

APUNTES ON ORIENTALISM IN/AND LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE:

DARÍO, TABLADA, BORGES, PAZ AND SARDUY

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¿Cuál es el otro polo del mundo de China y Japón? Tal vez la América precolombina.

Octavio Paz, *Conjunciones y disyunciones*, 48

As a contradiction, Latin American Orientalism poses an interesting disruption within the traditional epistemological and ontological differentiations of “the Orient” and “the Occident” which Said problematizes in *Orientalism*. In so far as one of the definitions he gives us of Orientalism is that which, among other things, “restructures the Orient,” then we are faced with a twofold question: first, what can we say of Latin American authors’ own “restructuring” and appropriation of the so-called Orient (i.e the Middle East and Asia)? Can we say that it is an exact replica of European Orientalism? Or is it disrupted, disturbed, shifted and could it be something more than mere colonial exoticism? And second, if so-called Latin American Orientalism is a different way to ideologically and imaginatively appropriate the “East,”¹ as “Oriental” art and literature crosses the Pacific and Atlantic oceans in both directions into Latin America, then can we even speak of it as a bleeding of Western into Eastern cultures? If we read Said’s definition of “West” carefully, then Latin American countries and both the “Far East” and “Middle East” today are part of non-western cultures that nevertheless have über-western elements and elements that remain “Oriental” in the sense of non-western. This is the rub! Where to place Latin America? Between East and West? Both Oriental and Occidental? These categories are immediately troubled.²

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Said explains that “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony.” But as two continents (Asia and Latin America) that never conquered each other and yet participated and participate still (tacitly and indirectly or not) in imperial and neo-colonial dynamics, their relationship to each other is not necessarily one of power.

Perhaps without having to deal with the heavy baggage of cultural hegemony then the cultural exchange that takes place is different, more symmetrical and positive? Of course, I do not pretend to erase the very complex and ever-present colonial and neo-colonial dynamics within the different Latin American nations, where what would be considered non-Western peoples, groups and civilizations are still systematically marginalized, colonized and capitalized upon by the more Occidentalized inhabitants of large cities, for example.³ But, for the purposes of this brief literary analysis, I will speak of Latin America as one geo-cultural entity in relation to the Middle East and Asia (Said’s original geographic mapping of the “Orient”) and I argue that the hybridity that we find in this selection of Latin American texts opposes the type of Orientalist colonial hegemony.⁴ For, if Said’s notion of Orientalism depends on (Occidental) positional superiority, then what can we call what comes about when the so-called Orient comes in touch with a different kind of Orient or with an Occident altogether un-occidental, as happens in these texts? What can we call this relationship?

In her study *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition*, Julia Kushigian insists that we look to the “discovery of diversity” in the relationship between the “Hispanic literary tradition” and “the Orient” for “it is an area that has sustained a much more profound historical and intellectual contact with the Orient than that of its rivals in Western Europe” (2). In fact, Kushigian reminds us that “Spain, and by extension Hispanic America, was not the initial conqueror but the conquered, not the primary colonizer but the colonized [...]” (2) and at the same time as this begins to problematize the “Orientalist” relation, we can also question Kushigian’s own unproblematized extension of Spain to Latin America (by using the term “Hispanic” America, as she does). If “West” and “East”—or Occident and Orient—are in binary opposition, the inclusion of Latin America into the equation disrupts the duality and “opens the space to an infinite blending of oppositions,” as Kushigian states. This opening might provide both literary and political insight, and it might prove subversive of the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism.

Some important key words to keep in mind while reading the “Orient” in Latin American literature are: flux, fusion, becoming-other, open-endedness, polyglossia, hybridity, *rapprochement*, baroque, and becoming. These terms indeed appear and reappear throughout, within the primary texts and also in the (rare) secondary sources. As Kushigian states,

Hispanic Orientalism is irrevocably involved in the process of becoming. The spheres were shifted from the Old World, or the Orient of the ancient world, to the New World,

or Spain of the Medieval period and the Renaissance. They were shifted once more during the era of discovery from Spain to Hispanic America, the “new” New World, which addressed itself again to the Orient. The ensuing circular movement of contact keeps the relationship unstable and does not permit closure. (14)

Latin America, between/neither/both Orient and Occident? As an open-ended question, this proves a fruitful starting point for our analysis.

ENCLOSING SCREENS, OPENING FANS: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Let me begin by taking a retrospective look into the Latin American literary canon, specifically its poetry, as the place of emergence of the so-called Oriental at the height of the nineteenth-century Orientalism in Europe, through Rubén Darío (Nicaragua, 1867-1916) and a bit later, José Juan Tablada (Mexico, 1871-1945).

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In his celebrated sonnet, “De invierno,” which takes place in Paris, Darío alludes to the Orient in a similar way as other celebrated nineteenth-century poets who are traditionally considered part of (or fall prey to) the Orientalist tradition: as Baudelaire, Verlaine and others (including painters like Manet), Darío here paints an intimate portrait of a beautiful woman, Carolina, reclined like an Odalisk; perhaps even naked save for an “abrigo de marta cibelina” (a sable coat) and a skirt of Alençon lace. Carolina is in Paris yet surrounded by the “Orient”: a Japanese silk screen (note that the Spanish word for screen, “biombo,” is a direct transliteration of the Japanese *biobu*) and “jarras de porcelana china” (Chinese porcelain jars) as well as her cat, an Angora. And yet this *dépayage*, whereby the speaker is transported from the cold Parisian winter into another place altogether, is operating on a double level: the speaker is not only admiring the “Oriental” décor but the luxury of his language and descriptions also echo a nostalgia for an idealized/exoticized Europe. Thus from Darío’s Latin American perspective the traditional nineteenth-century categories of Orient (Asia/Middle-East) and Occident (Europe) are equated in their foreignness, they conflate to create a new mythology or a new locus, a new metaphor. In a similar way, in his poem “Divagación,” Darío conflates Orient and Occident in one exotic new landscape in which Ancient Greece, Romantic Germany, France and Biblical Judea, India and Japan are equidistant to the poet’s turn-of-the-century Latin America. Thus Darío’s use of imagery puts into question the Orient/Occident binary as seen from the perspective of Latin American literature: it de-centers it, re-contextualizes and de-hierarchizes it: its new, flattening geography places Europe and Asia on level ground and therefore the traditional power relations implied in any Orientalist relationship as defined by Said begin to be layered and put into question when analyzed from the perspective of the disturbing third: Latin America.

The “Orient” becomes a familiar, if not intrinsic, part of the Latin American context in José Juan Tablada’s poetry. Tablada’s work does several things at the same time: on first reading it embodies Orientalism in the traditional sense of the word in a similar way as Darío’s does, for it seems to follow in the steps of the European Orientalists. At the same time, it inaugurates modernism in Mexican poetry; it is a textbook example of multiculturalism before the fact; and finally it announces stylistic renewal in poetry, to only name a few of its merits or attributes.

Tablada’s poetry, like an ode to the Pacific Rim, oscillates between here and there; between Mexico and Japan; America and Asia; Precolumbian and contemporary times, and like an ode, loves them all dearly (not in a possessive way, as one might argue an Orientalist colonialist European would) but as a child loves his mother and father. Tablada adores these countries and regions and embraces them in various forms in his poetry—I say like parents, for they are the origins of his poetry and of his poetic being. For instance, in “Exégesis” the speaker’s mother is related directly to the Orient as embodied in Japan:

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¡Quizás mi madre cuando me llevó en sus entrañas
miró mucho los Budas, los lotos, el magnífico
arte nipón y todo cuanto las naos extrañas
volcaron en las playas natales del Pacífico!⁵

His love for the “Orient” grows from the womb while his mother observes Japanese art and objects found in the Pacific coasts. Interestingly, through this poem, Tablada brings up Mexico’s historical Japanese heritage, something which is seldom mentioned outside specialized anthropological or art historical discussions even today: historically, the Pacific coast of Mexico, from the beaches of Michoacán to Acapulco especially, has been the place of exchange and immigration for many Japanese soldiers and merchants since the seventeenth century.⁶ And Tablada carries this Japanese heritage, in the shape of a Japanese cherry inside his Mexican onyx heart:

y en el vaso de ónix que es mi corazón,
infundiendo a mi sangre su virtud esotérica,
¡Florece un milagroso
cerezo del Japón!⁷

In this sense, even though Tablada’s poetry could be (and indeed has been) deemed as exoticist, a more careful reading of both his work and the term “exotic” reveals that this cannot be the case: exoticism is that which is outside (*ex-*) while everything about Japan, the speaker in Tablada’s poems insists, is *inside*—part of him, part of his soul, inscribed in the shape of a complicated hieroglyph. The title of the poem is “Exégesis” and therefore the poem can be read as an explication (exegesis) of Tablada’s poetry, but also of Tablada’s love of Japan, which has been literally “bred” into him from the

womb and is a part of his body. This embodiment and incarnation of “the Orient” in his self could therefore be read as a countering of more traditional (European) Orientalist exoticism.

In “Japón” again Tablada (or the poem’s speaker) gives himself to Japan; gives his body and soul: “¡Yo soy el siervo de tu Mikado! / ¡Yo soy el bonzo de tus pagodas!”⁸ and even incorporates Japanese history in himself: “Corre en las venas de mi sangre ardiente / íntimo canto de tu epopeya.”⁹ In this particular verse he even addresses Japan familiarly, as one would address a friend or a sibling.

Finally, there is a concrete coming together in this entire poem of the spiritual and the physical, of the metaphysical and the material, which is surprising. Tablada’s Japan—as Paz’s Galta, as we shall see—is thus both the country itself and art itself. And, as Tablada elaborates, or I dare say, embroiders, the tapestry that is “Japón” even further, he likens each strophe of the poem to the princess’s fans opening up and then continues the image as parasols open up like chrysanthemums and poppies. This is only one example of how the poem’s imagery unfolds in an almost hallucinatory process of increment, layering and opening.

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After having explained himself and his most intimate relationship to Japan in “Exégesis,” in “Japón” the speaker/Tablada allows himself to write the full ode in its most intricate and complex details, while nonetheless remaining controlled and self-conscious of the process of alienation and embodiment which necessarily takes place in such a poem: for instance, the speaker even speaks of Orientalism and calls “los blancos” (whites) and “las naciones de Occidente” (Occidental nations) vain and useless compared to Japan’s Nirvana. As the end of the poem approaches there is again a repetition of “¡Yo soy el siervo... / Yo soy el bonzo...!” And thus the speaker insists on giving himself up to Japan entirely, *religiously*, as the word *bonzo* emphasizes.

Finally, it is pertinent to note the emphasis Tablada places on the word “jeroglífico” (hieroglyph) in “Exégesis” and perhaps we could use it as a key to access all of Tablada’s work. His poems can be read as hieroglyphs of Japan, for a hieroglyph is a type of writing which represents meaning through figures or symbols (not phonetically-alphabetically). Thus, like a poem, a hieroglyph is the coming together *in writing* of both meaning and image, paradoxically crystallizing that tension which literature points to. And the preoccupation with the Orient, specifically the “Oriental” presence in Latin American literature—which is not necessarily tantamount to a negative Orientalism, as we have begun to see—seems to be tightly bound up with the question of language and writing in general (perhaps because of the notion of deciphering?). This becomes clear when reading Tablada’s hieroglyph but also when attempting to decipher language itself, as we shall see with Borges’ Averroes, or when renewing or inventing a new language altogether, as we shall see with Sarduy’s work.

IN SEARCH OF MEANING: BORGES AND AVERROES

A different combination of precisely the relationships between Old Worlds and New Worlds that I had mentioned in Darío, and between Latin America, Spain, and Morocco that Kushigian alluded to, happens in Jorge Luis Borges' short stories, specifically in "En Busca de Averroes" ("Averroes' Search"). Trying to pin down Latin America as either/or Oriental and Occidental is an impossible exercise in (cultural/political) translation: Latin America's hybridity (cultural, racial etc.)¹⁰ escapes any closed/enclosing definitions and an interesting metaphor for this ontological and epistemological impossibility could be read through Averroes' own dilemma.

64 "La busca de Averroes" is an immediately equivocal work. The story tells about Andalusian-Arabic translator Averroes' impossible search for the meaning/translation of the words Tragedy and Comedy (in Aristotle) in his own language, but also with the narrator's own impossible search for Averroes, the historical character. However, the story's mystery, its search, is that of fiction, a fictional search or a search for that which does not exist or, I should say, no longer exists. This is clear enough from the beginning, where the character in the title "Averroes" is and is not the same as the character named in the first lines of the story: Abdugualid Muhammad Ibn-Ahmad Ibn-Muhammad Ibn-Rushd, a.k.a Benraist, a.k.a Avenryz, a.k.a Aben-Rassad, a.k.a Filius Rosadis and finally a.k.a Averroes. This is at the same time a work about a name (naming), about the character (historical or otherwise) behind it (in the last line, the narrator qualifies "Averroes" by putting the name between quotation marks); it is a work about fiction; about writing; about the fiction of Orient (an unattainable China or the unimaginable roses of Hindustan); about the fiction of history; about the impossibility of translation, of knowledge; about that which does not exist. As the narrator concludes, this is a story of defeat: of man defeated by words, of philosophy by theology—or rather of liberal thinking by fanaticism—a conquista and reconquista of words in ourselves; a conquista and reconquista of the Other, of identity.

"La busca de Averroes" is at the same time a search, an essay in writing fiction and a disappearing act, which is invariably the act of translation. What is this "search for Averroes"? Is it Averroes's own search for Meaning (or specifically meaning in the words *tragedy* and *comedy*)? Is it the narrator's search for Averroes? Our own? The title is vague enough (and the many names of Averroes further complicate the search). The pretext, quoted as the epigraph, is Renan's own "Averroes et l'averroïsme" (assuredly a work of nineteenth-century French Orientalism), through which the narrator has learned of Averroes (aside from reading Lane and Asín Palacios, as he explains). Mere pretext, Borges' work is not following this Orientalist tradition, rather it takes it as a starting point or pre-text only to put it in question, deconstruct it and move onto other textual relationships. Thus the narrator's search for Averroes is a journey

through the many translations of this character (trans-lations in the sense of transport and movement) from one century onto the next, from one culture into the next, from one fiction—or metaphor—onto the next. It is a work in progress, our own search is then added to it, as well as the metaphor Borges, and/or his narrator, have added to a tradition (99).

This narration of a defeat (“En la historia anterior quise narrar el proceso de una derrota...,” the readers are told¹¹) may be the narration of the defeat of the paradoxically impossible yet inevitable contact between self and Other.¹² There is an inextricable link, according to the author, between his “subject” and himself, one losing itself in the other, a loss of identity *ad infinitum* to the point where the readers have lost all reference points and therefore are lost as well in the readerly search for meaning in the text. As Julia Kushigian posits in regard to Borges’ work in general, “[w]e are as different from the Other as we are from ourselves and we prove this in a continuous colliding of metaphors” (23). This is particularly true of this short story.

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Finally this story defeats or questions the very possibility of historical veracity (and thus again of identity) by laughing at Averroes’ lack of understanding and finding that it is much like the narrator’s own vis à vis Averroes. The work is riddled with references to the impossibility of truth, to the utter fiction of life and to the problem of language as mimesis (alluding back to Aristotle). The object of Averroes’s search is so near, the solution to the enigma of those words so close at hand and yet so ungraspable.¹³ The problem of mimesis and language, of “reality” and its expression, of two different worlds coming into touch is directly addressed when Averroes explains that, “Además, los frutos y los pájaros pertenecen al mundo natural, pero la escritura es un arte. Pasar de hojas a pájaros es más fácil que de rosas a letras” (95).¹⁴ This is the problem of language, the problem of translation (“pasar de...”), the problem of metaphor, of signifier and signified; in other words, la busca—the search.

OF GRAMMATOLOGY: PAZ’S POLYVALENT ORIENT

Another search for language, for a dialogue between Latin America and “the Orient,” another forking and self-effacing path is the path that Octavio Paz’s narrator takes in his *Mono gramático*. This novel, personal essay, travel book, and/or prose-poem (alluding in its hard-to-pin form to the French Nouveau Roman) is located in India, specifically in the town of Galta—a ruined city but also a mythological city, and a fictional place. To begin to approach the Orient in this text, the location itself could be read as a perfect place-holder for the “Orient” as both a metaphor—an abstraction or distillation almost—as well as a real place with specific geopolitical coordinates, problems, attributes. The plot, if we can speak of a plot, is a deconstructed palimpsest of Hanuman’s story (Hindu Mythology) as well as a traveler’s tale. As Paz himself

explains in the book jacket, “El *Mono gramático* no es un relato ni un cuento, sin embargo nos cuenta algo.”¹⁵

Paz wrote the text two years after having left his post as Mexico’s ambassador to India, while he stayed at Oxford, and in this sense it is an interesting work of traditional Orientalist scholarship: it deals with “Oriental” mythology (from the heart of the ex-British Empire) and he writes it from the “metropolis” (or, in this particular case, the cultural heart of the Empire) in order to explicate it or re-tell it for a different audience. And yet precisely because it is also a very personal and probing text, it lacks the traditional heteronormative or oppressive elements that make traditional (nineteenth?) century Orientalist *scholarship* so problematic. Nevertheless, one could perhaps try to place it amongst the many Orientalist personal travel narratives (in the spirit of Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*, for example) and yet it does not seem to fit neatly in that category either. How shall we label it then?

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It is interesting to note that, like Borges in the infamous story about the Master of Ceremonies Kotsuke no Tsuke and in *Averroes*, Paz opens this book with an epigraph taken from British Oriental(ist) scholarship: John Dowson’s *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*. And yet, like Borges, Paz’s work is not following this Orientalist tradition, it takes it as a starting point or pretext only to put it in question, deconstruct it and move onto other textual relationships. Paz’s work is in flux, to remember some of the key words associated with Orientalism in this study. The very nature of *The Monkey Grammarian* is becoming:

lluvia de universos sobre cuerpo de Esplendor, que no es cuerpo sino el río de signos de su cuerpo, corriente de vibraciones y de sensaciones de percepciones de imágenes de sensaciones de vibraciones, caída de lo blanco en lo negro, lo negro en lo blanco, lo blanco en lo blanco [...] escisión y proliferación y disipación, plethora y abolición, partes que se reparten, signos de la totalidad que sin cesar se divide, cadena de las percepciones de las sensaciones del cuerpo total que se divide. (61)¹⁶

This divided body becoming other, dissipating, not only echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s own preoccupations with becoming but illustrates my notion of the “Oriental” presence in Latin American literature as something, perhaps a sign or multiplicity of signs (as we shall further see in Sarduy’s work) which is open to otherness, which is undecidable: both same and other, old and new, black and white, etc. at the same time.

And it is in this sense that the identity of Paz’s eponymous hero is interesting: who is this Monkey Grammarian? Not only the monkey-god Hanuman who gives us the alphabet but also a human being—we are grammatical primates—i.e. the author who creates language and the reader who reconstructs it endlessly. Thus, *El mono gramático* (from the Spanish “mono” as both as monkey grammarian and as a deconstruction of mono—or hetero—grammar) is a work about language deconstructing itself, about ruins: this is a “story” where elements disappear and turn up in different

sections, which begins in medias res and which never ends, where the “Occident”—which could be manifested in the *Spanish* language itself—is re-appropriated in a non-colonial context, turned alien, becomes other, and where the Orient doesn’t end or begin, cannot be contained and controlled but is in constant, fluid, poetic (in the sense of generative/creative) becoming.

NEW TOPOGRAPHIES: SARDUY’S ELLIPTIC BAROQUE

Another way of observing the poetic presence of “the Orient” in Latin America is through Severo Sarduy’s baroque figure of the ellipse: with its de-centering two centers, it serves as an excellent visual model for my own interest in questioning and re-framing Orientalism in the relationship between Latin America and the so-called Orient. The ellipse illustrates an incessant rotation from one loop to another, built in opposition the European circle, which is one-centered. According to Sarduy, the baroque ellipse gives us a new way of *looking at* the world.

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Nevertheless, Kushigian claims that in the ellipse “something is missing that would make it a perfect circle” (73). Here, Kushigian’s argument still seems to point to the European circle as ideal, whereby the ellipse can only be seen as a flawed circle. I counter that in Sarduy’s neobaroque ellipse something is added, albeit paradoxically by subtraction: there is something more, not something less. The ellipse in Sarduy resembles what Paz writes in *Monkey Grammarian*: “No hay fin y tampoco hay principio: todo es centro. Ni antes ni después, ni adelante ni atrás, ni afuera ni adentro: todo está en todo” (133).¹⁷ While Kushigian claims that etymologically an elision (something less) is the case, I would argue that something being elided—erased—means that there is still something there—if only a trace—something missing but *something*, not nothing. And it is also interesting to note that Sarduy argues that the neobaroque (and its incarnation in the ellipse) is, precisely, a way to counter the destructive legacy of colonialism.¹⁸

In Sarduy’s ellipse there is no inside and outside, no self and other, no traditional binary: it is truly polyvalent. The ellipse opens the possibility of freedom that the circle withholds: the world opens up, the possibilities multiply. This is the case with Auxilio and Socorro and their multiple reincarnations, disguises and alter-egos in Sarduy’s 1967 novel, *De donde son los cantantes*. These twin characters embody the baroque aesthetics of elliptic polyglossia and multivocality that Sarduy argues for. They are perfect incarnations of an ellipse, twins whose character traits are to be traced and retraced in their various disguises and avatars.

De donde son los cantantes treats syncretism as a form of simultaneous coexistence (literary, racial, cultural). And to a complex cultural mix (Asian, African, European, and Indigenous), Sarduy adds yet another cultural hybrid: the transvestite. This novel

not only experiments with the limits of identity, but as with the Borges' story before, it would seem that this rethinking of identity necessitates pushing the limits of literature itself: bringing about a redefinition of the novelistic genre through poetry, music, painting and philosophy—Sarduy's references are as multifaceted as one of Socorro's or Auxilio's chandelier earrings. Here the so-called Orient is tattoo, torture, theatre, mask, beauty, the unattainable love object, a prostitute, smoke and mirrors, a Cuban neighborhood, a folk song.

For the purposes of this brief study, I will focus only on the main chapter dealing with the Chinese aspect of Cuban culture, titled "Junto al río de Cenizas de Rosa" ("Next to the River of Rose Ashes"). This chapter, featuring the twins Auxilio Chong and Socorro Si-Yuen (Help and Aide), is an homage to the Shanghai burlesque theatre in Havana. The burlesque is then turned hyper-Cuban, when referred to as the Opera del Barrio de Changai (from Chango, the Orisha and Shanghai, 111). In it we have a number of "Chinese" characters, which are and are not the same as Auxilio and Socorro, better known as the "Ever-Presents" (111). The main ones are: Flor de Loto Junto al Río de Cenizas de Rosa,¹⁹ who dances the Cantonese Mambo (110) and who is, as most characters in this novel, a double character—the same and other, reflections in a mirror: a transvestite who is also the Guayabera and slack-wearing elusive, skinny man. There is also Carita de Dragon,²⁰ the tattoo and torture artist and La Venerable,²¹ the old washing lady who used to be an imperial concubine. But then we also have a most interesting moment when Auxilio passes around photos of her "travels" wearing a Guayabera—like Flor's skinny double—and a painted yellow face, and others where she's dressed as a Ming Empress (98), sipping tea in Constantinople. The double heroines who possess the secret of the "seventy-eight metamorphoses" (112) incarnate every aspect of Cuban culture, they are the "Oriental" in flux: always becoming, always changing, they are open ellipse, never closed circle.²²

Sarduy's characters do not have a fixed identity: they are both male and female, "Oriental," "Occidental," high and low cultured, allegorical and real, etc. He deconstructs binaries and creates the literary mestizaje equivalent of the Latin American baroque churches of the seventeenth century.

This simultaneity, again, would oppose the traditional binary opposition of Orientalism in which the Self and the Other are necessarily separate and mutually exclusive (if not also in a relationship of domination). Sarduy's novel posits a flowing identity: both one and the other at the same time, multi-faceted and de-centered, like a crystal. This is achieved through discourse and what Kushigian calls in Sarduy "the rhetoric of discourse" (72). This rhetoric of discourse in Sarduy, has to do specifically with the notion that "todo es carnaval, todo es parodia, todo es risa"²³ (in Kushigian 76). And this parody would then have to do with the choteo, the alternation between high and low discourses the mock-heroic nature of Sarduy's prose, which is indeed carnivalesque and full of what Bakhtin calls the spirit of folk laughter.²⁴

Nonetheless, Kushigian argues that “Hispanic Orientalism affords Sarduy an appreciation of the Other that enhances an understanding of Western thought” (78). But what if the opposite were true? Her claim once more tends to give precedence and importance to “Western thought” over other forms of thought, something that, I believe, is completely absent in Sarduy. In his prose, absolutely *all* levels of discourse interact simultaneously and *at the same level*, which is what makes it absolutely polyphonic, baroque and carnivalesque. As Sarduy himself would say, “the rest is Christianizing translation, [...] real superficiality” (in Kushigian 78). Thus, while Sarduy’s own parodic baroque mirror-game plays with surfaces and their mutation, it also touches something deeply anti-Orientalist (here I’m using the term in Said’s original negative connotation of “Orientalism”). In Sarduy, the surface is so layered: it becomes deep, vertical in its horizontality. Gustavo Pellón writes that Sarduy’s writing is “verticalized like Chinese writing” (486).

“Atmósfera China muchachitas!”²⁵ the Changai theatre director hollers in Sarduy’s novel. Therefore “the Oriental” is something as vague as an atmosphere to be painted on and then removed, something ungraspable, a look... Like lipstick, like fake eyelashes and wigs, it is part of the moveability of being, an aesthetic as baroque as a wig with cascading hummingbirds and raspberries, as a character’s name; as an atmosphere to be breathed in at birth. In this sense, Sarduy takes Tablada’s interior “Orient,” which has been bred into him in his mother’s womb and flows in his veins, to a deeper level: the paradoxically multileveled surface of being.

The answer to the question implied in the novel’s title, *De donde son los cantantes*, then is a complex one, “... es ausencia pura. No hay respuesta,” writes Sarduy.²⁶ Or perhaps his question has many answers—including laughter—infinite possibilities and variations, it is a true baroque concert.

Therefore, if for Said the Orient is one of two elements in a binary (an oppositional relationship), in this brief sampling of Latin American works, the Orient is a different kind of duplication: a mirror image to be repeated *ad infinitum*, to become and transform, an *added* element that, *mutatis mutandis*, precisely disturbs and comfortable dualism. In these texts, Orient and Occident are no longer in binary and oppositional relation, their relationship can be complicated, added to, retraced in a new possible geo-map: the *ellipse*.

Through these authors’ different interpretations of polyglossia and polyvocality (whether they specifically refer to them as baroque or not), through the many voices that speak *at the same time* through the same text, we have a kind of equalizing principle created that counters traditional Orientalism. Here there is not one voice speaking over another, but sheer simultaneity. Thus, these Latin American texts prove to be productive alternative answers to the traditional Orient-Occident relation of power implied in Said’s Orientalism. They complicate it, trouble the dichotomic mix by throwing in a myriad other names, voices, mirror-images, singers.

These apuntes, or notes on Orientalism in Latin America can only be a brief noting, a noticing; a few notes but also a pointing at, a pointing towards in many directions simultaneously, an essay that is true to its name, *essay*, a sampler, an appetizer of what the Latin American literary tradition can offer in terms of a new and polymorphic relationship and presence of the so-called Oriental in its literature.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 I.e. the space/place/trope which is synonymous to "Orient" and which likewise includes the Middle East, and Asia.
- 2 A simple yet telling example of this lack of clear boundaries in Latin America still today is the use of the word "Indios" (Indians) to call the native inhabitants of the Americas: the term originates with Columbus' original confusion, when, thinking he had arrived to India, he began calling the people "Indians" and yet this term remains in use, bringing to life this original "Orient" in every day Latin America.
- 3 The use of the aforementioned word "Indio" in different contexts would prove yet again to be a telling example of this. Another important thing to mention would be, for example, the colonial and imperialistic dynamics at play for many centuries and still today within the so-called Orient, Japan being a prime example of this, but also China.
- 4 The expanded list of authors would not only include Darío, Tablada, Borges, Paz and Sarduy but would also include Efrén Rebolledo, Lezama Lima and Elizondo to mention only a few other Latin American authors who deal with the so-called Oriental in their work in very different ways.

- 5 “Perhaps my mother, when she held me inside her / looked much at the Buddhas, the lotus flowers, and the magnific / Nippon art and all that which the strange ships / poured upon the beaches of the Pacific” (my translation).
- 6 For more on this, please see Rodrigo Rivero Lake’s *Namban México*, for example.
- 7 “And in the onyx cup that is my heart, / infusing my blood with its esoteric virtue / blooms a miraculous / Japanese cherry!” (my translation).
- 8 “I am your Mikado’s serf! / I am the bonzo of your pagodas!” (my translation).
- 9 “In my burning blood’s veins runs / the intimate song of your [Japan’s] epopee” (my translation).
- 10 There is no word for “mestizo/a” or “mestizaje” in English (and this lack of such a word in a language that has a bounteous vocabulary is indeed a telling clue of Anglo racial policies while colonizing), but I find that “hybrid” and “hybridity” are productive and expansive alternatives.
- 11 “In this story I wanted to narrate the history of a defeat” (my translation).
- 12 Averroes fails to translate “comedy” and “tragedy” and thus disappears, or it may be the narrator’s failure to find *his* Averroes, who in turn is himself.
- 13 For instance, when the children play at being the mosque, minaret and muezzin under Averroes’ window, Averroes is given a theatrical clue for his search that goes ignored: they are acting out a scene, mimesis of action. Then at the dinner, Abdulcasim mentions theatre (not the word, though) in China (a reference to an Orient more removed) and yet goes unheeded.
- 14 “And moreover, fruits and trees belong to the natural world, but writing is an art. To go from a leaf to a bird is easier than going from a rose to a letter” (my translation).
- 15 “*The Monkey Grammarian* is not an essay or a story, and nonetheless it tells us something” (my translation).
- 16 “Rain of universes over Splendor’s body, which is not a body but a river of signs of its body, a current of vibrations and sensations of perceptions of images of sensations of vibrations, a fall from the white into the black, from the black into the white, the white into the white [...] cleavage and proliferation and dissipation, plethora and abolition, parts which part, signs of a totality which incessantly divides, chain of perceptions of sensations of a total body which divides itself” (my translation).
- 17 “There is no end and there is no beginning: everything is center. No before, no after, no forward, no backward, no inside, no outside: everything is in everything” (my translation). Despite Paz’s use of the words “pure center” here, the essence of what he writes still resembles Sarduy’s ellipse in its simultaneity and non-exclusion.
- 18 Irlemar Chiampi’s *Barroco y modernidad* frames the neobaroque as a postcolonial reconfiguration of the Eurocentric debate over Latin America’s “incomplete” modernity. The neobaroque is thus constituted “as an archaeology of the modern, one that allows us to reinterpret Latin American experience as a dissonant modernity” (18). Jean Franco also points to the innovations of the literary canon found in the essays of Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy and others, in particular those essays that study the baroque and she affirms that they “inverted the metropolis-periphery relationship in which it had traditionally been the metropolis which read, researched, observed and recovered information about the periphery” (504-05).
- 19 Lotus Flower Next to the River of Rose Ashes.
- 20 Little Dragon Face.
- 21 The Venerable One.
- 22 It is also important to note that in everything “Oriental” that comes up in this chapter, “al nivel temático al igual que al estilístico el cubano logra un vaivén constante de mistificación y desmitifi-

cación. Nunca deja que el exotismo aflore, sin acompañarlo de ingrediente incongruo que lo desmone [...]" ("On the thematic level, as well as the stylistic one, [Sarduy] achieves a constant ebb and flow of mystification and demystification. He never allows for exoticism to bloom without accompanying it with an incongruous ingredient that will deconstruct it" (489, my translation).

- 23 "Everything is carnival, parody, laughter" (my translation).
- 24 Kushigian translates "choteo" into English as raspberry, which is specifically fitting in the analysis of *De donde son los cantantes* since the novel opens with cascading *frambuesas*.
- 25 "Chinese atmosphere ladies!"
- 26 "It is pure absence. There is no answer" (my translation).