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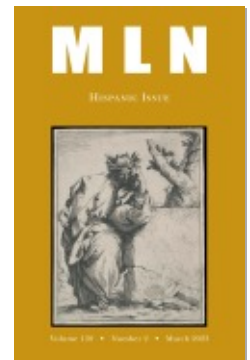
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Deus Ex Machina: Contemporary Argentina's Literature of Infrastructure



D. Bret Leraul

Infrastructure

This article traces the growth of representations of literary infrastructure in Argentinean literature parallel to the rise of global finance capital and the successive price and debt crises it has visited upon the Argentinean economy since the restoration of liberal democracy in 1983. I argue that as Argentina's robust mid-century literary institution has declined, the concrete organizations that constitute its infrastructure—for example publishing houses, educational institutions, cultural bureaucracies—become fodder for literary fiction.¹ In short, literature represents its own infrastructure when that infrastructure comes to present a problem. My claim rests at once on the logics of the literary institution and literary form as well as the history of Argentina's political economy and its effect on cultural institutions. This is at once a position paper about methods of cultural analysis and an outline for an institutionalist history of contemporary Argentinean

¹While infrastructure is defined below, my understanding of institution follows that of French sociologist Luc Boltanski. For Boltanski, an institution is a “bodiless being” whose role is above all to establish the silent, semantic commons of communication, beyond the contract of sender and receiver” (75). The properly semantic function of institutions rests on the illocutionary force of “denominating the whatness of what is” (75), which is not to be confused with the material, coercive force of the policing functions of “administrations” and the coordinating functions of “organizations” (79).

literature culminating in a close reading of two works, César Aira's *El congreso de la literatura* (1996) and Pola Oloixarac's *Mona* (2018), that are exemplary of what I call Argentina's literature of infrastructure.

The literature of infrastructure is part of the broader trend of literary self-referentiality at the end of the twentieth century.² But where metafiction and autofiction tend to buoy the illusion of literary autonomy, the literature of infrastructure employs these techniques to highlight literature's heteronomy. Extending the topological metaphor of the term "infrastructure," we might say that the literature of infrastructure is latent within the literatures of self-reference. That is to say, all metafiction (portrait of the text) or autofiction (portrait of the artist) is potentially literature of infrastructure (portrait of the institution) if the material conditions are right from the vantage point of the periodizing critic, that is, when the infrastructure of literature becomes a problem forcing itself into the literary consciousness.

Beginning in the 1990s, meta- and autofictional tropes that had centered on literary subjects (writers and readers) grew to include representations of the shifting infrastructure of the literary institution: for example Daniel Link's blog and internet novels that represent the shifting media of everyday and literary writing; Mario Levrero's and Alan Pauls's representations of literary agents and granting institutions; Ricardo Piglia's and Pola Oloixarac's campus novels; and, as I explore below, César Aira's and Oloixarac's novels about literary conferences. I would also include under the literature of infrastructure what anglophone critics have termed the "theory novel" which directly or indirectly represents the theoretical apparatus that came to dominate literary studies over the course of the twentieth century.³ Picking up the torch of an older tradition of speculative Argentinean literature, whose most famous torchbearer is certainly Jorge Luis Borges, works by Ricardo Piglia, Héctor Libertella, Martín Kohan, and Mario Ortiz

²This category of self-referential literature, including the literature of infrastructure, can be seen as part of what Beatriz Sarlo and Alberto Giordano have identified as the "subjective turn" in Argentinean letters, even though they focus on *testimonio*, essay, and other forms of life writing rather than meta- or autofiction. Meta- and autofiction are pillars of what goes under the heading of postmodern fiction in the anglosphere. According to Linda Hutcheon, one of the genre's foremost students, metafiction enacts a bringing to consciousness of the text "as discourse *within* and *about* discourse" that plays on the indistinction of "actor and spectator, author and co-creating reader" (72). Writing about contemporary Spanish fiction, Robert Spire concurs that: "The language of metafiction tends to be more opaque in that the reader does not look through it so much as at it" (9). Margaret Rose adds that metafiction represents the "whole process of text-reception within the text itself" (64).

³See Huehls and Ryan.

represent or perform the theoretical discourse of a canon of (post) structuralist and post-Marxist theory that was institutionalized along with the restitution of university autonomy in the mid-1980s.

What drives all this self-reference? Where some see in self-referential literatures the narcissism and sophistication that can only result from a highly autonomous literary field, the literature of infrastructure suggests something else. Self-reference may not be a narcissistic choice to refer to oneself—whether that self is a literary subject, object, or institution—but rather the impossibility of referring to other things. As literature's social function has been eclipsed, its purchase on anything beyond its increasingly narrow confines wanes. The literature of infrastructure is a baring-the-device in an expanded sense that is less defamiliarization than an act of bearing witness to and dwelling in the ruins of the national-romantic literary project and corresponding organization of economies in terms of the nation-state.⁴ Like Heidegger's hammer, these institutions force themselves into our collective consciousness at the moment of their inutility, whether they have malfunctioned, ceased to exist or no longer serve their purpose. The literature of infrastructure suggests the vestigial nature of today's literature, like some shriveled appendix of late-capitalist culture.

To invoke literature's infrastructure is to recall the vulgar Marxist distinction between infrastructure and superstructure and its twentieth-century collision with longstanding debates about the autonomy of art that continue to this day in (post-)Marxist literary criticism.⁵ In Argentinean letters, the most recent incarnation of this debate is Josefina Ludmer's theory of postautonomous literature, first published online and later elaborated in the book-length essay *Aquí América Latina* (2010). Postautonomous literature describes those literary practices that emerge from a world in which "everything cultural (and literary) is economic and everything economic is cultural (and literary)" and "reality (thought in terms of the mass media which is engaged in constantly constructing it) is fiction and fiction reality" (Ludmer 115). Postautonomous literature possesses neither literary value nor the power of critique, "the politics proper to it" (154). But as the autonomous mode of reading wanes, it gives way to other modes rooted in the "public imagination" of our late capitalist societies of

⁴For this particular framing of the end-of-literature thesis, see Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*, especially Chapters 3, 6, and 11.

⁵For a historical example, see the so-called expressionist debate among members of the Frankfurt School. More contemporary takes in Marxist cultural criticism include Beech, Brouillette, Brown, La Berge, Stakemeier and Vishmidt.

digitized spectacle, modes of reading with neither author nor text (12) that dedifferentiate the binaries that sustain the ontological status of cherished Western institutions, in short, modes of reading proximal to the poststructuralism that Ludmer helped to institutionalize as literary theory beginning with her legendary 1985 seminars at the University of Buenos Aires but now inflected by the “politics” of the postautonomist multitude in all its ambivalence.

Ludmer dedicates much of *Aquí América Latina* to the identification of a corpus of objects and an inventory of positions within a postautonomous literary field. Her criteria for constructing this corpus are the temporal and spatial coordinates of advanced capitalism in Latin America, for example, the null time of life online or the urban island of Latin American megalopolises swollen by rural migrants whose movement challenges the space-time of Latin American nationalisms. There is little doubt that since the late 1990s the literary fields in Argentina, Latin America, and regions around the world have undergone a series of profound changes. And there is no doubt that we can read these changes in the representational content of the works that are denominated as literature by publishers, critics, and teachers. But rather than rely on the shifting experiences and representations of space and time under advanced capitalism and its technologies of capture and control, I think we can identify a corpus of texts that speaks to Ludmer’s postautonomous condition of literature by focusing on the collapsing infrastructure of an always already heteronomous literary institution. Although from an institutionalist perspective like mine, the implication that literature was ever autonomous in any practical sense is untenable, the term postautonomy is felicitous because it captures the ideological conditions of possibility for the recognition of the literature of infrastructure, that is, a literary field must first be able to conceive itself as autonomous in order for the problem of its infrastructure to represent a dissonance strong enough to find literary expression.

Ludmer’s theory of postautonomous literature struck a chord because it pointedly theorized a broader critical awareness of the breakdown of Argentina’s literary infrastructure. Beginning in the late-1980s, a slow trickle of social and media histories of the book evinces this growing infrastructural turn in Argentinean literary criticism.⁶ In addition to these foundational studies, we can add recent works in

⁶See Sarlo (1986), Prieto (1988), Altamirano and Sarlo (1990), Sagastizábal (1995), Getino (1995), Gutiérrez and Romero (1995), De Diego (2001).

book history by Sagastizabal, De Diego, Botto, Szpilbarg and others.⁷ Many recent contributions frame their interventions in terms of Ludmer's postautonomous literature.⁸ Craig Epplin's *Late Book Culture in Argentina* is a recent example. According to Epplin, late book culture is "a transitional period in which the status of the book as a literary medium is increasingly uncertain," a period in which

the book becomes a problem, a fragile object of inquiry. Or, from another perspective, it becomes a solution, a hybrid object of conceptual and material durability. In both cases, the specific character of the medium itself comes to matter a great deal, if only because other literary interfaces consistently place it in relief... Theirs is the world of books in a moment when the book cannot be taken for granted. (3–4)

Late book culture becomes a meaningful category of historical analysis for similar reasons to the literature of infrastructure. Both literary infrastructure and the materiality of the book are cast "in relief" by shifting contexts that mean that neither can be "taken for granted" any longer. The two analytics differ in the relations between text and context that they presuppose. As this passage and the term "book culture" evince, Epplin's study tends to conflate medium (writing), support (book), and institution (literature). A cursory glance at contemporary Argentinean publishing and cultural consumption belies such a conflation. Fictional narrative, not even those select texts deemed "literature" that Epplin and I study, comprises only a fraction of the number of volumes and titles published and purchased in the country (*Encuesta Nacional* 26; *Informe de Producción* 11). Despite Epplin's claim that literary autonomy has never existed—insofar as autonomy is understood as freedom from institutional vectors of coercion and control such as market, church, and state—to conflate book and literature, medium and institution pulls his study in contradictory directions. On the one hand, it allows the literary to reify into an aesthetic quality, a position associated with advocates of literary autonomy. On the other hand, it reifies literature as mere commodity, a position associated with advocates of literary heteronomy. In both, Epplin's focus on the materiality of the book and its shifting context in a complex media ecology deemphasizes the social constitution and

⁷The first *Coloquio Argentino de Estudios sobre el Libro y la Edición*, celebrated in 2012 at the Universidad de la Plata, marks the consolidation of the field of book history in Argentina.

⁸Like Epplin, a recent essay by Brian Whitener and Stephen Buttes' response similarly engage the infrastructure of literature by taking up Ludmer's provocation.

determination of his categories of analysis.⁹ This article adds to Epplin's media theoretic with its reifying tendencies a focus on the relationship between literature and its infrastructure understood as historically embedded repertoires of social relations, in short, as institutions.

Among the elements of our built environment, infrastructure holds a particular place in the economy of attention. On the one hand, infrastructure is that which facilitates the social metabolism of nature. It is for this same reason that infrastructure often becomes apparent when it fails. This is not to say that infrastructure is only apparent when it breaks down or that it is always invisible when it is working. The hypervisibility of infrastructure projects has long been wielded by developmentalist regimes around the world to shape and harness collective desire, a process Brian Larkin calls the "poetics of infrastructure" (334-36). And of course, infrastructure's (in)visibility and (dis)functionality are relative to particular subject positions (Nemser 17; Star 381-82); for those whose work involves the creation, maintenance, and destruction of it, infrastructure is as visible as a set of stairs to a wheelchair user. Even as infrastructure operates in poetic or spectacular registers, even as the aesthetic particularity of perception, sensation, and embodied experience necessarily relativizes those attributes, the specificity of the category of infrastructure remains bound to its functionality and therefore invisibility for the hegemonic user, those forms of life to whose measure the lifeworld is built through the instrumentalization of other lives.

While infrastructure is often associated with brute matter, the structuring oppositions between words and things, superstructure and infrastructure obscure the dialectical, metabolic, osmotic, autopoietic and other relational modalities that obtain between humans, the rest of nature, and our built environments. Indeed, fetishizing brute matter reifies the social relations of production that Western Marxism saw as the preeminent face of domination under capitalism. For this reason, I want to understand infrastructure socially and relationally as not only the elements of our built environment that facilitate our social metabolism of nature but also as the repertoires of social relations that constitute and construct those environments in the first place. In short, an infrastructural lens hopes to advance the dereification of the capitalist lifeworld, in this case the dereification of its literary culture.

⁹Some scholarship that subscribes to a materialist worldview, for example in media theory or communications, can end up fetishizing the material and in so doing redouble the reification of social relations that makes the capitalist lifeworld appear as an immutable second nature.

Political Economy of the Book

My phenomenologically inflected thesis holds that the infrastructure of the literary institution enters the representational content of the contemporary Argentinean novel because that infrastructure is broken. The historical specificity of this corpus has two factors. The first, is the historical reality of a once-robust literary infrastructure in the mid-twentieth century consisting of a booming book industry and sophisticated critical apparatus in both journalism and the university and capable of supporting professional authors. These are the social indicators of what we often mistakenly call the autonomy of the literary field. The second factor, referenced above, is the confluence of the breakdown of these material conditions with a literature of self-reference that develops in part as a response to these material conditions. An infrastructural lens therefore seeks to ground literary history and genre analysis in the political economy of the book.

"Autonomy"

From the late 1930s into the 1970s, Argentina's book industry dominated Spanish-language publishing. The mid-century golden years have late-nineteenth-century foundations in the popular libraries, literacy campaigns, and formal education drive promoted by the Generación de '37 which included Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and other reform-minded liberals. In the wake of the university reform movement that began at the University of Córdoba in 1918, Manuel Rojas would take up the country's first chair of literary studies at the University of Buenos Aires. The young department would play host to the great essayists and literary critics of the thirties and forties including Alfonso Reyes and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. State-led factors like these coincided with capital accumulation fueled by the internal colonization of the countryside through railroads funded by loans from British capital, leading to a growth in cultural consumption among the middle and working classes.

Relative to these fundamental causes, the immediate cause for the boom in Argentinean publishing was more accidental. Beginning in the 1930s, Spanish printers, editors, and publishers fleeing fascism in the wake of the Spanish Civil War brought commercial expertise and cosmopolitan ambitions to the Argentinean book industry. The presses they founded, including Losada (1938) Sudamericana (1939) and Emecé (1939), would bring Latin American and Argentinean

literature to the world—a task made easier by the vacuum left by the censoring and decline of the Spanish book industry. There is no clearer expression of the professionalization of publishing during this period than the 1938 founding of the Cámara Argentina del Libro (CAL), the book industry's first professional association and lobby.

The consolidation of Argentina's book industry bore fruit on the literary scene. The increasing professionalization of Argentinean authors—who, to be sure, still worked their second jobs as librarians (Borges), educators (Viñas), translators (Cortázar), editors (Piglia), and booksellers (Gusmán)—heralded the entrance into Argentinean letters of the burgeoning middle classes, whose aspirations were buoyed by a more favorable distribution of national wealth under the Peronist compromise. The golden age of the book industry in the preceding decades gave way to a rich literary and critical scene. Cultural journalism flourished beyond the pages of the feuilleton in legendary journals like *Contorno* (1953–1959), *El escarabajo de oro* (1961–1974), *Los Libros* (1969–1976), *El Ornitorrinco* (1977–1986), and *Punto de vista* (1981–2008). On the state-sponsored end of the spectrum, the board of regents for the University of Buenos Aires founded the Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires (Eudeba) under the directorship of Boris Spivacow focused on Argentinean authors, the domestic market, and an innovative distribution model through Eudeba-branded kiosks. Spivacow's populist principle was reflected in the press's motto: “libros a todos... al precio de un kilo de pan.” With the 1966 intervention of the University of Buenos Aires by the Onganía dictatorship, Spivacow and other editors at Eudeba founded the Centro Editor America Latina (CEAL) that would publish more than 5,000 titles before its closure in 1995. As this brief overview makes clear, by mid-century, the infrastructure of Argentinean literature was a complex network of publishers, printers, distributors, book sellers, educational institutions, and professional associations.

The breakdown of this infrastructure parallels the broader political and economic context. There are many theories about Argentina's decline from its position among the wealthiest of nations in the first half of the twentieth century. From a political perspective, the first blow came from Argentina's increasingly volatile politics culminating in the Videla dictatorship (1976–1983) and the forced disappearance of tens of thousands of leftists and other perceived dissidents. From an economic perspective, the second blow came from an increasingly volatile economy fueled by the rise of global finance capital in the 1970s and compounded by the ideological pendulum swing between

successive regimes, what one Argentinean economist has summarized as “socialism without a plan, capitalism without a market” (Sturzzenecker quoted in: Veigel 20.) Bloated global finance markets sought profits in riskier investments in the Global South which in Argentina fueled growing public foreign debt aggravated by runaway inflation (e.g., the Golpe de Mercado in 1989; the effects of the Tequila Crisis in 1995-96; the effects of the Asian Tiger Crisis, collapse of the Russian ruble, and devaluation of the Brazilian real in 1998-99) and hamstrung monetary policy (e.g., *la tablita* in the 1970s, convertibility in the 1990s) Combined with the fire-sale privatization of state-backed companies, the retreat of social provisioning, and the impunity of government corruption, this marked a new era of unabashed upward wealth redistribution.

Heteronomy

Zooming in we may ask: How does Argentina’s volatile political economy since 1976 affect the infrastructure of literature such that this infrastructure surfaces in the Argentinean literary imaginary beginning in the 1990s? The murderous politics of the last dictatorship devastated the literary field. Authors, critics, publishers, distributors, and readers were systematically silenced, censored, persecuted, jailed, exiled, tortured, and murdered. Drawing on the legal framework implemented during the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía (1966–1970), El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976–1982), as the last dictatorship was euphemistically called, made state repression of culture and ideological production parallel its framing of a neoliberal economic model, its systematic extermination of armed leftist groups, and the dismantling of popular organizations (Invernizzi and Gociol 27–28, 31). After Rodolfo Walsh was gunned down on March 25, 1977, one day after publishing his “Carta abierta a la Junta Militar,” it became clear that no one was safe. At once systematic and capricious, state terrorism targeted those who animated the leading book industry in the Spanish-speaking world, setting the stage for its decline over the last fifty years (Invernizzi and Gociol 58).

The contradictions between the statist, antiliberal military junta and the liberal elites of the political class were reflected in Economy Minister Martínez de Hoz’s simultaneous deregulation of financial markets in 1977 and fixed devaluation of the peso beginning in 1978, what became known as *la tablita* (Veigel 61–62). Both moves applied monetarist neoclassical theory with little concern for the

complex realities of the Argentinean or global economies. Given the statist tendencies of the military rulers and their vested interests in provincial economies and entire industries, Martínez de la Hoz was unable to control the fiscal deficit through compensatory austerity measures, and inflation outpaced the planned devaluation of the peso. The overvaluation of the peso eroded Argentinean companies' international competitiveness and necessitated foreign borrowing to fill the growing current account deficit. The deficit ballooned after the Volcker Shock in the US hiked interest rates on Latin American countries' foreign loans and the ouster of Shah Reza Pahlavi of Iran set off the second oil shock increasing the current account imbalance between oil-exporting countries and oil-importing countries like Argentina. *La tablita* was finally abandoned in 1981. The devaluation of the peso and ensuing economic recession was deepened by the failed South Atlantic War against Great Britain, the Latin American debt crisis of 1982, and internal squabbles between political elites and the military junta that thwarted countercyclical government action.

The return to democracy in 1983 did little to calm Argentina's turbulent political economy. After the political compromises of his first year in office, president Raúl Alfonsín and a team of heterodox economists affiliated with the Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad and headed by Juan Sourrouille began implementing a stabilization plan that would halt Argentina's inertial inflation without reducing wages and profits. Through a combination of price and wage freezes, cuts in government expenditures, tax hikes and increased tax enforcement, changes in central bank policy, and the gradual replacement of the peso with a new currency, the Plan Austral did manage to stabilize the economy by earning the trust of its competing sectors (Veigel 152). Dependent as it was on state intervention, the Plan Austral was vulnerable to the vagaries of politics, and the initial success of the plan rallied Alfonsín's enemies. Domestically, the fixation of wages was determinant: Peronist unions organized two general strikes in 1986; members of Alfonsín's own party, Unión Civil Radical (UCR), militated against the plan for contravening the party's traditional mission to increase wages; and the disgruntled ranks of the military raised the specter of another coup. The pressure proved too great and Alfonsín increased the wages of all public sector employees opening the gates to wage demands from all sectors of the workforce. Internationally, the Baker Plan, which had sought to renegotiate the foreign debt held by developing economies, fell apart in 1986 just as fiscal austerity at Argentina's central bank began to falter. By 1988 inflation returned

and the failure of the last-ditch Plan Primavera, concocted to boost the UCR's chances at the polls that year, pointed the economy again toward crisis. In early 1989, uncertainty about the impending elections and future economic policy set off a panic. Runs on the banks and speculation in the austral in February devolved into hoarding and then looting as inflation spiked. By May, Alfonsín declared martial law and by July he had resigned the presidency. The panic of 1989 became known as the Golpe de Mercado not only because capital had conspired against Alfonsín, but because it inaugurated a period of free market fundamentalism under his successor, Carlos Saúl Menem.

In the wake of the Plan Austral debacle, Menem's electoral triumph in 1990 marked the beginning of full-throated Argentinean neoliberalism after years of piecemeal implementation, thanks in no small part to the fact that it came from the unlikeliest of sources, the cupolas of the Partido Justicialista with the backing of key sectors of the Peronist movement (Pucciarelli 61-65). This paradoxical *revolución conservadora* put in place the same raft of policies piloted by the Chicago Boys under Pinochet and consolidated in the capitalist center under Thatcher and Reagan: structural reform of the state (deregulation); opening of the economy to international markets (free trade); privatization of state-backed enterprises and social services (austerity), all in support of the new financialized regimes of capital accumulation by dispossession to stave off global capital's falling rate of profit and secular decline. Menem and his economy minister Domingo Cavallo could carry out these fundamental changes in the realm of production and circulation despite opposition by Argentina's powerful unions thanks to the stability they achieved in the sphere of consumption (Heredia 199-201). Cavallo's *Ley de convertibilidad* tamed inflation almost overnight by fixing the exchange rate of the austral and then the peso to the dollar and backing the national currency with dollar reserves. Like *la tablita* of the late-1970s, it also overvalued the peso, inflated public and private debt, and placed the Argentinean economy at the whims of foreign capital. Looking back from the economic rubble left in the wake of Menem's two terms in office, the "miraculous" growth of the nineties achieved through liberalization and precaritization under the aegis of convertibility appears as outright fraud.

The book industry suffered the effects of this period of inflation and failed stabilization plans, losing international competitiveness thanks to the overvaluation of the peso. Law 20380 for the Promotion of the Argentinean Book passed in 1973 and included measures to subsidize book exports, but it never went into effect and was eventu-

ally repealed in 2001. Fiscal policy in this period also inflated the cost of key inputs like paper and made accessing financing difficult (De Diego, "1976-1989" 187). During the early years of the dictatorship under the price controls of *la tablita*, political crisis devastated the book industry dropping the number of volumes published from 50 million in 1974 to 17 million in 1979 (Getino 56). In the period spanning the end of *la tablita* and sharp devaluation of the peso, the ratio of book exports to imports inverted: in 1974 Argentina's publisher exported 16.6 million volumes and imported 9.4 million; in 1981, the year of the final devaluation of the peso, the country exported 7.7 million volumes and imported 55 million (Schmucler 208). And if that were not enough, the arrival of the photocopier combined with an antiquated and largely unenforced intellectual property law from 1933 (Law 11723) eroded the crucial university readership. In the face of these losses both at home and abroad, from the 1980s onward, publishing Argentinean literature for the internal market became a "survival strategy" for Argentinean presses (De Diego, "1976-1989" 196).

According to José Luis de Diego, the post-dictatorship literary field of the 1980s and 90s responded first to its political and then to its economic context, represented by new technologies. Immediately following the return to democracy, the need to reckon with the experiences of *los años de plomo* impelled the rise of non-fiction including journalistic and historical narratives (de Diego, "1976-1989" 200). The trend would prove to be a common one across Latin America giving rise to genres like *testimonio* and *la nueva crónica*. Combined with an incipient capitalist realism and the spread of its corresponding culture of narcissistic individualism, this would bring about the *giro subjetivo* decried by Beatriz Sarlo for heralding the closure of an empathic literary imagination and the possibilities for solidarity it harbors. In the period following the failure of the Plan Austral leading up to the unbridled neoliberalism of the Menem years, literature began to contend with the spread of audiovisual media and their supports (film, video, cable, personal computers) (De Diego, "1976-1989" 201). In the face of a proliferating culture industry, the literary field redoubled its claims to autonomy and renounced the political commitments and ethical responsibilities of yesteryear for the escapism of a Grupo Shang-hai (Daniel Guebel, Martín Caparrós, Sergio Chejfec, Jorge Dorio, Luis Chitarroni); the irreverence of a *Revista Babel*, which claimed to publish "todo sobre los libros que nadie puede comprar"; or the hermetic language games of an ascendent post-structuralist literary theory (Drucaroff 55-56; Patiño; Riveiro, "Revisiting Literary Value"

8). Whether we call it exhaustion or decadence, the post-dictatorship literary field when faced with adversity turned inward, away from its material conditions of possibility and any possible intervention into a reality beyond its own weakening institutions. Like the price of the peso under Menem's *Ley de convertibilidad*, literature began to lose all reference to a reality beyond that of its own making.

If from 1976 to 1989 the Argentinean book industry was wracked by the caprice of authoritarianism and inflation, the relative stability of the Menem years consolidated what remained of the book industry in the hands of multinational conglomerates. Monetary control provided a stable economic environment attractive to foreign capital, and, in the absence of any regulation promoting or sheltering Argentina's book industry, presses were sold to the highest bidder. Take the example of Sudamericana, the emblematic Argentinean publisher of García Márquez and Cortázar that did so much to bring about the boom in Latin American literature (De Diego, "Concentración" 144). In 1984, Sudamericana had already entered into an agreement with the Spanish publishing group Planeta, but by the end of the 1990s even that was unsustainable. In 1998 Random House-Mondadori, a Spanish subsidiary of Random House US, purchased Sudamericana months before the German conglomerate Bertelsmann purchased a majority stake in Random House making it the largest publisher in the world. Materially and symbolically, 1998 marks the end of Argentina's large-scale international publishing industry (Botto 225). Thanks to convertibility, an overvalued peso created high prices (in dollar terms) on the domestic market (in dollar terms) so that the international book conglomerates (whose international transactions are all denominated in dollars) achieved extraordinary profits throughout the 1990s. Multinational conglomeration also reduced production costs, consolidated the workforce, and put downward pressure on wages, e.g., in the two-year period between 1996 and 1998 wages in the publishing sector dropped 24%. While in the 1990s the total number of books printed in Argentina rebounded from the historic lows of the 1980s, fewer of those books were by Argentinean authors and profits from their sales accumulated elsewhere (Botto 219). Heading into the twenty-first century, multinational publishing conglomerates dominated 75% of the Argentinean book market. It is in this cultural and political economy that the consecration of César Aira's literary project begins, a process to which we now turn.

Literature

Aira's Conference

Born in Coronel Pringels in 1949, César Aira's literary career spans the period in which the literature of infrastructure incubates and surfaces, namely the period of political and economic instability and neoliberal reforms in the 80s and 90s that decimated Argentinean publishing. Despite the poor reception of his early works, Aira's star rose during the Menem years and he was fully consecrated in the wake of the 2001 financial crisis, a fact indicated by the international circulation of his books, including the first edition of *El congreso de literatura*, published by Venezuela's Universidad de los Andes in 1997 (Riveiro, "Latin American Publishing" 58), and the publication of monographs dedicated to his work, such as Sandra Contreras's *Las vueltas de César Aira* (2001).

Although much of Aira's literature recurs to metafiction, *El congreso de literatura* is perhaps his most metafictional work for its sustained thematization not only of literary production but also the reproductive labors that institute the literary field. The novel narrates the first-person account of an author, César, who attends a literary conference in Caracas at which Carlos Fuentes, one of the leading lights of the Latin American Boom, is the guest of honor. The narrator, as it turns out, is also a mad scientist who has invented a machine to raise an army of Fuentes clones for the purpose of world domination. Unfortunately, the wasps genetically engineered to gather his genetic material mistakenly sample Fuentes's blue silk tie which the narrator's cloning machine, "set to 'genius' mode," magnifies into gigantic blue silk worms that writhe down the slopes of the mountains ringing Caracas destroying everything in their wake (103).

The novel's conceit provides the armature for a host of metafictional reflections: about the nature of linguistic reference and the fine line that separates fiction from reality, about narrative technique and narrative theory. Even the novel's thematics of artificial reproduction—cloning, genetic engineering, an embedded dramaturgical adaptation of the Book of Genesis and Eve's creation from Adam's rib—parallel the artificial reproducibility of literature's print medium and the artifice of the narrative (re)production of worlds. This parallel is embodied in the figure of César—at once translator, author, and mad scientist—whose scientific mishap engenders a state of aesthetic contemplation as the protagonist gazes upon the sublime beauty of the giant blue

worms, his “obra maestra,” before using mirror reflections—another artificial reproduction—to return them to their molecular scale (113).

Alongside these traditional and explicit metafictional tropes, we also find the more implicit metafictional gestures typical of the literature of infrastructure in the novel’s thematization of the institutional inscription of literary work. Most obvious is the novel’s setting at a literary conference, albeit one that the narrator does not attend and that remains a mere proscenium to the action. In this, Aira reinscribes the invisibilization of infrastructure, the reproductive labor of the critics, professors, teachers, and students that (re)constitute the literary institution. The narrator criticizes the critics thronging the conference as clones for their modish, celebrity-driven taste who, like the genetically modified and cloned wasps that could not distinguish “dónde terminada el hombre y empezaba su ropa,” similarly have “dificultades para decir dónde terminada el hombre y dónde empezaban sus libros; para ellos también todo era ‘Carlos Fuentes’” (102). At the same time, it is this same literary institution that, along with Philosophy, History, “los Clásicos,” distinguishes high from low culture and invests the upper classes with their cultural capital, their ideological legitimation (33). And it is for this reason that the mad scientist César chooses to clone a literary celebrity—a figure at the intersection of high culture and class power—as his vehicle for world domination, and also because cloning members of the upper classes “no le servían... justamente porque tenían tan asegurado el ejercicio del poder último y definitivo” namely economic capital “y lo tenían asegurado en toda la sucesión de generaciones de sí mismos” (33). Despite its absurdist logic and satirical cant, this almost Bourdieusian analysis of the field of cultural production is another stroke in Aira’s portrait of the institution.

The structure of the novel too can be seen as reflecting the infrastructure of late twentieth-century Argentinean literature. Its most memorable episode is its madcap climax and conclusion. Unsurprisingly, the *deus ex machina* of the blue worms is also metafactively inscribed in the diegesis when the narrator stops them with a device called an “Exoscopio,” quite literally a *deus ex machina* borrowed from the previous night’s staging of the author’s play *En la corte de Adán y Eva* by a university theater troupe. This is trademark Aira: an abrupt, unanticipated and often supernatural ending that nonetheless leaves most of the narrative’s threads at loose ends. Early critics of Aira’s work often panned his novels for “falling short” of their promising beginnings, but over the course of the 1990s, the plot twists and

unfinished quality of his narratives became central to increasingly positive appraisals (Riveiro, "Revisiting Literary Value" 7–9). In Aira's self-estimation and subsequent critical assessment of his work, the *deus ex machina* trope stands at the center of his poetics, the famous *huida hacia adelante* or forward flight.

In describing the apocalyptic ending scene, *El congreso's* narrator struggles to give a credible account of the blue worms' appearance. "Esa primera visión era ultramundana... Advierto que decirlo así puede hacer pensar en la escritura automática, pero no hay otro remedio que decirlo. Parece la intromisión de otro argumento... Y sin embargo había una perfecta continuidad que no se había interrumpido en ningún momento." (94) In this passage we find the elements of Aira's poetics as outlined in a speech he delivered at a literary conference held in Caracas in 1993 in honor of Carlos Fuentes and later published as "Ars Narrativa." There Aira defines his "estilo de 'huida hacia adelante'" as "procedimento," "una especie de burocracia artística," and a way of "hacer arte automáticamente... Lo que hace que el arte sea hecho por todos, no por uno." At the same time, this style is as singular as "la completa improvisación definitiva" so that Aira's books become "novelas por accidente" ("Ars Narrativa"). The dialectic of difference and repetition, the singular and the copy that constitutes Aira's poetics is thematized in the mad scientist's plan to clone literary genius. As Jorge Panesi puts it, "se repite científicamente lo que la literatura mostró desde siempre con su régimen de repeticiones imposibles: hacer que se repita lo único, lo irrepetible" ("Los nuevos monstruos" 76). It is also structurally reflected in the author's reliance on the *deus ex machina* in order to keep up with the forward flight, the *perpetuum mobile* of his frenetic writing practice. By recurring to the *deus ex machina*, Aira "renounces" and "abandons" the continuity of narrative verisimilitude for the sake of the writing continuum produced by his machinic, procedural poetics.

The *deus ex machina* also (re)produces in readers a paradoxical structure of feeling familiar to Aira's Argentinean audience: at once a faith in miracles and resignation to fate that is born of the precarity of those dominated by machines mistaken for gods. It should come as no surprise, then, that Aira's improvisational poetics and miraculous storylines find favor among readers in the late 1990s when the modernist imaginary of the welfare state with its social provisioning infrastructure gives way from the pressure of neoliberal class warfare and its state form under *Menemismo*. Put differently, Aira's surrealist fables in fact realistically capture the structure of feeling of a society

wracked by inflation, that is, how it feels to be a subject of capital whose alienation subjects one daily to the vicissitudes of systemic, economic forces beyond one's control. In this, I concur with Beatriz Sarlo's asseveration that Aira's "abandono de la trama" and "maravilloso disparatado" in fact cast an ethnographic eye on the present: "salgamos a pasear por un mundo donde no hay argumento sino suma de episodios" ("Sujetos" 3-4).¹⁰

Aira opens *El congreso* with a reflection on the vicissitudes of value during the years of hyperinflation, one that anticipates the novel's reflections on literary value and cultural capital. Part One loosely relates how the narrator solved the enigma of the "Hilo de Macuto," an apparatus that for four hundred years had hidden a pirate's treasure "de valor incalculable" (11-12). The boon is especially significant for the narrator who has lost his modest livelihood as a translator to the inflation crisis that "ha afectado seriamente a la actividad editorial, que paga el periodo previo de euforia" (22). He continues, "La euforia llegó a la sobreoferta. Las librerías se llenaron de libros de producción nacional, y cuando el público debió ajustarse el cinturón, la compra de libros fue lo primero que suspendió... este año pasé desocupado, administrando penosamente mis ahorros y avizorando con ansiedad creciente el futuro" (22). With bitter irony Aira's narrator draws our attention to the truly miraculous, not just the existence of the treasure but the fact that it has retained its value over four centuries "teniendo en cuenta la velocidad a la que se suceden en nuestros países las devaluaciones, los cambios de denominación de la moneda y los planes económicos" (22).

Argentina's hyperinflation in 1989 and 1990 indeed strained credibility. Global finance and international and domestic monetary policy colluded to create realities stranger than fiction such that absurdist fables like Aira's might reasonably be judged ethnographic. The question of value has been central to appraisals of Aira's works. In her seminal monograph on the author, Sandra Contreras argues that Aira's experiments with and eventual adoption of "escritura mala" effects a literary "devaluación" (Contreras 126 ff.). This avant-garde play with aesthetic value parallels the increasing autonomy of prices from values and the purchasing power of money that seems to change as quickly as Aira's plots reverse course. The author's procedure that

¹⁰Dierdra Reber makes a similar claim about Aira as commentator on contemporary life under capitalism. She pits this realist Aira against the critical reception of an avant-garde Aira. My approach is more dialectical and sees the realism of Aira's absurdity given the absurdity of capitalist reality.

takes accidental chance as its operator¹¹ not only produces a writing continuum but an aesthetics of excess that questions the artificial scarcities that seek to stabilize (money) markets. His is an aesthetics of excess in the sense of both abundance and waste, for it captures the euphoria of the golden years of book publishing that precede *El congreso* as well as the euphoria of price inflation that continually lays waste to Argentinean's purchasing power. Indeed, it is Aira's position at the intersection of the "double discourse of value" (Herrnstein-Smith 125–34) that leads Cristian Molina to class his works as "relatos de mercado," texts that thematize the market of symbolic goods and its value dualism. Aira's poetics of forward flight and its corresponding aesthetics of excess pit the value systems of capital and culture against one another while raising the modernist challenge to the aesthetic values of capitalist modernity repeated to the point that it becomes as cliché as the plot twists of Aira's devalued literature. It is little surprise that Aira's work has been canonized, for he treads the well-worn path of modernists and avant-gardes into a place prepared by them in the hearts of literary critics (Speranza 307–311).

At the same time that Aira's star rises amidst the crumbling of Argentina's mass-market publishing industry, his publishing practices also nourish a rich ecosystem of independent, small-scale publishers that has only grown since 2001 (Botto 248–49). From his longstanding relationship with the small, mostly academic press Beatriz Viterbo founded by Sandra Contreras and Adriana Astutti to the imprints of multinational conglomerates like Emecé and more recently Penguin Random House, Aira's delirious literary overproduction "satura el mercado de textos marca Aira" confounding the scarcity logics of literary prestige that cling to the book market by applying the culture industry's logic of excess (Montaldo 14). Like the pairing of Maxi the unemployed, middle-class bodybuilder—an aesthetic practice to be sure—and the informally employed *cartonero* families of Bajo de Flores in *Villa* (2003), Aira's aesthetic turns on the question of value—as does the entire aesthetic tradition harkening back to Alexander Baumgarten. Just as the *cartonero*'s informal work valorizes waste material, aesthetics valorizes excess—in Maxi's case excess energy and time, in Aira's case fiction's excess reality—into something of value whether economic, aesthetic, or otherwise. Neither artisanal aesthetic as Epplin claims nor trash anti-aesthetic as Cecilia Palmeiro does (Epplin 61), Aira's aesthetics of excess, much like his avant-garde positioning in

¹¹See Aira, "La nueva escritura."

the field, is quite traditional, for the aesthetic has long represented that excess not fully accounted for by economic value.

While Aira allows some readers to escape into an absurdist world strangely familiar to their own lived experience, for other readers, the representations of faith in miracles and resignation to fate appear as reasonable affective responses to the failure to realize the infrastructural dreams of modernity, but not necessarily imaginary solutions to or escapes from them. This latter position maps the enigmatic distinction between “azar histórico” and “azar accidental” that Aira mentions in an aside in “Ars Narrativa.” In other words, the eruption of “accidental chance” in Aira’s literature of infrastructure points readers to the “historical chance” of the neoliberal dismantling of the institutional infrastructure that once blunted the material force of accident, transforming events into social regularities while also deriving meaning from disparate facts and brute matter. Growing religious sentiment, belief in miracles, and, more recently, conspiracy theories—in short postsecularism—indicate the crumbling of modernist infrastructure, perhaps nowhere more keenly felt than in Argentina in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Oloixarac’s Conference

The climax of Pola Oloixarac’s *Mona* is no doubt an homage to Aira’s *El congreso de literatura*. During the last of the speeches delivered by a preening group of nominees for the Basske-Wortz literary prize, an enormous fantastical snake from Norse mythology, Jörmungander, arises from the nearby bay as if conjured by the words of the brooding Icelandic poet Ragnar Tertius, bringing earthquakes and floods in its wake. Where Aira’s blue worms grow from the modernist tradition and critiques of the hybris of techno-scientific progress, Oloixarac’s Jörmungander arises from the eschatological waters of the anthropocene. For while Aira’s mad scientist lights upon a technological solution that keeps the faith of capitalist modernity, Oloixarac’s Mona Tarile-Byrne impassively watches as a tidal wave consumes the nominees one by one as she muses about the resurgence of this myth amidst the end of literature. The apocalyptic scene triggers in Mona the repressed memory of her sexual assault by her partner Antonio only days earlier on the Stanford campus, where Mona is a doctoral student in Romance Languages.

Unlike in Aira’s *Congreso*, Oloixarac’s recurrence to the *deus ex machina* is not part of a larger poetic project. Instead, the citation of Aira’s famous plot twist parallels the literary public relations strategy Oloixarac

has undertaken on her social media accounts since the publication of her breakout debut novel *La teorías salvajes* (2008). Reference, citation, namedropping, and, now, selfies are the reified social relations that compose a discursive field. By publicizing these relations online, Oloixarac associates herself with authors who embody the literary canon much like *Mona*'s citation of Aira's *Congreso*. Since the advent of social media, every author is also her own publicist, and Oloixarac's is a literature of infrastructure for the era of world-wired literature and the feminization of its immaterial laborers. Likewise, the trajectory of her career is a study in the entanglement of literary celebrity and literary consecration in the early twenty-first century when authorial persona and identity emerge as central pillars of literary infrastructure.

If there is a larger project underpinning the *deus ex machina* eruption of Jörmungander into the novel's plot, it may be Oloixarac's continued exploration of genre fiction: the metafictional campus novel in *Las teorías salvajes*, science fiction and fantasy in *Constelaciones oscuras*, and now a combination of the two in *Mona*. The novel can thus be seen as a continuation of Oloixarac's preoccupation with the contemporary infrastructure of literature. Where *Mona* directly thematizes the workings of world literature and satirizes its accompanying identity politics, *Las teorías salvajes* thematizes the place of theory at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Buenos Aires while satirizing the pieties of left progressivism that imbue the institution. The conceit of the literary prize in *Mona* is abundantly clear. *Las teorías salvajes*, too, can be classed as literature of infrastructure insofar as the university emerges over the 1980s and 90s as an essential element of literary infrastructure not only for its longstanding reproductive roles teaching and canonizing the field. As mass-market consumption of literature has declined in Argentina and around the world, the university has also become an increasingly important patron of the literary arts, as evidenced by the institutionalization of creative writing workshops.¹²

Just as *Teorías salvajes* scorned the cultural politics of memory known as *setentismo* that was promoted by the successive administrations of

¹²Mark McGurl has argued that the university has become the primary patron of the postwar US literature. Since the explosion of writing programs beginning in the nineties, so McGurl, universities house and patronize not only literary reception but increasingly literary production too. Not only do a growing number of authors and would-be authors from Latin America find their way to US programs, whether MFAs in Spanish, university sponsored residencies—Oloixarac participated in the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 2010 like *Mona* (39)—or funded PhD programs that buy authors time to write while training them for teaching positions that can support their practice in the future—Oloixarac like *Mona* was enrolled in a PhD program at Stanford, where Jorge Ruffinelli, one of her early reviewers, taught until recently. Increasingly, Latin American and Spanish universities also offer MFAs in creative writing in a bid to commercialize the informal, author-organized workshops of the past.

Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, *Mona* takes aim at the (neo)liberal identity politics that have come to dominate corporate America and its universities.

Había llegado a Stanford... en un momento en el que ser ‘mujer y de color’ constituía, en el vademécum del racismo bondadoso de Estados Unidos, una forma de capital. Las universidades compartían valores esenciales con los sociológicos clásicos, donde la diversidad marcaba su tracción y prestigio... Su fantasía identitaria fue muy bien recibida en el campus (se relacionaba con su campo de investigación) y ahora Mona tenía la oportunidad de hacer una carrera que consistía en ser sí misma, lo más sí misma posible. (14–15)

Mona criticizes the same logic at work in the field of world literature when she expresses her disgust for “la falsa familiaridad de la cultura ‘latina’ en común” and positions herself against national intellectual elites “que se hacían ricos escribiendo sobre los pobres en Miraflores, Buenos Aires, Ciudad de México, o Santiago,” declaring instead, “prefería vivir en traducción acorde a sus gustos literarios” (37). Of course, even this is no internationalism of working peoples and their cultures but a universalist cosmopolitanism that culturally legitimates the global elite of the neoliberal era holding out the universality of capital as the only alternative to the ills of what it portrays as inevitably jingoistic nationalism. What follows is a series of cartoonish portraits of the Basske-Wortz nominees that draw heavily on national stereotypes: Phillippe the melancholic French author; the Russian Vlad, self-declared Nabokov expert; Akto Perksson an almost albino member of the already fair-skinned Nordic contingent of authors; Israeli author Hava Pinkus for whom all roads lead back to the Holocaust; and Abdullah Farid the anti-assimilationist Iranian author and Danish asylee whose speech arouses in Mona fantasies of the Great Replacement Theory that animates *Blut-und-Boden* right-wingers around the world (36–49).

Oloixarac’s irreverent critique of (neo)liberal identity politics is somewhat perplexing given the traumatic and repressed subplot of Mona’s rape. *Mona* was published at the moment when it could not but interpellate resurgent feminist movements across the Americas, from Ni Una Menos in Argentina and mayo feminista in Chile to #MeToo in the United States. Perhaps then, Mona’s is an immanent critique made on behalf of an author who has deftly wielded identity politics in her bid for literary consecration.

Oloixarac is acutely aware of her gendered speaking position. In the raft of interviews that helped position and promote *Las Teorías salvajes*, Oloixarac consistently amplified the minor scandal solicited by her critique of *setentismo* suggesting that the real scandal was less the novel’s polemic than the fact that a woman would dare to make it (Gallón

Salazar, González, Maciel, Rodrigues, Rojas, Wiener). Journalist and chronicler Gabriela Wiener correctly points out that seemingly every early review or interview surrounding the publication of *Las Teorías salvajes* made mention of Oloixarac's physical appearance. But she errs in her claim that "*Pese a su aspecto de pin up*, su léxico de doctora en filosofía política le ha granjeado muchas enemistades" (Wiener; my emphasis). Oloixarac's persona—and by extension her novel—scandalize not "in spite of" this apparent incongruity but precisely because of it. In fact, it is central to her then incipient authorial persona which Oloixarac gendered and sexualized at every turn. In doing so she highlights that the author—"la personalidad" according to Chrysto, Macedonian "dibujito animado" and Mona's "estrella gay del festival" (49)—has become an indispensable element of the infrastructure of literature as it has fused with social media.

This coincidence of author and infrastructure means that *Mona*, like *Las teorías salvajes*, is a portrait of the institution couched as autofictional portrait of the artist,¹³ the metafictional fold of the subjective turn. In an interview about *Teorías salvajes*, Oloixarac's explanation of her protagonists' sexuality—that "she is a sexual object conscious of itself" (Rojas)—applies to her authorial persona. It would be easy to confuse the sensuous description of Rosa Ostreech with Oloixarac's persona; indeed, at the launch party for an artwork-cum-computer virus that recalls Borges's *Aleph* adapted to the unending novel that is Google, Ostreech bumps into Pola, mentioning in an aside that they are often confused with each another at university:

Tengo un esqueleto intachable y persuasivo... Me reparto con elegancia a través de carne suave, rósea, de tono impreciso entre las aceitunas doradas y el marfil lírico de Bizancio... A esta altura el lector ha de haber comprendido que el experimento presente prescribía hacer un laboratorio de mi cuerpo así como una atalaya desde donde comandar una operación terrestre. (*Teorías* 105–6).

Ostreech is more dominatrix than *femme fatale*. So too is Oloixarac to commentators who declared that the literary world "surrendered at her feet" (Néspolo) or the blogger whose profile picture shows the author smoking a cigarette through a latex mask (!!!). Given these

¹³McGurl claims that "the campus novel and the portrait of the artist are, then, two of the signature genres of the Program Era, each of them allegorizing, in complementary ways, the autopoietic agendas they also enact" (49). Their overtly reflexive character gives them "an aura of intellectual sophistication... inviting critics to take them seriously as participating in the modernist/postmodernist high literary tradition," and by "holding up a flattering mirror to the critic's own sophistication" (McGurl 48).

resemblances, we cannot be sure if Ostreech reflects Oloixarac or if Oloixarac's authorial persona performs Ostreech.¹⁴ Whatever the case, each "makes of her body a laboratory" for a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whether the embodiment of a theory or the incarnation of a fiction. It is precisely the ambiguity of these multiple and multimedia constructions of authorial persona and performances of literary celebrity that makes *Las teorías salvajes* a sophisticated "ground war" on the terrain of the literary field today.

The case of *Mona* is at once less sophisticated—perhaps because it builds on groundwork laid by *Las Teorías salvajes* and *Las Constelaciones oscuras* and an established, even overdetermined, authorial persona—and more morally fraught. Although *Mona* is clearly self-conscious of the strategic essentialism she deploys in advancing her career, she is barely conscious throughout the novel of the trauma that has befallen her. The depiction of her assault in the novel's last pages, darkly recolors the reader's memory of earlier scenes in which she masturbates or has sex with another prize nominee. It also offers the novel's most poignant critique of (neo)liberal identity politics: It has failed to prevent *Mona*'s rape even as it readily explains it. This explanation essentializes *Mona*'s persona as the kind of identity that the novel explicitly critiques. It also represents the reification of experience that allows identity to function as literary infrastructure, self-commodification for personal advancement. However essentializing the novel's reception may have been due to the timing of its publication, Oloixarac's strategic essentialism cannot escape a similar fate. Whether moral ambiguity, self-conscious complicity, or simple political contrarianism, all can be said to characterize Oloixarac's positioning over the last fifteen years, for they are central to her performance of the institutionalized anomie that still defines the ever more restricted field of literary production and that has helped her to break into it.¹⁵

In the era of what Ludmer calls postautonomous *realidadficción*, the imperative to "ser sí misma, lo más sí misma posible" entails embodying an institution reduced to authors who are also critics, teachers, publicists, and publishers. Indeed, the decreased internal articulation of the literary institution can be said to motivate authors to the autofictional blurring of their authorial personas with those

¹⁴Nor should we conflate the two figures. To do so would flatten the novel's constitutive irony and the performative construction of its author's persona. At the same time, this confusion of narrators and author is one cause of the scandals that have stoked her minor celebrity (Drucaroff 119; Valente).

¹⁵For the concept of institutionalized anomie, see Bourdieu.

of their protagonists, to recur to the logics of celebrity and scandal and pseudo-political dustups in order to prove the authenticity or urgency of an artform increasingly irrelevant as its social functions rot away. Cultural journalist and market researcher Hernán Vanoli summarizes this state of affairs in three of his eleven theses “sobre literatura en tiempos de algoritmos”: “3. Todo escritor es su propia y precaria obra de arte bioprofessionalizada” (39). “4. Además de ser su propia obra de arte, todo escritor es un nanoactivista” (49) “5. El escritor nanoactivista bioprofessionalizado produce un *commodity* llamado sinceridad” (57). Heriberto Yépez lodges a mordant critique of Ludmer in similar terms:

Lo post-autónomo ludmeriano es un tipo de escritura más accesible: más legible (“transparente”) y disponible en distintos medios y plataformas. También se trata de maneras de escribir y publicar que facilitan que más personas puedan ser autores o, al menos, escribientes... Ludmer no quiso confesar o no percató que aquello que utopiza... como literaturas post-autónomas (a manera de neovanguardia blanda) en realidad constituye la escena del precariado auto-glamourizado que el neoliberalismo impuso a la escritura. Llamándole “literatura posautónoma” Ludmer maquilló la maquiladora escritural neoliberal. (n.p.)

In this light, the literature of infrastructure is another name for the literature of the neoliberal era. But it is a name that focuses our attention on all that we have lost and the continued desire that civil society, the state, even our social metabolism of nature should still blunt the force of “accidental chance” by building infrastructures for the future that would also dismantle the “historical chance” of imperialist heteropatriarchal racial capitalism and its differential protection of some and exposure of others to premature death.

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