spanish include Jorge Eduardo Arellano’s, the incisive study by Julio Valle-Castillo, and the introduction by Silvio Sirias, published in the collection’s re-edited version. Arellano emphasizes the importance of the movement known as *new american poetry* in the poetry of the young writer, Valle-Castillo for his part, dividing the career of the poet into two facets—that of the young experimenter of avant-garde forms and that of the adult, neoclassical and traditionalist poet—situates *Tropical Town* in the first phase, that of the proto-avant-garde poet (Valle-Castillo 35), while Sirias analyzes the influence of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, his first love, and diagnoses the young poet a syndrome À la Harold Bloom of "anxiety of influence," due to the immense modernist shadow of Rubén Darío looming over the young de la Selva (Sirias, "Introduction").

All these studies have contributed immeasurable contributions to the valorization of this collection that is at the same time, like the colossus of the north in which it was written, simple and complicated. And I typify this way, with these oxymoronic adjectives taken from Dario's famous “Ode to Roosevelt,” because *Tropical Town* is a real rarity in Nicaraguan literature, and even more so in American literature. It is the product of an extremely young and audacious poet who writes in an adoptive language, in a labored Nineteenth-century style, while living in a racist and xenophobic United States and remembering his battered Nicaragua under the neocolonialist boot. *Tropical Town* is a book written between two lands and in the middle of two opposing languages. It is a
poetic document that evidences the dawn of a regional, ultimately hemispheric, entre-
choc, and its deficiencies and exoticisms are the product of political as well as cultural
asymmetries.

In synthesis, Tropical Town and other Poems is divided into four sections. Among these, the one that has received the most attention is "My Nicaragua," in which the Selva elaborates costumbrista images of the sleepy streets of his native León, and in which the nostalgia of the exiled poet is particularly poignant. It could be said that what the 22-year-old poet elaborates are bucolic postcards, crafted using Nineteenth-century metric forms to establish a cross-cultural dialogue with the American people. For example, the poem “Tropical Rain” personifies the torrential rain of the Nicaraguan winter as a witch who "keeps all the worlds in her bag and blows the heavens away" (1-3). After the storm passes, the poet paints a scene full of playful beauty and tropical detritus:

And the streets swollen like rivers, and the wet
earth’s smell.
And all the ants with sudden wings filling the
heart with wonder,
And, afar, the tempest vanishing with stifled
thunder
In a glare of lurid radiance from the gaping
mouth of Hell!

An immense mystery surrounds the streets of León. The poet colors the storm with a tenebrous brush and transforms the tropical voluptuousness using neo-gothic and symbolist brushstrokes. Although the poem has aspects associated with American modernism, such as concern for the image and the search for diaphanous language, the motifs, motifs and theme of the poem belong to that of the Nineteenth-century Pre-
Raphaelites or Victorian Symbolists.
While there are many Spanish-speaking studies dedicated to *Tropical Town*, few American scholars have tackled the aesthetic contradictions of this collection. The exception is Steven White, who has set the tone in the analysis of the stylistic dilemma prevailing the first collection of the Nicaraguan poet (915-921). White focuses on an article signed by Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the Dominican critic with whom de la Selva maintained a long friendship. Published in Cuba in 1919, Ureña's article relates the close friendship between both intellectuals and draws rich images of the Nicaraguan’s political vocation (Ureña 293-299). But it is precisely this brief article which reveals de la Selva’s aesthetic universe and its gravitation towards exoticism in *Tropical Town*. "So far, in truth, it has to be said that Selva has not decided to break with the Nineteenth century," reports Ureña, "the framework of his inspirations begins in Keats and Shelley and reaches Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell." The latter, Thompson and Meynell, form part of the pre-Raphaelite Catholic revival which took place in England during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. Moreover, Ureña quotes a letter from the young poet in which he expresses the need to differentiate his poetry from the new currents, that is to say, from the Imagists and Modernists, whom he considers, at best, a passing fad.

"Poets under thirty are legion," he writes to Ureña. "Among them, the best are Edna St. Vincent Millay and Stephen Vincent Benet ... These - and I with them - return to the traditional forms of English verse. We represent the continuity requested by Alice Meynell in her famous essay "Decivilized" (Ureña 297). As Jorge Eduardo Arellano explains in his study of de la Selva, White was the first researcher to identify this essay.
In short, one could say that White's finding reveals more ambiguities in the aesthetic conception of the young poet. Here is the most execrable fragment of Meynell's article:

Especially from new soil—remote, colonial—he faces you, bronzed, with a half conviction of savagery, partly persuaded of his own youthfulness of race. He writes, and recites, poems about ranches and canyons; they are designed to betray the recklessness of his nature and to reveal the good that lurks in the lawless ways of a young society. He is there to explain himself, voluble, with a glossary for his own artless slang. But his colonialism is only provincialism very articulate.

The aristocratic tone, the racism which bubbles under her prose, even the ignorance of Meynell’s text, all of these are somewhat understandable in a conservative temperament; in a mind constellated by the white man’s burden, which was propagates as Imperialist propaganda by Victorian society. What is surprising is the attraction towards this demagogic text when expressed by a poet who has suffered and lived through the legacy of imperialism and neocolonialism. It is highly surprising since de la Selva simultaneously declares himself against the North American occupation of Nicaragua, and expresses support of both progressive and socialist causes (Valle-Castillo 30). The paradox remains, and what is not up for debate is that de la Selva sides with Meynell’s senescent, traditionalist aesthetics.

However, after analyzing Meynell's essay in its entirety, it is possible to draw a sketch of a response as to why the Selva subscribes to this decidedly traditional and even anti-avant-garde project. Speaking of American poets, Meynell concedes that "they have had some delicate successes when it comes to continuing some of English literature." But the Englishwoman harshly criticizes "the applause that has encouraged Americans to write poems in prose and paint panoramic landscapes,” and advocates "the fine and admirable continuity that only delicacy can guide in a sustainable way." It is a call which the Selva undertakes with singular obedience. In 1915 he publishes in the aristocratic
magazine *The Forum* his "Tale of the country of the fairies," an extensive poem which he also decided to include in *Tropical Town*.

The poem can be described as an extended allegory or metaphor in which the poet elaborates an *ars poetica* aimed against the new poetic currents. Written in paired verses in iambic pentameter and rigid consonant rhyme, the poem tells the story of a poet who weaves a delicate tapestry adorned with "symbols, such as those worshiped by the magician Merlin / a cross, a flock of lambs, a flock of doves "(13-14). The poet writes his delicate verses in a tapestry for the brave king, and goes to the palace to offer his majestic masterpiece. But at the door of the palace awaits a figure who destroys his lofty aspirations:

A critic met me at the guarded door.  
"’Twill do,” he said, “to clean the kitchen floor;  

“Or else, perhaps, to garb the lowly head  
Of kitchen wenches, for, you see,” he said  

“The colors are too gaudy and the style  
Is obsolete.” –His lips were black with bile.  

“The subject is antique; you should have fraught  
Your pretty dreams with valiant, modern thought.”

De la Selva continues his allegory of the poetic tapestry and reports that the hungry poet is vindicated, as his tapestry of traditional verses adorns the bodies of the Greek heroes and becomes the sacred blanket of the Magdalena, and finally serves as a garment for Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

The poem has a bucolic, pastoral tone and its metaphorical conception is extremely simple, even naive. The poem was selected as one of the best of the year by the African-American critic William Braithwhite, who, like the young de la Selva, was an
advocate of traditional forms and universal themes (Aberjani and West 40). On the other hand, the opinion of modernist poets and critics about *Tropical Town* was much less enthusiastic. The only criticism published in English consists of a short synopsis published by the *New York Tribune* and signed by the modernist poet Orrick Johns. "The poetry of Solomon de la Selva, Nicaragua's official poet," writes Johns, "escapes me. I suspect he's one of those endangered birds, an ego unafraid." With a curt and condescending language, Johns dismisses the Nicaraguan as a poetastes who writes trifles, and concludes in a devastating way calling him a mountebank.

The venomous opinion of Johns contrasts with that of the Latin American critic Pedro Henríquez Ureña. In the previously cited article, Ureña applauds his poetry and exalts "the poetic elements that are not common in American literature: warm images and verbal melody." For the Dominican critic, "the American imagination gravitates toward realism, towards clear and unadorned concepts" and conjectures that the attraction of the young Solomon of the Forest to the traditional forms of English poetry is because England" with its imaginative poets and great wizards of rhythm ... is much closer than North America to the culture and the tastes of Latin America" (Ureña 296). In addition to offering this hypothesis, Ureña tells a story of crucial importance in the life of the poet. Citing an article from the *New York Tribune*, Ureña recounts the unique political courage of the Nicaraguan during the gala night in celebration of Pan Americanism at the National Arts Club in New York in February 1917. Among the distinguished audience were numerous intellectuals and as a guest of honor, former President Theodore Roosevelt. After a series of boring speeches and praises to the Pan-American unity, de la Selva took to the podium, and instead of continuing the false exordiums towards an
asymmetric and unjust Pan-Americanism, he pointed an accusative finger toward the ex-

president, creator of the expansionist policy of the "Big Stick," and vehemently
denounced the occupation in Nicaragua. According to the newspaper report, Roosevelt
grumbled and grunted, visibly upset.

The incident, as well as the exoticisms of *Tropical Town*, as well as the cold
reception by American critics, are evidence of an incipient cultural entre-choc. In
metaphorical terms, during this period de la Selva builds a sublime podium or pediment
made of traditional poetic forms from which seeks to establish a dialogue with the
colossus of the north. Instead of following the experimental path of the modernists, the
Selva chooses the traditional route, hoping to communicate his marginal identity, and to
signal the abuses of American expansionism. In other words, as a text interdict between
languages, territories, cultures and aesthetic forms, *Tropical Town* presents numerous
issues related to postcolonial discourse or theory. These include mimesis and mimicry,
hegemonic discourses, asymmetries between centers and margins, the crisis of
representation, and the tireless quest for sovereignty and authenticity of marginal
identities.

All these problems persist in today's literary landscape, and *Tropical Town*—

despite its Nineteenth-century exoticisms—represents a cornerstone of twentieth-century
Spanish and American literatures. Disillusioned by his poetic career and from the United
States, de la Selva enlisted in the British Army, participated in World War I, and then
published *The Unknown Soldier*, his masterpiece. Gone are the precious verses, the
unshakable faith in the power of poetry, and the poet's conception of the immortal bard
and bearded prophet. Anticipating the austere verdict of the Marxist critic Theodor
Adorno, who famously declared that it is not possible to write poetry after the horrors of Auschwitz, Salomón de la Selva, after witnessing the barbarism of the first mechanized war on a global scale, is momentarily divorced from the exoticism he had cultivated in *Tropical Town.*
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Modernist Acceleration and the Poetics of the Instant

This chapter describes how literary works both replicate and re-function the artist’s ontogenetic mediation with the playful structures of human culture as they confront the mute temporality of natural history. As a literary mode, the poetics of the instant re-play for the reader the poet’s rushing awareness of the fragility of human culture (and its externalized semiotic structures) vis-à-vis the cosmic precariousness and unfathomable exuberance of natural history. Moreover, the instant captures the individual poet’s formal limitations when it comes to framing both the macro-historical landscape of natural history in tandem with the specific, micro-temporal range of the poet’s historical position. After engaging in several readings of poems around the discourse of temporality—from the post-romantic mode of Wallace Stevens, the confessional poetics of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, to Derek Walcott’s postcolonial poetry—this chapter proposes the poetics of the instant as a novel way of conceptualizing rhythmic mediation, individuation, and literary representation beyond the strictures of standardized critical debates around the vexed issues of modernist acceleration and temporality.

Life does not flow along a slope on the axis of objective time that would serve as its channel. Although it may be a form imposed upon time’s successive instants, life always finds its primary reality in an instant.

—Gaston Bachelard, Intuition of the Instant

Today’s postmodern subjects—precarious inhabitants of the Anthropocene—are facing a multitude of crises, and yet I would argue that this set of anxieties are structured around a singular crisis or temporal gap; the ever-growing gulf between sensuous embodiment and symbolic representation; the aporia between, on the one hand, that which is objectively public, and that which is idiosyncratically subjective, on the other. In other words, traditional modes seem to lag behind the dizzying, accelerating rhythms of modern technology and media. Under the constraints of speed, individuation and identity-formation become clunky and unresponsive; as intersubjective processes, they become easy prey to the predatory forces of commodification, ever more unable to keep up with
the accelerating environment. Reviewing this inventory of mimetic strategies seemingly exhausted by a contemporary “situation [that] yields both unremarkable and unutterable signs,” McKenzie Wark enumerates a series of questions that circumscribe what concerns us here:

How are these signs to be read? How are these flickering images to be experienced? … Could there be pedagogy of how to construct situations that enable particular desires to be communicable and which make desirable certain kinds of communication? Could there even be, not a knowledge, but perhaps a sensibility, of what is and isn’t communicable, of how communication at the limit can remain free from centralized control?²³

Along with Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, Wark argues for a re-calibration of the limits of mediation. They turn the problem of communication on its head and argue that if communication itself “always seems to happen in the shadow of a lost immediacy with the totality,” then it follows that the process itself is predicated on what is left outside, on exclusions and limitations. As the dark precursor, excommunication excludes what cannot be properly conveyed, but which nonetheless remains encrypted as the rhythmic shadow of communication.

Looking awry at the more contemporary ramifications of our ongoing temporal crisis, the following reflection approximates the vexed idea of perceiving temporality ‘from the outside’ to conceptualize a poetic mode that limns the instant, limit or horizon of a subject’s perception of temporality. The poetics of the instant, in other words, describe how literary works both replicate and re-function the artist’s ontogenetic mediation with the playful structures of human culture as they confront the mute resilience of natural history. As a literary mode, the instant re-plays for the reader the poet’s rushing awareness of the fragility of human culture (and its externalized semiotic

structures) vis-à-vis the cosmic precariousness and unfathomable exuberance of natural history. Beyond the strictures of a Bergsonian theory of duration, the poetics of the instant describe the individual poet’s formal limitations when it comes to framing both the macro-historical landscape of natural history in tandem with the specific, micro-temporal range of the poet’s historical position.

**Counter-Rhythm and Repose**

While the types of questions posed by “the controversial German philosopher” of political kinetics and autogenetic vessels, Peter Sloterdijk, for instance, can guide us a long way towards the kind of thinking required by modernity’s accelerating situation, his framing tends to be willfully provocative and ambiguous. Moreover, his prescriptions for society’s high-speed pathologies are often as vague as they are seductive. In the words of Hartmut Rosa and William S. Scheuerman, for Sloterdijk

both earlier versions of critical theory ultimately failed because they misunderstood and uncritically supported the kinetic forces of modernity, which set everything in motion until they ultimately achieve a state of ‘total mobilization’ (‘*totale Mobilmachung*’), a warlike state where everything is determined by the logic of speed.24

Rosa and Scheuerman conclude that while it is true that Sloterdijk’s polemical argument is “overtly speculative, unsystematic,” and unempirical, it nevertheless manages to capture the discontinuity between “systemic macro- and individual micro-level perspectives on social experience.” In more succinct terms, it becomes “notoriously difficult,” if not outright contradictory, “to disclose how systemic or functional needs (for

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example, the imperatives of growth and acceleration in capitalist economies) are translated into cultural perspectives as well as individual orientations toward action.”

Put another way, for Sloterdijk the imperative is to conceptualize a non-reactive ethical framework, one nimble enough to both detach and transform itself as it faces the retroactive consequences of an accelerating capitalist rhythm. The problem is one of systemic blind spots, of unexpected encounters and directions:

And though one says that one is part of everything,
There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.

In these lines, from the aptly titled poem “The Course of a Particular,” the American poet Wallace Stevens synergizes the individual’s alienation from a system that seems to run automatically—a phylogenetic trajectory that moves against the grain of an individual, all too fleeting, perspective. In poetic terms, this phenomenon is genealogically tied to the sublime communion with nature of the Romantic tradition—a kind of poetic historicism, in which “one says that one is part of everything” but simultaneously confirms, “that the historical world is only a graveyard of enthusiasms.” What this alienated perspective discloses is not only the gap between the subject and the socius, but the cleavage between a precarious human perspective and the natural history. From what presents itself as a non- or de-humanized perspective, the American poet anthropomorphizes the precariousness of leaves as they cry in the silent winter. Paradoxically, however, “It is not

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25 High-Speed Society, 15
a cry of divine attention, / Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry. / It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.”

What Stevens offers his readers in this particular poetic trajectory is a kind of negative representation, a mimetic conveyance that comes close to the liminal mode McKenzie Wark identifies as xenocommunication. As a “paradox of communicating with or as the incommunicable…” xenocommunication traces “a kind of iridescent arc in negative, an immediate experience of a kind of radical (in)difference, which is so excessive that its effect is traumatic on mere human receivers.”

Although Stevens often comes close “to that tendency that descends from the fringe romantics and the Surrealists, which puts the weird on the outside of a hierarchical order of communication,” he nonetheless feels obliged to manage this excess—the cry that concerns no one at all—through a secularized background that both determines human agency and creates the condition for a silent, if minimal, redemption. In this formal sense, Stevens recuperates the possibility of communication by appealing to a kind of meditative slowness or repose, and excludes the residual excess of immediacies and rhythmic disconnections.

In short, the poet from New Haven allows his poetry to oscillate in the threshold of the expressionless, but since he remains in a post-Romantic paradigm, he does not unmask his own (disembodied) voice in the same way in which he de-personalizes human culture vis-à-vis the natural landscape. It is a paradoxical outcome since Stevens does come close to the liminal mode of de-personalization I am calling the poetics of the instant. Close, and yet not close enough, because as we shall see, the poet must first

28 “Furious Media,” 162.
29 “Furious Media,” 165.
foreground her mask—her personality, her subjectivity, her voice—before carrying on with the process of capturing the instant.

**Excursus: Mobility and Peripatetic Poetics**

Since I risk getting ahead of myself, it is worthwhile to use the third movement of this trajectory to both review and recalibrate the issues I have sketched have thus far. Facing an increasingly perilous, high-speed, global, capitalist mode of production, the larger social totality—the macro level, with its own meta-human prerogatives, economic goals, and commodity futures—functions at an accelerating rhythm, one which is out of sync with the micro level, the rhythm of individual lives. Reviewing the asymmetry of this ‘rhythmic course,’ Bernard Stiegler recapitulates the problem as one brought about by a rampant process of exteriorization:

> the exteriorization of memory [as] a loss of memory and knowledge, has today become the stuff of everyday experience in all aspects of our existence, and, more and more often, in the feeling of our *powerlessness*, if not of our *impotence*, our *obsolescence*—at the very moment when the extraordinary *mnesc* power of digital networks makes us aware of the immensity of human memory, which appears to have become infinitely recoverable and accessible.\(^{30}\)

To Stiegler’s overtly acerbic diagnosis I would add that the speed and “power of the digital” contaminates, as it were, not only a vexed present, but also the way in which we frame and read the past, insofar as we can now anticipate the accelerating contemporary situation in the anxious writings of the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

If Nietzsche presciently conceives of a speculative ‘science of walking’ and frolics, a study of keeping one’s pace, in *The Joyful Science*, Freud’s speculative phase, in-between an economic and a topographic model of the psyche, with his suggestion of a

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\(^{30}\) *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, 29-30.
blind *pulsion*—a yearning for internal stability that gravitates towards death and the inert—anticipates the effects of this accelerating trajectory as it feedbacks into the lagging recesses of the modern subject. In attempting to go *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud indeed misses his mark but his missteps nonetheless identify the ensembles of repetition, or as he calls them elsewhere, the discontinuous rhythms and habits of the subject. Attracted to the biological concept of stability or homeostasis, according to which the organism regulates the “qualitative thresholds of pleasure and unpleasure,” Freud hypothesizes “that the mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant.”

Recalling an sphygmomanometer (*systole/diastole*), Freud’s concept can be described as a mechanism of over-compensation, insofar as the subject—under the aegis of a rhythmic play (*fort/da*)—negotiates his mastery of the surround through a compulsion to repeat, which exhibits “to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some ‘daemonic’ force at work.” 31

As Freud admits, this ‘daemonic’ power, which gravitates towards inertia, the inorganic, and towards death, seemingly contradicts the drive towards self-preservation. And while the psychoanalyst’s discovery of this negative pulsion or drive is not sufficiently fleshed out, it does map on to the idea of natural history operating as an unconscious rhythmic force operating under the subject’s (conscious) line of sight.

In his peripatetic poem “Skunk Hour,” the poet Robert Lowell frames the virulence of this compulsion as he drives around the post-WWII American suburban landscape:

> One dark night,

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my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;  
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
they lay together, hull to hull,  
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .  
My mind’s not right.

A car radio bleats,  
“Love, O careless Love. . . .” I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .  
I myself am hell;  
nobody’s here—  

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes’ red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.  

A Freudian reading of these three tenebrous stanzas would perhaps focus on the poet’s melancholia and paranoid perception. One might even point to Lowell’s biography, to his mental collapse during the 1950s, and to the childhood traumas born in the bosom of his patrician upbringing. In fact, given Lowell’s ‘confessional poetics,’ the literary psychoanalyst might argue that this feverish focus on the poet’s personality is entirely warranted, since the poem’s legibility increases under the light of his creator’s biography.

While this reading is attractive, it nonetheless loses sight of the cosmic, abstract movement described in Lowell’s ambulatory poem. That is, while the poet does foreground his mask—his personality, his confessions—he does so precisely to remove his semblance; to unmask his voice as it arrives at the limits of temporal representation. “From the anxiety of base contact, which it can only experience as dissolution, the ego stumbles into the ennui of autonomy, the antechamber to a harsh despair…”

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a non-human view of the “nothingness of winter,” Lowell’s poem display’s the subject in the grips of an abstract, de-personalized arrhythmia—as the treadmill of the socius accelerates, the subject overcompensates for his loss of mastery. Unable to keep up with the surrounding accelerating spectacle, the poet exorcizes himself from his surroundings by freezing the instant, and projects the residues of his perception onto the mute animality of a mother skunk, marching in unison with her “column of kittens,” as it “jabs her wedge-head in a cup /of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, / and will not scare.”

To recapitulate, the poet acquires the necessary distance to reflect on his own entire condition by re-modeling the “engine of the will-to-utopia," and by coming to grips with the exhaustive role it has played in both his singular life and in the trajectory of the socio-historical totality (both onto- and phylogenetically). That is to say, this engine, pulsion, or force, operates both in the intimacy of individual lives, and in the macrocosmic scale of the species. If Freud identifies this dark precursor as the death drive or Thanatos, Nietzsche wryly calls it “the genius of the species,” while more recently, Michel Foucault settled on the value-neutral concept of ‘biopower.’ Finally, this whole conception of perceiving reality as an accelerating process (brought about by stepping outside one's particular history) is also self-recursive, insofar as the literary work imitates both the collective trajectory of the species, as well as the strangeness of this shared history as it rushes through the subject's internal, intimate experience of the representational process. In Joseph Brodsky’s elegant phrasing, “Since the poet follows a phonetic trail, even what we might call a phonetic image, when you memorize his poem you repeat the whole process of his own creation from the beginning.”

In the Waiting Room: Temporality and the Problem of Scale

Our focus throughout has remained within an Anglo-European perspective, and what could be described—despite Lowell’s brief Catholic conversion—as a North American, specifically New England, protestant poetic tradition. Consequently a few words are in order; words best arranged by Derek Walcott:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that grey vault. The sea. The sea has locked them up. The sea is History.

First there was the heaving oil, heavy as chaos; then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel, and that was Genesis. Then there were the packed cries, the shit, the moaning;

Exodus.
…³⁵

Mixing before and after, and blurring the lines between mythology and history, Walcott’s proleptic answer to the questions posed by these invisible “Sirs” begins to grasp the confusion of European historiography, which violently enslaves the local and the peripheral to an indexical pedigree. Confusing the temporal with the spatial allowed the Anglo-European mentality to cast the non-European

as non-synchronic, out of sync, trapped in states of incomplete development. The hypothesis of cultural anachronism made it possible for Europeans to deny the synchronicity of other people they shared the world with, and so to refuse to engage with them in political terms.³⁶

In other words, Walcott’s poetic reflection uncovers the organizing process of European mimesis, whereby events are quickly gleaned and archived through canonical categories, in this case theological (i.e. biblical) ones. Just as the ‘discovery’ of the Caribbean was quickly integrated into the corpus of Christian redemption, the poet re-calibrates this process through an ironic process of anagrammatization. At the end of this asymmetrical exchange the series of complex and particular local histories are quickly swapped for two biblical typologies: Genesis and Exodus.

It is a reduction process that instantiates in verse what Erich Auerbach describes as the hidden current running under the language of the gospels. He writes, “What considerable portions of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles describe, what Paul’s Epistles also often reflect, is unmistakably the beginning of a deep subsurface movement, the unfolding of historical forces.”37 Auerbach recognizes this almost automatic process of ‘historism’ as the culmination of a bi-directional process. In the case of Walcott’s poem, the result mobilizes the typologies of the Christian texts and imposes them against the local rhythms and patterns underlying the peripheral Caribbean landscape. In short, Auerbach’s conception of Christian figuration, and Walcott’s idiosyncratic mobilization of this process of superimposition, can be understood in political terms as the bi-directional management of temporality.

Similarly, and perhaps most poignantly, Saussure’s anagrammatic investigations retroactively replay this mental process that decants kernels or secret rhythms from a text, and then regroups these ‘mental compressions’ or anagrams into temporal and indexical

37 *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (44).
categories. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard describes Saussure’s process thusly:

> Here, the thread of meaning is quite different: it splits the manifest body and follows the body beneath the body, like the anagram which follows the model of the dispersal and resolution of a first term or corpus whose secret is another articulation than that which runs beneath discourse and traces something (a name, a formula) whose absence haunts the text. It is this formula of the body which defies the anatomical body, that the knife describes and resolves. It is certain that the efficacy of the sign, its symbolic efficacy in primitive societies, far from being ‘magical’, is bound up with this extremely precise labour of anagrammatical resolution.38

Baudrillard is much maligned these days for his supposed obfuscations and obscurantism, and while this may be true about his latter intellectual phase, here he limns Saussure’s process of anagrammatization in words that not only scintillate with pregnant suggestion, but which also explain the process of deconstruction as the differential of differences in a text. What a text offers us is an ecstatic body writing its thought-patterning process, not events themselves, but the rhythm or arrangement of a body in space, a body that spatializes time in the form of what Benjamin calls nonsensuous similarities. A contemporary reader of Lowell and Stevens might try to find anagrammatic keys under their poems, and they might not be faulted for finding such anagrams as ‘aristocratic, postcolonial, modern, ecological, aesthetic anxiety, cold war, masculine,’ and indeed, multiple reading strategies have formed around these compressed readings.

If Walcott’s cartographic perspective surveys the peripheral rhythms running under the Anglo-European spatialization of history, the poet Elizabeth Bishop manages to convey the body’s fleeing perspective of the instant—a ‘view from above or the outside’—as she sits “In the Waiting Room” of history:

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But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them,
Why should you be one, too?

... 
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.
Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one?

It is difficult to think of a more cogent exploration of the poetics of the instant than what
Bishop offers us here, the remainder of an ontogenetic confrontation with the
phylogenetic engine of individuation. Like the Joycean epiphany, this view from above or
from an ‘outside’ perspective is closely linked to the Nietzschean Eternal Return, insofar
as it consists of the ‘highest thought’ (I knew that nothing stranger... could ever happen),
and moreover, because the subject must inevitably return after she confronts this a-
signifying border or limit:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.39

The emphasis on dating is striking, insofar as it gives it the air of a concrete, personal
experience, but it also makes it part of a larger calendar of Anglo-European civilization.
And yet the civilization that depends on this calendar is not only in the process of

destroying itself (*The war was on. Outside...*), but more importantly, its historical preeminence is now recognizable as an anxious question mark; a question mark whose borders are the yellow frames of a *National Geographic* magazine. WWI marks both the turning point in European historicism, since it becomes clear that *all* civilizations will eventually end, and it also marks the time when the postcolonial gaze can no longer be cast away to the past, but must be recognized within the horizon of a heterogeneous present. What is achieved is thus a twofold movement, wherein the subject recognizes the contingencies of history seared in her person, as well as her ability to stand outside this structure and to view it *through* the poetics of the instant. In Sloterdijk’s felicitous phrase, the poetics of the instant mediate “the fact that, throughout evolution, man became more than a living machine, but also a sort of machine of the spirit, insofar as he formed the possibility, in thought, of thinking and of letting the world emerge as world.”40

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What I have struggled to come to terms with in the preceding reflection could perhaps be circumscribed as an answer to the problem of scale, and historical temporality. By ‘problem of scale’ I mean a crisis in mimetic modes, modes that seem unable to stretch themselves wide enough over the immense valleys of modern subjectivity vis-à-vis the vexed trajectories of history, culture, and evolutionary biology. The most prevalent paradigms in the humanities seem unable to descry this cleavage between the macro- and micro- levels of experience, since they privilege typologies of reduction and procedures of ‘hermeneutic detection,’ which though valuable and indispensable, are liable to lose sight of the vexed economy between the

40 *Neither Sun Nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 116.
heterogeneousness of lived experience and the homogenizing impositions of the linguistic sign. Recognizing the importance of rhythm as an ‘a-signifying regime’ that boils under the apparent authority of the signifier is thus of maximal importance, insofar as it can be described as the ethical cleavage between the social or compulsory and the spontaneous or idiosyncratic. As Auerbach explains, “what happens in that moment—be it outer or inner processes—concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common.”

An emphasis on the temporality of the instant is therefore “an attempt to define a particular site by the exteriority of its vicinity; rather than trying to reduce the other to silence, by claiming that what they say is worthless…”

Since the biological theory of recapitulation has long been considered specious, I would like to offer a few words for why I think it is necessary to re-conceptualize it as a phenomenological and aesthetic mode of cultural reciprocity. Admittedly, it seems curious to revive a mentality so steeped in the anthropological reductions of European anthropology in the form or guise of an ethico-poetic process of micro/macro rhythmic reciprocity. Indeed, one can argue that the specter of European biologism reaches a crescendo with Ernst Haeckel’s uncanny anatomical progressions. And the idea that ontogeny replicates phylogeny sounds like orthodox Marxism to contemporary ‘cognitive’ sensibilities; the same goes with Freud’s recourse to ethnography in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Totem and Taboo. The Eurocentric arched eyebrow, The Golden Bough, incest, parricide, and the stench of formaldehyde emanating from the anthropomorphic embryos—everything reeks of obsolescence. The poetics of the instant

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41 Mimesis, 552.
42 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 17.
does not leave any of this aside, it is not about transcending this historicity, but to recognize it as the discourse of a provincialized mentality coming to terms with the macrocosmic dimensions of its idiosyncratic locality.\textsuperscript{43} It is also ethical, insofar as the instant mobilizes the memory of European colonialism and technological ‘development’ in tandem with the disappearance of historicism and Eurocentric teleological projects.

Apart from the poets discussed above, and in addition to the writings of Benveniste, Sloterdijk, Saussure, Auerbach, and Foucault, one should mention thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard, and the Brazilian philosopher Pinheiro dos Santos, as pioneers of the discourse on the instant, veritable explorers of ‘rhythmanalysis’ as a methodological procedure. And while Felix Guáttari castigates Roland Barthes as part of a tendency that “equates the elements of language and narrative segments with figures of expression, and thus confers on linguistic semiology a primacy over all semiotics,”\textsuperscript{44} one may hazard that he was unaware of Barthes’s last phase, and of his search for an economy of gestures and ‘idiorhythms’ in early forms of Christian community arrangements. In \textit{How to Live Together} Barthes tries to answer Nietszche’s question—‘Has anyone collected men’s experiences of living together—in monasteries, for example?’—by searching for the internalized rhythms, and for the confused subjectivity produced by bodies living together under the roof of externalized linguistic structures. Viewing the subject from above, or from outside, the postcolonial instant recapitulates the rhythmic genealogy of these antecedent investigations.

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\textsuperscript{43} Dipesh Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference}, (Princeton: Princeton Uni. Press, 2000). Chakrabarty observes that the “historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other ‘rude nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room” (8).

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm}, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995) 4-5.
It remains to be seen if it would be possible to run an experiment wherein a group of writers, all embarking in different—yet equally grueling—conceptual edifications and wild machinations, could be gathered in a communal space, a kind of dormitory perhaps, where they could be closely monitored; cameras could be installed, blood pressure recorded. Each writer would in turn have another writer, an ethnographer, closely monitoring his everyday rhythms. Group A would be instructed to resist any rapport with their assigned objects of study, while Group B—maybe living in a separate building?—would receive no further instructions. One can hypothesize flashes of grievances, sexual hiccups, long-term liaisons arising, but most likely a complete breakdown in the scientific purity and reliability of this control group. On the other hand, Group A would also be compromised, since the very presence of the ethnographers would turn them into invading voyeurs, thereby contaminating the reliability of the data.

Yet all of this would be for show.

The real purpose of the experiment would be to develop a study of ‘how communities live together,’ but this would not be revealed to the scientists themselves, providing them with plausible (scientifically sound) deniability. Yes, in this experiment it would be the hovering black globes judging everything, accruing data in their surveils, crunching loopholes and splicing streams of electrons while one writer fingers his assigned watchman, and another berates her mute ethnographer for the silence of his affront. The machine would record all, the writing and the non-writing, the shitting farting and groping that gets lost in the margins of books, in order to provide the literature a complete theory of multiple, maximized, homeostatic living. With the
exponential rate of discernment our recording devices have achieved it is safe to say that this experiment could be easily designed these days; perhaps it already has.
The Gothic Third World:  
Photography and the Poetics of Exclusion

The following is a series of meditations that both reflect and displace Benjamin and Kracauer’s critical discourse of modernity. While their ideas are usually understood as symptoms of the catastrophic historical situation in Weimar Germany, this essay attempts to inscribe their theories on to the accelerated processes of modernization that took place in the Third World during the last decades of the 20th century. By reading photographs from Susan Meiselas and Rafael Trobat and the poetry of Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas’s in constellation with Benjamin and Kracauer, this argument works through the logic of temporal and spatial superimposition, and elaborates a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image.

“Baudelaire had the good fortune to be the contemporary of a bourgeoisie that could not yet employ, as accomplice of its domination, such an asocial type as he represented. The incorporation of a nihilism into its hegemonic apparatus was reserved for the bourgeoisie of the twentieth century.”45 –Walter Benjamin

I. Opium and Cockaigne

Imagine a world where cooked pigs run around with knives on their backs, ready to be carved up for consumption. A world of infinite leisure, populated by fit and attractive humans, where sex is always available and work is not only frowned upon but also illegal. The weather is always temperate and contingencies are of the best and most entertaining kind: there are showers of gold, trees with overhanging branches brimming with warm apple pies, and jugs with never-ending wine for bibulous fiestas. This is the world of Cock-a-doodle or Cockaigne, the utopian land of plenty that emanates out of the life of hardship and scarcity of medieval peasant folk. Cockaigne allowed the masses to dream collectively and to playfully imagine a better life.46 In his haunting collection of

prose poems, *Paris Spleen*, the aging Charles Baudelaire evokes this mythical place in the context of 19th century Paris:

A true land of milk and honey, where all is beautiful, opulent, tranquil, honest; where luxury prides its orderliness; where life is rich, easy-going, altogether excluding disorder, turbulence, the unforeseen; where joy merges with quiet; where even cooking is poetic, at once plentiful and exciting; where everything my angel, resembles you.\(^47\)

Baudelaire adapts the medieval legend surrounded by the urban metropolis. In other words, he superimposes the cornucopian fairy-tale on the precariousness of the modern world. “Don’t you feel the feverish illness wrapping us in bleak misery,” he asks his beloved, “this nostalgia for a land we don’t know, the anguish of curiosity?” The disjunction between reality and the imagination, or better, the unbridgeable gulf between the Idea of utopia and the actuality of nineteenth-century Paris yields a pathos of loss and exclusion that cuts across the narrative of modernity. The poet yearns for a future without contingencies, where something as quotidian as cooking becomes an occasion for poetic fulfillment and artistic revelry. Instead of the immediacy embodied in the “forest of symbols” from his earlier poem “Correspondences,” the aporia—the aperture—between reality and fantasy cuts through Baudelaire’s posthumously published prose-poems.

Undeterred by the nostalgic pathos of his fantasy, the poet envisions this mythical, distant land in the debased reality of his squalid apartment. His urban furnishings become an intermediate zone, “where all is opulent, proper, gleaming, like a clean conscience, like magnificent kitchen utensils, like splendid gold-work, like gaudy-jewels!”\(^48\) Instead of merely re-producing the mythical land of Cockaigne, Baudelaire re-inscribes the


\(^{48}\) Baudelaire, *Spleen*, p. 34.
yearning for a land of plenty in the modern context. He brings the temporal preoccupations of modernity into the fairy-tale as he emphasizes the presence of brand new kitchenware and lurid jewels in this inorganic space. It seems that even fairy tales and legends gravitate towards the illusions of modernity, and Baudelaire does not stop this process, but instead accelerates it: the legends from the past become contaminated by the squalor of the present. In another prose poem from the collection, “Fairy-gifts,” the poet inverts this strategy and brings the world of reality or actuality—the world of the Parisian proletariat—closer to the world of legends, myths and fairy-tales. The prose poem tells the story of a “grand assembly of the Fairies,” gathered together to distribute their various gifts. Jarringly, even in the world of Fairies social injustice prevails, since “the power to attract fortune magnetically was allotted to a rich family…” whereas the Poetic gift is reserved for the son of a poor stonecutter “who could by no means aid in the development, or supply the needs, of his pitiable offspring.”

By superimposing reality onto utopia and vice-versa, Baudelaire reveals the dialectic between imaginary inscription and social exclusion.

Which is to say that in the modern period Cockaigne is relegated to the domain of fairy tales, child’s play, and nursery rhymes. With the advent of industrialization, the rigid stratification of feudalism is replaced by an equally hierarchical (and patriarchic) class system: the lords become robber barons and bourgeois magnates; the serfs become proletarians and the masses of the working class. But the fanciful idea of Cockaigne does not die. It is merely sublated by the forces of modernization, turning the naïve folklore into a powerful ideological construct. Whereas Cockaigne emanates out of peasant

bonfires, the new ideology is forged in the ironworks of mass entertainment, in the illustrated pages of the *Image d’Épinal*. In the intermediate market zone of the urban arcades, emblematic of nineteenth century Paris, and in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin identifies a “dialectical fairyland,” a place of monstrous hybrids where myth still palpitates, however tenuously, under the capitalist onslaught of the inorganic.

Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer finds the fairy-tale logic of Cockaigne in the illustrated newspapers of Weimar Germany. “After the twilight of the gods,” he writes in “The Mass Ornament” the gods did not abdicate: the old nature within and outside man continues to assert itself.”⁵⁰ His starkly titled essay “Photography,” is preceded by an enigmatic epigraph from the Brothers Grimm version of “The Land of Cockaigne:”

“In the days of cock-a-doodle I went and saw Rome and the lateran hanging from a silk thread. I saw a man without feet outrunning a swift horse and a sharp, sharp sword cutting a bridge in two.”

“This is what the film diva looks like,”⁵¹ Kracauer writes in the essay’s opening paragraph, immediately after the Brothers Grimm quotation, which suggests that the epigraph is meant as a superimposition of the fairy-tale onto the image of the diva. The diva bears the semblance of the land of plenty; she embodies the possibility of a realm beyond this debased world of repetition and social exclusion. Embedded in networks of production and consumption, the diva emerges recognized as semblance from the dot-matrix of the illustrated newspaper. She comes from a land of fairy-tales as an ideological construct of glitzy plenitude. The diva is glittery semblance, the thick pseudo-luster that adorns the world of commodities.

⁵¹ Kracauer, *Ornament*, p.47
Instead of elevating the absurd logic of Cockaigne, Kracauer uses the legend to disrupt and destabilize his own analysis of Weimar culture. In the process, both Cockaigne and the harsh, often similarly absurd realities of everyday life become irrevocably intertwined. Fantasy and lived experience crash, beyond recognition. In their writings, Benjamin and Kracauer transpose this operation and elaborate a discourse that foregrounds this process of superimposition in order to reveal the parallels between processes of inscription and exclusion. It is a critical program that conceptualizes photography as the quintessential space of modernity and its multifarious contradictions. If History—as the opiate peddled by the ruling class to hide the harsh realities of economic exploitation—is the photograph, Cockaigne—as the utopian possibility of a better life—is the photographic negative. Behind the photographs there is an alternative history that unravels the genealogy behind the pedigree.52

The following is a series of meditations that both reflect and displace Benjamin and Kracauer’s critical discourse of modernity. While their ideas are usually understood as symptoms of the catastrophic historical situation in Weimar Germany, this essay attempts to inscribe their theories on to the accelerated processes of modernization that took place in the Third World during the last decades of the 20th century. By reading photographs from Susan Meiselas and Rafael Trobat and the poetry of Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas’s in constellation with Benjamin and Kracauer, this argument works through the logic of temporal and spatial superimposition, and elaborates a poetics of exclusion as a tentative discourse on the utopian potential of the photographic image.

II. The Diva and the Dot-Matrix

In a way, Siegfried Kracauer uses the medieval legend of Cockaigne as an ornament for his meditation on the modern medium of photography. He only cites the first four lines of the story and does not elaborate on the mythical land in the body of the essay. And yet Cockaigne hangs (by an ideological silk thread, as it were) over his untimely meditation. Moreover, in “The Mass Ornament”—a meditation on modern aesthetics, which should be read in tandem with the “Photography” essay—53—he returns again and again to the language of fairy-tales, and uses it as heuristic tool to explain his larger argument about mass culture. Crucially, Kracauer complicates common assumptions about fairy-tales and reveals instead their bifurcated potential as vehicles for both ideological normativity and radical de-familiarization. On the positive side—as far as social and political changes are concerned—fairy-tales carry a message of fairness, and they are inherently moralistic and didactic since they “are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice.” In fairy-tales, “natural power is defeated by the powerlessness of the good; fidelity triumphs over the arts of sorcery.”54 Cinderella triumphs over her evil stepmother and over her garrulous stepsisters; her hard work and humility are timely remunerated; justice is ultimately served.

This bifurcated constitution becomes an important theoretical consideration in Kracauer’s analysis of reason under late capitalism. Like fairy-tale justice, reason is double-pronged. It leads to liberty and justice but also to limited concepts that exclude and reify reality. Reason under capitalism, for Kracauer, turns into ratio, a programmatic,

54 Kracauer, Ornament, p. 80.
normative use of reason that attempts to inscribe reality by excluding much of what it frames as such. Capitalism uses reason up to a point, “it rationalizes not too much rather too little.” For Kracauer, fairy-tales are merely a step in the process of demythologization that characterizes history. Capitalism is also a stage in this process of demythologization, but like fairy-tales, capitalist narratives rationalize within the constrained logic of their own closed systems. The mass ornament—the Tiller girls hovering as limbs over the dissipated crowd of spectators—reifies the human image and enlists the masses by revealing itself as a “mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction.”

Like the mass ornament, the photograph burrows in the interstices between radical change and temporal continuity.

In The Burden of Representation Victor Tagg frames the photography as a medium imbricated, from the start, in the logic of capitalist consumption. Tagg argues that during the genesis of what we now know as photography, a number of trajectories were possible, but the development gravitated towards the readily exploitable and consumable; the relation between capitalism and photography was faithfully seared onto the pages of history. It is therefore difficult to conceive of one without the other. Kracauer’s originality lies in the fact that he extrapolates this diagnosis and stretches it to its logical conclusion. He argues that photography arose as the only medium that has shown nature devoid of meaning. Nature is no longer the “forest of symbols” of Baudealais’s “Correspondences.” “The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning,” Kracauer writes, removing the issue of

55 Kracauer, Ornament, pp. 81 – 83.
57 Kracauer, Ornament, p.62.
invention and human agency and foregrounding instead the radical shift in human
subjectivity involved in the invention of photography

One of the many formulations that Kracauer assumes *a priori* is that photography
is both imbricated and implicated in collective modes of homogenization and
surveillance. “The barren self-preservation of spatial and temporal elements,” he argues,
“belongs to a social order which regulates itself according to economic laws of nature”
(62). The photograph destabilizes the relation between nature and culture, so that
reason—or rather its deformed clone, *ratio*—triumphs over the chaos of nature and
becomes the regulator of human experience. Inevitably, this triumph of what appears to
be total semblance is an illusion, since photography both reveals and occludes the true
aspect of things from the masses. The illusion of the demonic diva occludes the fuzzy
dot-matrix, “the millions of little dots” that constitute her rendering.58 With the triumph
of economic *ratio*, mediation is no longer linguistic, nor typological. The forest of
symbols has been cut down and has been replaced by the rectilinear trees of semblance
and homogeneous order. *Quid me nutrit, me destruit*, goes the latin saying, and in
modernity the photograph both extends perception *and* reifies it. In the dot-matrix that
allegorizes the diva of the illustrated magazines, “people see the very world that the
illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving.”59

To a certain extent, Kracauer’s analysis of photography in conjunction with
illustrated magazines anticipates Roland Barthes’s structuralist exegesis of the
photographic image. In essays like “The Photographic Message” and the “Rhetoric of the
Image,” Barthes emphasizes the multifarious encodings—institutional and otherwise—

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that are shrouded in the apparent spontaneity of the photographic image. Since the image is mechanically mediated it becomes a locus of apparent objectivity, whereas it is actually framed by various social and subjective forces. For Barthes, the allure of the photograph is precisely that it can encode and inscribe “as though the scene were immediate and spontaneous, that is to say, without signification.” However, Barthes insists that this naïve correspondence between signifier and signified is merely the confusion that attends to the paradoxical nature of the image as both spontaneous emanation and methodical encoding. Barthes uses this photographic paradox to illustrate the instantaneous association between the perception of phenomena and its interpretation. He argues that if “there is no perception without immediate categorization, then the photograph is verbalized in the very moment it is perceived; better, it is only perceived verbalized….”

Like Kracauer before him, Barthes is keenly aware of the way photography changes both historical and spatial configurations of thought. He understands photography as a prosthetic device, a technology for recording that enlarges man’s omnipresence in the world. “Hence in every society,” he writes, “various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds… to counter the terror of uncertain signs.” This dialectic of security and uncertainty reveals that photography changes everything precisely because it promises a world where everything is visually accountable and latently encoded. For Barthes, the radical disjunction between nature and culture inscribed in photographs “allow the assessment of the anthropological revolution

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61 Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p.36
it represents in man’s history.” Similarly, Kracauer understands the technical drive towards diminution and reduction embedded in the photograph “as the general inventory of a nature that cannot be further reduced.” In a sentence, “photography is the go-for-broke game of history.” Writing decades before the onslaught of globalization and decolonization, Kracauer’s meditations on photography and Weimar society diagnose the fraught parallels between the homogenizing mechanisms of colonization and the overbearing continuum of history.

In an early essay, “Travel and Dance,” Kracauer conceptualizes a modern constitution in which time and space have become mere husks: forms empty of content. Crucially, this process of kenosis or demythologization entails an obsession with form, movement and spatial ambulation that is deracinated from the subject. “Radio, telephotography, and so forth,” Kracauer argues, “each and every one of these outgrowths of rational fantasy aimlessly serves one single aim: the constitution of a depraved omnipresence within calculable dimensions.” The European bourgeoisie has entered the world of the travel agency and the miniaturized souvenir, where every space and time has its historicized ornament. In other words, one can extrapolate the illustrated dot-matrix over the face of the entire globe, so that each spatial dimension acquires a form, a convergence of encodings that signify it as a ‘foreign’ place. Thus, photography becomes imbricated in discourses of space, conquest, colonization, homogenization, and ultimately, history.

63 Barthes, *Image*, p. 44
64 Kracauer, *Ornament* p. 61.
65 Kracauer, *Ornament*, p. 70
III. Global Photography and the Continuum of History

In his idiosyncratic essay on photography and death, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes reconstructs a quotidian—indeed banal—*mise en scene*. “I was glancing though an illustrated magazine,” he writes. “A photograph made me pause. Nothing very unusual: the photographic banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua….”66 It is a photograph by Koen Wessing, the year is 1979 and Barthes’s words reveal how commonplace the struggle for sovereignty in the so-called Third World had become by the late 1970s. So commonplace, in fact, that the photographs in the illustrated newspaper have become banal images seared with the pathos of cultural homogenization. Barthes quotes Baudelaire (“the emphatic truth of gesture in the great circumstances of life”) and admits that even if the pictures were shocking, “they bore no mark or sign: their homogeneity remained cultural.” Barthes goes further, and elucidates how photography immediately imbricates history, or a certain kind of history (in Barthesian terms, the *studium*) of space and conquest, “a classical body of information: rebellion, Nicaragua… ruined streets, corpses, grief, the sun, and the heavy-lidded Indian eyes.”67

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In other words, the photographer registers the colonial sediments, the racial register, and the logic of history, or better yet, the logic of historicism. For Kracauer, historicist thinking is intimately tied to photographic representation, insofar as both promise a sequence of events and spaces without gaps, a total history that is ultimately overbearing and homogeneous. The Nicaraguan insurrection is legible for Barthes only through the mediation of the illustrated newspaper, which, is inextricably embedded in the ratio of reduction and accumulation. For the European reading public, the Nicaraguan revolution is merely a historical episode in the long Eurocentric narrative of emancipatory revolutions. The Nicaraguan armed conflict is legible as an aerial photograph taken from the totalizing vantage point of European historicism. In Kracauer’s concise formulation, “the equivalent of [historicist] photography would be a giant film depicting temporally interconnected events from every vantage point.” Only if an event has been properly illustrated in the Western imaginary can it then be included in the spatio-temporal narrative of capitalist ‘world history.’
One way in which Western media historicizes events in the Third World is through the process of homogenization and photographic miniaturization or reduction. In the case of the 1979 Nicaraguan Sandinista uprising, the work of photographer Susan Meiselas is a classic case. Her work traces the rebellion in Nicaragua from early 1978 (when the prospects of a substantial revolution were relatively low) to the popular victory of July 1979. As such, her work is a valuable trove of heterogeneous pictures that form a valuable photographic archive of the entire conflict. Moreover, her work does not just focus on the conflict, but on the myriad ways the Nicaraguan population was affected by the upheaval.68 Her most famous photograph of the armed uprising, however, depicts a beret-wearing Sandinista hurling a Molotov cocktail across a barricade, in a pose that

![Image of a Sandinista hurling a Molotov cocktail](image.jpg)

*Figure 2. Susan Meiselas. Nicaragua, Estelí, 1979.*

could only be described as sculptural. It is a dramatic portrait and it lends itself to the _go-for-broke_ narrative of historicism as conceptualized by Kracauer. The pyramidal hurler becomes an icon for what Benjamin calls the moment of recognition, when history sears the image of the present.

It is a hauntingly beautiful and jolting portrait. And yet, like all photographic representations, Meiselas’s iconic image can be easily turned into a reified image, a homogenized abstraction under the heading “Third World Conflict.” Such a reduction belies the preponderance of colonialist encodings and exclusions. The caption under the image of the iconic guerrilla fighter “directs the reader through the signifieds of the image… by means of an often subtle _dispatching_, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance.”69 Meiselas’s work is brutally honest, but its immediate power is ultimately lost in the homogenizing matrix of the illustrated magazine.

As such, photographs of armed conflicts—particularly Third World conflicts—are rapidly organized and _rationalized_ according to the fairy-tale logic set up by the forces of capital. The reductive icon—the discalced freedom-fighter—allows the _ratio_ the means to quickly separate friends from foes, victims from perpetrators, and the dark forces of savagery from the holy order of civilization. Through the prosthetic omnipresence afforded by the photographic apparatus, the colonial unconscious separates, organizes, homogenizes and ultimately reifies.

To be sure, Meiselas’s iconic photograph carries a powerful message of sovereignty, independence and the power of revolutionary change. Indeed, it is what Benjamin calls a Dialectical image, since it represents a perilous moment in which now-

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time [Jetzeit] emerges and destroys the continuum of history. As he writes in his short meditation on the “Doctrine of the Similar,” this moment “offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars… [i]t is like the addition of a third element… to the conjunction of two stars; it must be grasped in an instant.”

Nevertheless, this process does not necessarily take place at the moment the photograph is taken. In fact, since a photograph is not a subjective emanation, this dialectical potential depends on the way the photograph is interpreted, and on a myriad of historical, political, and institutional contingencies. In the end, even the most politically charged photograph can fail to register in the blocked sensorium of the masses.

The preponderance of iconic images in the Western coverage of Third World conflicts raises several questions. For instance, what are the dangers of fetishizing and romanticizing photographic representation of armed conflict? Can photographs of quotidian, even banal circumstances have a political or social effect? What is the value of photographers that depict the precarious lives of the marginalized urban poor? The work of the Spanish photographer Rafael Trobat is a useful example to address these difficult questions. While both Meiselas and Trobat work in Nicaragua, their work differs in crucial temporal terms. Meiselas depicts Nicaragua in 1979, ravaged by civil war, a country in a brutal transition from de facto American protectorate to Cold War combat zone. Trobat’s work, on the other hand, focuses on the so-called democratic period, from 1991-2006, a period of rampant neo-liberalism, corruption, and widening economic disparity. It is not a question of which photographs have a higher capacity to mobilize the

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masses or which photographer portrays Nicaragua in a better light. The real issue is how to read Trobat’s photographs of urban poverty as images that foreground issues pertaining to representation and exclusion.

In many ways, Meiselas’s photographs anticipate Trobat’s focus on the social and economic referents assembled before the camera. One of her photographs depicts a smiling Sandinista in olive green fatigues, rifle in hand, under a Coca-Cola poster. The parallels between the image-as-advert and the image-as-testimony reveal the preponderance of capitalist ratio in spaces ravaged by conflict and by the legacy of Imperialism. Similarly, Trobat’s photographs usually have a benign double valence: his
photos do not exclude but rather include both the center and the margin. In a visually complex photograph, Trobat captures a destitute, shirt-less boy with his legs in the air, playing to the camera. On the tattered walls behind him one can make out a cutout of Coca-Cola’s cherubic Santa Claus, and a number of photographs that are barely legible but which seem to be own Trobat’s own work. Finally, the space depicted are the ruins of a building destroyed by the 1972 Managua earthquake, many of which became a refuge for Managua’s poor.

![Figure 5. Rafael Trobat. “De vuelta al club Terraza.” 2000.](image)

By focusing on Old Managua’s ruins, Trobat portrays both the destitution of the urban poor and the history of violence and loss that characterizes Nicaragua. As such, he limns the tenuous parallels between photography and memory. Since, as Kracauer holds,
“the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged,” Trobat’s photographs of Managua’s ruins function as a meta-discourse of sorts, since the ruins can be read as the photographic evidence of the city’s past—the ghost city inside the neoliberal metropolis. Like old-fashioned crinolines and tattered buildings, the marginalized poor inhabit the spatio-temporal past:

“The tightly corseted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city center has been moved to another part of town. Usually members of the lower class settle in such buildings.”

Trobat’s photographs of the marginalized masses in the Third World metropolis foregrounds the dignity in the eyes of humans living in the peripheries of history. Importantly, his lens depicts the rich as well as the poor, and—like the photographs of the Weimar period by August Sander—his images function as an inscription or record of social types and other figures. This strategy makes it possible to view society horizontally, as opposed to the capitalist insistence on verticality. This is the “photography of the literalization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate.”

Or in Barthes’s auratic pronouncement, “the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence.”

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71 Kracauer, Ornament, p. 55.
IV. Poetic Inscription and Detritus

In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin again returns to the tropes of superimposition, reduction and exclusion. For Benjamin, the poet is genealogically related to ancient modes of shamanism, divination and clairvoyance that gradually gave rise to forms of script, language or what he calls nonsensous similarity. Which is to say that even if the poet loses the gift of prophecy, he gains the power to make images out of dissimilar runes. Thus, the poet can commemorate phenomena and record them, in what Benjamin reads as a kind of techné. “To command nature herself to stand still… is the dreamer’s delight,” he writes. “But to utter a call that will freeze it anew is the gift of poets.”74 However, in Baudelaire’s poetry Benjamin reads an anxiety over inadequacy, or “the ‘here’ in which the inadequate becomes an actuality.” It’s almost as if Baudelaire pimps himself as a poet; he advertises himself and uses the

imbricated language of the crowd in the gaudy bazaar. His poetics are shot through with “an urbanity that would befit a refined amateur.” The poet becomes a photographic device. Like the Holy Ghost, embodied in the prosthetic human body, Baudelaire becomes the mediator—the photographic apparatus—for the collective experience of the modern crowd. “The poet finds the refuse of society on their streets and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse,” Benjamin concludes. “This means that a common type is, as it were, superimposed upon their illustrious type.”

The prose poems of Paris Spleen are emblematic of this photographic motif. As “little poems in prose,” they are framed as reduced portraits of scenes, pictures of thought organized both as a sequence and as constellations of phenomena and their intagliated interpretation. “The Old Showman,” for instance, depicts an urban fair where the Paris poor “forget their discomforts, labors; they become like children.” It is an atmosphere of revelry and debauchery where the proletariat can forget about their quotidian hardships and take part in the escapism of the mass ornament. But in the margins of the playgrounds, the poet sees a “poor showman, as if in shame self-exiled from all these splendors, bent, worn, decrepit, a human ruin…” In the peripheries of glitzy urban entertainment, the ostracized showman stands as a figure of destitution, failure, and surrender. His isolated demeanor destabilizes the gaiety of the crowd and leads Baudelaire to not only question the holiday proceedings but to identify with this excluded figure. “I tried to figure out my sudden sadness,” the poet writes, “saying to myself, here I have seen the image of the old man of letters who has outlived the generation he

76 Benjamin, “Central Park,
amused so brilliantly….”  

Like the cumbersome crinoline or a ruined arcade, the poet is excluded and discarded. He is dismissed as a worn-out novelty.

Benjamin identifies this poetic attitude that hovers in between fascination with the masses and traumatic exclusion as the defining feature of Baudelaire’s poetics. Crucially, this precarious oscillation operates through the logic of superimposition. On the image of the poet as unfettered libertine “another one was laid… it shows Baudelaire as the exemplar of aesthetic passion… No study of Baudelaire can fully explore the vitality of its subject without dealing with the image of his life.” Caught up in the incipient logic of capitalist consumption and mass culture, Baudelaire adopts the image and pose of the excluded poet. He “was obliged to lay claim to the dignity of the poet in a society that has no more dignity of any kind to confer.”  

Immensely aged and bent down by the exigencies of the market, the martyred poet superimposes his art on the faceless masses.

Like Walter Benjamin, the Nicaraguan poet Carlos Martínez Rivas (1924 - 1998) recognizes the uniqueness of this poetic perspective and uses it to elaborate his own poetics of precariousness and exclusion. Widely recognized as the most important Nicaraguan of the 20th century, Martínez Rivas published only two poetry collections during his lifetime. Distrustful of the literary market and unconcerned about posterity, he shunned the limelight, choosing instead to live a quiet life of writing marked by persistent bouts of alcoholism—the disease that would eventually kill him. In the introduction to his posthumously published Collected Works, the editor Pablo Centeno Gómez—the poet’s close friend and literary executor—provides excerpts from the transcription of a rare poetry reading held by Martínez Rivas in the National University of Managua in 1984. In

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77 Baudelaire, Spleen, p. 27-8.
it, the poet meditates on Baudelaire’s poetic achievements and on the French poet’s influence on his own artistic development; an influence which he does not deny.

Tellingly, he evokes Charles Baudelaire by describing his self-portraits, “and other portraits of his made by Gustave Courbet and Nadar (when photography transitioned from the daguerreotype to the portrait), Duchamp Villon’s bust, and the treacherous cartoon by Daumier.” He goes on to present his own poetic portrait of Baudelaire, “which is really the portrait a friend gave to him in 1866, before he departed Brussels, only to die in Paris in 1867.”79 Martínez Rivas’s evocation of Baudelaire is titled “Ecce Homo: on one of Baudelaire’s last photographs.” In the excerpted transcripts he comments that the photograph would have been Baudelaire’s last portrait and goes on to share his poetic rendering of the modern poet’s physiognomy:

fixed without stepping away from the ascetic rictus of the débauche forehead furrowed manuscript manuchrist thorns brow draft nocturne illegible print proofs footprints of the old man after the new failed enterprise yes but someone had to undergo the relay a case of military vocation there is always a volunteer the volunteer of a bankrupt will and let the enforced parable remain prodigal that cornerstone graft in between the communion of saints and the communion of sinners for the sinning church so that narrow solidarity remain unbroken and never extinguish the species lineage and his traits remain copies [ejemplares] this photography of c. b. was taken in Brussels circa 186780

Written in 1957—when Martínez Rivas lived in Beatnik California, working odd jobs and struggling to maintain his young family—the poem stands out for the absence of punctuation and its experimental bent. Reading the poem is an unhinged experience, insofar as the words stumble into each other, verbs crash into nouns and adverbs, and images scintillate and evanesce in a torrent of fluid words and opaque ideas.

The poem, however, is “fixed” from the start: the chaotic meditation is predicated on a still image; on the photograph of a deceased figure; on the mummified trace of a deceased physiognomy. In short, Martínez Rivas writes a little poem in prose for Baudelaire, superimposing his form to delineate his physiognomy.

In addition to developing a dialectical fulcrum between movement and arrest, the poem becomes a copy of the ‘original’ photograph. Imbricated in a tradition of portraits of Charles Baudelaire—portraits rendered in a myriad of media, like painting, sculptures and lithographs—Martínez Rivas’s poem foregrounds the “species lineage,” that form a discursive network that is both authentic and specious, original and copy all at once. His poem is an “exemplar” of Baudelaire and works both as a celebration of his originality and as yet another “instant,” or as yet another copy in the after-life of Baudelaire’s image. Deeply aware of poetic genealogies, Martínez Rivas recognizes that citation—far from being mere plagiarism—is often associated with the elaboration of a poetic locus built out
of imaginary traces; out of images from a petrified past that shed light on a darkened present. Conscious of the influence of Baudelaire’s *imago* on his own artistic growth, Martínez Rivas grants that he has learned from him to “behave in a literary way, in both habit and work ethic…” He has taken from Baudelaire “the tendency to view life and the world from the same austere and bitter angle, preserving the correction of urban language, but this is a coincidence that is less literary than personal… I think about Baudelaire everyday; not only as a favorite poet in my library, but as a deceased friend lost forever.”

In an abrupt spatio-temporal jump, Martínez Rivas brings the perspective of the French poet and superimposes it on his perspective as a Third-World poet and on his poetics of detritus and exclusion. In a montage of poems grouped together under the heading “The Poverty Statutes,” the Nicaraguan poet uses the photographic motif to inscribe those that have been excluded by the overbearing ratio of capital. In one of his most powerful poems, “To Those Who Never Lost Because They Never Had,” Martínez Rivas elaborates a poetic discourse that foregrounds images of hunger, destitution and exclusion:

To write about Hunger,
not poetry of protest but of experience,
is difficult if you never go hungry.

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Sure, with a good camera, with a Leica,
you can photograph hunger.
One can give a graphic testimony of hunger.

Children from India or Africa
that are only little bones and belly.
The bellies full of hunger described by Leonel Rugama.
The poem starts by stipulating the problem of adequately representing destitution and deprivation, particularly from the snug vantage point of those who have never experienced hunger pangs. Words won’t adequately represent the amoebic bellies if the speaker has not experienced the crippling weakness of an empty stomach. Moreover, the allusion to the Sandinista martyr-poet Leonel Rugama inscribes the poem in the struggle for social justice and sovereignty. Using the very inadequacy of his discourse, Martínez Rivas frames his poem as a photographic panorama of detritus and exclusion.

Instead of using the deracinated and pompous language of poetry, the poet devices a photographic motif, “a Leica,” in order to capture the evanescent struggles of the marginalized poor around the globe:

A man with a miserly piece of dry bread under the bombs in Eritrea.
A little girl in emergency care undergoing war surgery, anesthetized, not asleep, with rubber tubes in her little nose.

In Haiti, during the famine of 1975, a little boy as if carved from wood, so squalid; and that little girl from Vietnam, the one that flees naked and burned on the asphalt highway.

With nothing to do, with no domicile, a grandma without grandchildren sleeps in the abolished New York-Pennsylvania Station.

The descriptions are marked by the overbearing pathos of the weak and the downtrodden. Martínez Rivas achieves this effect in the first stanza by emphasizing the smallness of the little girl, the invasiveness of the medical equipment and the oxymoronic valence created by the smallness of her innocence, and the massive engines of war. In the second stanza,
the poet displays two contrasting processes of inscription. In the first, the simile depicts the precarious Haitian boy as a carved statue, bearing the inscription of his economic exclusion and malnourishment on his emaciated skin. The second process is more properly photographic, insofar as it is an ekphrastic reduction of Nick Ut's iconic photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc covered in scalding Napalm. Erythrea, Haiti and Vietnam: marginalized Third World countries excluded from networks of power and exchange. And yet the last image superimposes the ratio of violence and exclusion in the capitalist metropolis. The excluded burrow in the centers of power as well, deep in the underground ruins of a ghostly subway station.

Martínez Rivas’s poetic meditation on hunger, violence and exclusion ends with an image of solemnity and detritus:

\[
\text{And a couple, husband and wife, decrepit,}
\text{photographed by the SIPA-PRESS Agency,}
\text{“Gothic Third World,” with a background of trash:}
\text{he, toothless; she the august, wrinkled brow.}
\text{But so united in their dignity and misfortune}
\text{that one even envies them.}
\]

\[
\text{What I am referring to}
\text{when I titled}
\text{this note: TO THOSE WHO NEVER LOST}
\text{BECAUSE THEY NEVER HAD.}^{81}
\]

These last two stanzas both echo and amplify the preceding photographic registers. In a sense, the poem returns to the logic of its frame: the problems that obtain an honest representation of hunger, poverty and destitution. A second frame returns as well, the frame of the illustrated magazine, embedded in the matrix of international news agencies

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and the revealing headline “Gothic Third World.” This reflexive move yields a vision of
the downtrodden: the poet sees the dignity of the excluded behind the encodings of the
illustrated magazine. The last stanza seals this semblance of recognition by turning the
poem into a photograph, a commemorative device inscribed by its title—its referent—that
rehearses the possibility of a poetics that reckons with the frames of visual, political, and
economic exclusion.

V. Conclusion:
Exclusion / Superimposition

“Always of interest,” writes Baudelaire in ‘Widows,’ “joys of the rich reflected in
the eyes of the poor.”82 Perhaps one can read a certain amount of envy in the piquancy of
his aphorism, the same kind of envy Martínez Rivas reads in the eyes and semblance of
the marginalized. In this dialectical triad, the poor idealize the world of the rich and
famous propagated by the fairy-tale ratio of the illustrated magazine. The poor are
excluded from these glitzy frames, populated by flashy commodities, royals in tiaras and
demonic divas. On the other hand, the rich both exclude the poor and fail to recognize
their humanity. The poet—excluded by the ratio of capital and defrocked of his poetic
aura—superimposes and allegorizes his social alienation by recycling the detritus of the
mass ornament. In the words of William Carlos Williams, “man, starved in imagination,
changes his milieu so that his food may be richer—The social class, without the power of
expression, lives upon imaginative values.”83 As poets, Baudelaire and Martínez Rivas
foreground this process of social and poetic superimposition and produce lyrical traces

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82 Baudelaire, *Spleen*, p. 25.
that recycle and re-inscribe—however tenuously—the excluded human gaze behind the diva’s demonic dot matrix. Their images are superimposed on actuality. They reveal that the potential for change nests not in the photography of the status quo, but in the excluded detritus of the anonymous masses.