

Book Review

Shellhorse, Adam Joseph. *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina.* U of Pittsburgh P, 2017.

Anti-Literature, a title that immediately betrays a polemical stance, attempts a “rethinking of the fundamental concepts of what is meant by ‘literature’ in posthegemonic times” (3). Though a discussion of the avant-garde (as a concept and as a historical phenomenon) does not play a major role in this study, it is interesting that, like Guillaume Apollinaire’s celebrated 1913 “L’Antitradition Futuriste-Manifesto-synthèse,” which invoked an alternate tradition by pitting *passéistes* against proponents of the nascent avant-gardes, *Anti-Literature* similarly “pos[es] the problem of anti-literary modes of writing as part of a crucial, unexamined *counter-tradition*” (6, emphasis added). It challenges classical, monological, and long-entrenched historical notions of literature by bringing out the subaltern, the feminine, literary politics, and literary debate. The ambition is to respond to major interpretations of Latin American literature—such as Ángel Rama’s *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982), John Beverley’s *Against Literature* (1993) and *Testimonio* (2004), Alberto Moreiras’s *Tercer espacio* (1999), and Brett Levinson’s *The Ends of Literature* (2001)—and to define the contours of this counter-tradition conceived as “a multidisciplinary, minoritarian, and multimedial ‘body’ of writing that produces affects and new modes of perception” (7).

In this study, Shellhorse brings together his interests in constructivist, radical reflexive poetics of the 1950s and 1960s, the historical avant-gardes, the relationship between literature and other arts and media, and the crisis of the literary vis-à-vis questions of power and representation in Latin America. He is also heavily invested in theory, engaging a bevy of figures that includes John Beverley, Jon Beasley-Murray, and Jacques Rancière, among many others, to contest totalizing interpretations of literature centered around identity and representation. Consistent with his stance against linear unity, Shellhorse produces not a polished theory of anti-literature, but rather a collection of case

studies, a “collage or constellation” he compares to “an interstellar conversation among mutant stars,” in which Brazilians figure prominently (11).

Chapter 1 examines Clarice Lispector’s final novel, *A hora da estrela*, which portrays an impoverished migrant girl from Brazil’s Northeast, by closely engaging the novel’s “self-inscribed problematic centered in writing the feminine and the subaltern” (23). Zeroing in on these two features as well as on the use of the metaliterary, Shellhorse argues that Lispector is able to counter identitarian fixity, ending the novel in “immanence as an act of affirmation . . . with the simultaneous death of both the writer [character] and figure” (42). Chapter 2 reassesses the Argentine Marxist novelist and scriptwriter David Viñas, alternatively maligned as overly programmatic or falling short of true commitment. For Shellhorse, Viñas’s anti-literary legacy—literature’s dissolution into politics, cinema, and other media—can be seen in his polemical bestseller, *Dar la cara*. Viñas’s script-turned-novel features anguished, subaltern characters “[r]eminiscent of Fellini and the films of Italian neorealism, . . . travers[ing] an urban, modernizing Buenos Aires” (50) with “no purity of form, no neatness of discursive domains, no rote imposition of ideology . . . , but rather a redistribution of writing that scrambles all normative majoritarian codes” (53). Viñas counters Sarmiento’s foundational view of literature as civilizing agent by “*barbariz[ing] writing*: against the image of literature as projection of the rationalized state” (59), all while taking us “to the body, to the non-scriptural,” and “[s]uspending the illusion of representation” (69).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore concrete and post-concrete poetry by the Campos brothers (Augusto and Haroldo) and the *antropofagia* legacy of their intellectual forerunner Oswald de Andrade. A novel take, chapter 3 presents Andrade’s cannibalist poetics as defiantly rejecting representational logic and giving rise instead to a new poetic vanguard that “abandons the . . . word-centered function to engage . . . the post-literary, post-verbal era of late capitalism” (72). Here cannibalism produces a new reading subject: Augusto de Campos’s semiotic pop poems, for instance, display “another view of committed literature: an interpellation of the reader as creator-critic from the cannibalized ‘bones’ of popular culture and mass media” (91). In chapter 4, Haroldo de Campos’s neobaroque prose poem *Galáxias* is read through the lens of the avant-garde, posthegemony, and subaltern studies to reveal its intertextuality and anti-literary subversion “as a proliferating sequence of sensory ensembles that affirm play,

the aleatory, and endless permutation, [through which] the reader must undergo the ordeal of the affect, always undecidable” (118).

The baroque *Galáxias* is contrasted in chapter 5 with works by Osman Lins that were inspired by medieval religious literature. Lins’s *sui generis* oeuvre embodies an alternative baroque poetics, which, while politically allied to the subaltern, nonetheless configures an “unfixed, anti-representational, and anti-subjective typology of text” (128). The sixth and final chapter returns to Haroldo de Campos, this time to probe his poem “O anjo esquerdo da história,” dedicated to the agrarian protest *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST). For Shellhorse, “[c]onstituting an opening to the other, the poem’s vortex of signifiers inscribes the idea of singularities resisting the land problem in common” (186).

Shellhorse’s concluding chapter makes the apparent centrifugal force of the corpus here examined appear more coherent. All these works collapse the limits of “literature” while resisting conformism and suspending forms of domination. “Anti-literature,” Shellhorse pithily concludes, “is anticlosure” (193). And indeed, questions, some methodological, others about the robustness of the concept, remain open. For one, while the privileging of Brazil is clearly a conscious, strategic move on Shellhorse’s part, partly to situate his study within a distinctly comparative and original Brazilian context, and partly to respond to the lack of attention to Brazil within prior studies of “Latin American” literature, one does wonder why authors such as Julio Cortázar and Nicanor Parra, both of whom explicitly deployed the concepts of “antinovela” and “antipoesia,” respectively, would not merit an appearance alongside their Brazilian colleagues. Likewise, a stronger connection to the historical avant-gardes might trace the roots of the polemical elements of “anti-literature” to similar non-conformist and anti-representational tendencies, while also contrasting with the uniqueness of its current formulation. In all, though, Shellhorse can be commended on an argument that is vigorously sustained throughout and on tackling provocative texts by authors such as Lins, Campos, and Viñas, which have not yet been given their due.

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