

Can I Laugh or Should I Cry? Humor and Politics in Some Cases of Contemporary Experimental Writing in Latin America

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Abstract: Starting from the premise of the global impact of technology on the acts of reading and writing, the essay elaborates on the expression of political humor in what I call “second-hand writing” based on characteristics of Latin America. Certain recent fictional and poetic production of an experimental nature, with a focus on Brazil, Chile and Mexico, is analyzed in terms of their recycling and non-originality procedures, and especially their practice of irony, parody and corrosive humor as a tool for reviewing colonial and post-colonial history in terms of state, gender, racial and linguistic violence.

Keywords: Latin American literature, experimental writing, decolonial humor, second hand writing, unoriginal genius

Resumo: Partindo da premissa do impacto global da tecnologia sobre os atos de ler e escrever, o ensaio aborda a expressão do humor político no que chamo de “escrita de segunda mão”, com base em características da América Latina. Certa produção ficcional e poética recente de natureza experimental, com foco no Brasil, Chile e México, é analisada quanto aos seus procedimentos de reciclagem e não originalidade e, especialmente, de sua prática de ironia, paródia e humor corrosivo como ferramenta para rever a história colonial e pós-colonial em termos de violência estatal, de gênero, racial e linguística.

Palavras-chave: Literatura latino-americana, escrita experimental, humor decolonial, escrita de segunda mão, gênio não original

An atmosphere that combines literary appropriation and cultural revision

Between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a sense of strangeness about reading and writing flourished. The popularization of the digital environment, which was in full swing, was changing the way texts circulated, thereby posing a challenge to people's reading habits. The new need to transfer everything possible to a new (virtual) form of existence called for conversion tools, which called for formatting devices, which in turn called for access mediators, which from update to update multiplied the necessary files, documents, folders, programs, systems, and thus accelerated the pace of production and increased the quantity of everything subject to acceleration and scaling. This vector of change, more or less the same on a global level, met with specific local situations. Concerns resulting from this intersection, in the context of reading and writing, gave rise to a series of critical and creative reactions that called attention to the new situation and set out to give due treatment to such a transformative insertion of sensibilities that was being imposed on our lives. In this vein, throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, in Brazil, Chile, the United States, Canada, Spain, Uruguay, and Argentina, manifestos, studies, and radical poetic productions emerged that affirmed the new atmosphere and showed how it favors the recycling of texts and the revision of historically consolidated content.

In this chapter, we will use some theoretical frameworks as a foundation to elaborate on these changes and relate them to the context of thinking, reading, and writing in Latin America. We will then look at some examples of poetic or fictional productions that we see as both reactions to and symptoms of this contemporary atmosphere, primarily in works by Brazilian, Chilean, and Mexican authors. At the end, we'll propose a conclusion that links the points made throughout the text.

It's worth mentioning a few essays and studies published in the first two decades of the 21st century which, despite their enormous differences, are similar insofar as they point out changes in reading, writing, and literary production based on their relationship with the virtual and digital environment. The "Sampler Literature Manifesto", by Fred Coelho and Mauro Gaspar, and "Unidentified verbal objects", by Flora Süssekind, are examples from Brazil; *Los muertos indóciles: necroescrituras y desapropiación*, by Cristina Rivera-Garza, from Mexico; "Post-autonomous literature", by Josefina Ludmer, in Argentina; *Postpoesía: hacía um nuevo paradigma*, by Agustín Fernández Mallo, in Spain; *Uncreative writing: managing language in the digital age*, by Kenneth Goldsmith, and *Unoriginal Genius: poetry by other means*, by Marjorie Perloff, in the United States, are some examples.

By highlighting the popularization of procedures for displacement and intervention in the text (virtualized by the control c + control v of personal machines), as well as recent literary works that make use of them, these studies point to a questioning of the model of individual authorship and the notion of original creation. According to professor and researcher Lev Manovich, who studied recent new technologies as they emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in *The language of the new medium*, when a certain procedure becomes popular, the way it works is no longer restricted to its original field and it goes on to be applied to the most different areas of life, or to the most different targets. In other words, a certain operating logic, which made specific sense in a given context, spills over into various spheres of life in society: just as all previously existing content has had to undergo a new modulation in order to gain its existence in the digital environment, researchers, poets, writers, artists have also been acting as “filters” of content from both the present and the recent past, either critically or creatively, in order to modulate, renew, transform or unveil it in a new cultural environment. Literary works, anonymous discourse, and official discourse are read today as texts to be cut up, rewritten, and reformulated through different poetic approaches. Writers and artists often seek to intervene in public records, to turn the gesture of (re)writing into building community, to delve into presumed banality to reveal the offensive, the tic, the language vice or the boring everydayness, or even to unveil the artificiality of official and institutional history in order to produce counter-discourses. In this chapter, we will focus on contemporary works by writers and poets mainly from Brazil, Chile and Mexico. These works, taking part in this atmosphere of experimental writing of cultural appropriation and revision, make use of parody, irony, corrosive humor, and exposure to the terrible or the ridiculous, often exploring humor as a political commentary as well.

Veronica Stigger’s diagnosis of the new atmosphere and the resulting delusions

Within this field of experimental writing in which appropriation and revision are central elements, sticking to the timeframe of the 21st century, perhaps the first organized diagnosis of the contemporary situation occurred in 2001 with *Neoconceptualism - El Secuestro del Origen*, a manifesto and, at the same time, a collection of poems and narratives published in India by two Chilean writers. “It is forbidden to use any word that arises from the originality of the neoconceptual author,” said Carlos Almonte and Allan Meller. They coined neoconceptual writing as that which happens when the text is the result of appropriations of other people’s literary texts. In the book, the duo uses Jorge Luis Borges, Conde de Lautréamont, and the Bible, among other sources, a source for every new text-as-reading performance, as someone might call it. Something similar happened in 2007 in Argentina, when writer Pablo Katchadjian published *El Martin Fierro ordenado alfabeticamente (El Martin Fierro in alphabetical order)*. Shortly after, Brazilian poet Marília Garcia

published a poem that was clearly composed of the alphabetical reordering of all the verses of *A teus pés*, an emblematic book by Ana Cristina Cesar, a poet from the previous generation. These publications express a productive quality in the concerns about changes in sensibility in the act of reading. Poets began to invent new reading protocols. In this context, creation didn't lie exactly in the writing, but in the discovery and proposition of an alternative reading path within original texts.

Unaware of the Chilean manifesto, in 2005, Frederico Coelho, a historian and essayist, and Mauro Gaspar, an editor and researcher, both of whom were still PhD students then and fans of DJ Shadow and Ricardo Piglia, entered a university classroom in Rio de Janeiro with two microphones during a conference of the Faculty of Letters and, standing up like minstrels, they vocalized their "Literature Sampler Manifesto". The text is produced according to the proposal that the two Brazilians went on to defend: a multitude of writing that brings together fragments of literary and artistic writing - an expansion of Almonte and Meller's neo-conceptualism. We find fruitful ideas in the "Literature Sampler Manifesto" ("Manifesto da literatura sampler", as it is called in Portuguese), such as questioning the indiscriminate use of the notion of quotation. After all, when the whole body is made up of pre-existing pieces of skin, the pieces stop being grafts and become the tissue of the body itself. Writing is thus not symbolically, unconsciously, or inevitably related to reading, as Michel Foucault pointed out, but deliberately, explicitly, and materially so. Writing as a collection of read fragments. Writing as the visible record of a unique reading path. A path that transgresses the model and reveals authorship. A journey that results in a collection, which, with its objects handled and manipulated, results in a new discourse.

In 2013, literary critic Flora Sussekind stated that a series of works in Brazilian literature at that time expressed "choral experiences", characterized by

listening operations, and the constitution of a kind of echo chamber in which resounds the (at first sight unclassifiable) simultaneous rumor of a multiplicity of voices, non-verbal elements, and an overlapping of registers and diverse expressive modes. (Süssekind 2013: 1, my translation)

In her precise diagnosis, Flora Sússekind saw in these experiences "a form of simultaneous questioning of both the historical hour and the field of literature itself." Her proposal to think about bringing together not only literary texts but also non-literary materials was the scope I worked on in my research for the book *Escrever sem escrever: literatura e apropriação no século XXI (Writing without writing: literature and appropriation in the 21st century)*. One example studied in the book is *Delírio de Damasco (Delirium of Damascus)*, in which writer Veronica Stigger presents a collection of phrases heard from acquaintances or strangers organized into three

themes: blood, sex and money. The book ranges from grotesque to surrealist humor and is as much about denouncement as it is pure banter. Its selection criteria are the opposite of those used in Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades*. Whereas the French artist looked for unattractive objects that even provoked a certain indifference, Stigger captures what catches her eye. They are prehistories, as the author says. Far from a tedious, flowing, cold text, her collector's writing brings together short, absurd texts that can either make you laugh or light the fuse of a dramatic bomb. Let's take a look at some of them:

Wherever he went
he took along
his urine test.

They're doing very well in the United States:
she's a call girl,
he parks cars.

No wedding.
But if there were,
her father already said he won't attend.

Better
a murder
than a suicide.

Poor Indians!
They lived in peace.
Then the humans came and killed them all.
(Stigger 2012: extracts from pages 17, 27, 33, 35, 44 and 45, my translation)

The humor is derisive, sharp and sometimes cruel. Like other Latin American examples that we will see throughout this chapter, Stigger's work is far removed from that harsher notion of conceptual writing, in which the works establish a relationship of irony and confrontation with the reader (sometimes even a rejection of reading), often producing shock or exhaustion. As employed by Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman in *Notes on conceptualisms* or by Kenneth Goldsmith in "Paragraphs on conceptual writing", among others, the harder and colder notion of conceptual writing seems to me, today, a reference that contributes to thinking about different degrees of radicality in the gesture and readability of each experimental work made through appropriation, without the need for the concept itself to be used radically.

The in-between place of Latin American discourse in Roman Luján and Carlos Soto-Román

What is the specificity of writers based in Latin America? For Brazilian writer and theorist Silviano Santiago, this specificity, which would be as much material and geographical as mental, could be elaborated through the concept of the “*entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano*” (the “in-between place of Latin American discourse”):

Between sacrifice and play, between imprisonment and transgression, between submission to the code and aggression, between obedience and rebellion, between assimilation and expression - there, in this apparently empty place, its temple and its place of clandestinity, that is where the anthropophagic ritual of Latin American literature takes place. (Santiago 2000: 26, my translation)

The book *Sánafabich*, published in 2019 by Mexican poet Román Luján, seems to reside in this in-between place. Starting with the title of the book, which also gives its name to a poem, Luján proposes the slur “son of a bitch,” widely used by Americans, but not how it is spelled in English, but how the expression is heard by a Mexican ear. The incorrect spelling is revenge for the incorrect pronunciation. Luján invades the English language in order to distort it - between submission to the code and aggression, between assimilation and expression, as Santiago says. The alternative spelling of “son of a bitch” is a humorous revolt. Let’s read the poem “Sánafabich”:

se dice tamal, no t'mali
se dice Colombia, no Columbia
se dice cañón, no canon
se dice Salma, no Selma
se dice Román, no Ramán, no Ramoun, no Romiu
se dice Sacramento, no Sacrmeno
se dice chipotle, no chipote, no chipole
se dice guacamole, no guac, chingada madre
se dice Chile, no chili
se dice Tijuana, no Tiawana
se dice quesadillas, no cuesadiles
se dice dulce de leche, no dolchi di letchi
se dice mole, no mouli
se dice Juárez, no Warés
se dice chorizo, no churitzou
se dice mojito, no mojírou
se dice peyote, no peiori, pendejou
se dice empanada, no impañara

se dice Bolaño, no B'lano
 se dice jalapeño, no halapino
 se dice García Márquez, no Marqués
 se dice enchilada, no onchilara
 se dice Juan, no Wan
 se dice habanero, no habañerou
 se dice Estados Unidos
 (Luján 2019: 17)

The task that the voice of the poem sets itself is to point out the error and teach the correct one according to its place of origin, inverting the position of power. Perhaps its most interesting moment, in humorous terms, is when an interlocutor is inserted (“chingada madre”; “pendejou”). This is when the poem allows us to imagine a peculiar character, who is always rebelling against the speakers that distort his language, a perhaps utopian revolt that would lead to a reaction that would turn every kind of conversation into a rebellion and a lesson. The poem points to the incorporation of Spanish into English, maintaining the sound of the English language, as a weapon of discrimination and exclusion, which only simulates an assimilation of Spanish. A simulation of assimilation that must be unmasked for the sake of true cultural and linguistic diversity. The poem ends in a silence that refers to another type of linguistic appropriation, also with political and geographical consequences: the appropriation that takes place when a country symbolically presents itself as an entire continent, “America”. If we forget for a second the tragic effects of erasure, such exaggeration and erasure become hilarious.

This gesture of exaggeration and erasure is recalled by the Chilean poet Carlos Soto-Román in work *11*. Intervening in official documents of the Chilean dictatorship, the text of the work shows the recurrence of the epithet that the dictatorship itself gave itself: “SUPREMO GOBIERNO”. Always in full capital letters. Soto-Román’s book is triggered by the date of September 11 in Chile, when in 1973 Augusto Pinochet led a military coup that ousted the elected government of President Salvador Allende and inaugurated a brutal dictatorship that lasted 17 years. On the book’s cover, the image of the number 11 is represented by two elongated figures that occupy it vertically, which inevitably reminds us of two tall buildings. In this way, the standard imagination is provoked into inferring that the book is about 9/11, when the attack on the Twin Towers in New York took place. If a country appropriates the name of an entire continent, why not invade the imagination created by the worldwide coverage of September 11 in the USA and, from a Chilean point of view, re-appropriate this date or broaden the references around it? In this sense, Soto-Román plays a trick on unsuspecting readers and dialogues with Román Lujan’s poem “Sánafabich”. Both exert the expropriation of words (Luján) and images (Soto-Román) and

create humorous effects in the name of reappropriating history, identity and the imagination, in favor of diversifying references for the imagination, so that certain memories (linguistic or historical) are not buried by others.

Laughter in its natural environment: society in Angélica Freitas' googllages

The work of Brazilian poet Angélica Freitas investigates popular language and certain conservative thought patterns. She often resorts to reinterpretations of traditional songs and poems, clichés, and platitudes, as well as the language of advertising, and creates parodies with the effect of contradicting the prejudices ingrained in society. In “poetry is not”, the poet lists in verse a series of opinions about poetry, all collected from the Internet after typing the expression “poetry is not” into a search engine:

poetry is not (reloaded)

poetry is not an idiotic thing
poetry is not an option
poetry is not just language
poetry is, not
poetry is not to be understood
poetry is not a hard science
poetry is not a weapon
poetry is not Orpheus's anymore
poetry is not different
poetry is not a marriage
poetry is not a meaning
poetry is not, has never been
poetry is not a choice
poetry is not and does not want to be a commodity
“poetry is not a force of shock.
it is a force of occupation”
but isn't poetry the revelation of reality?
poetry is not the art of the object
poetry is not a mere artifice
poetry is not Castro Alves', as many people think
poetry is not representative anymore
poetry is not a permanent occupation
poetry is not a mirror,
no, poetry is not a contemplative art
poetry is not an idiotic thing

poetry is not something that can be used as a trumpet
poetry is not a matter of feelings
poetry is not made (directly) of ideas but of words (which are the carriers of ideas
people don't always realize that poetry is
not mere entertainment, inconsequential literary banter
but poetry is not.
(Freitas 2005 *apud* Domeneck 2011: n.p., my translation)

At first glance, it appears to be a poem full of certainties, but by the end the only certainty we are left with is how difficult it is to define poetry. There's a whole lot of humor that accumulates as we go through this sort of catalog of non-definitions of poetry, from the crudest to the most elaborate. All of them, curiously, as bearers of ideas, have their ideas rejected. The only accepted idea is Mallarmé's, that poetry is made up of words, which in turn are, finally, carriers of ideas. The poem puts Paul Valéry, Mallarmé, and the lay, uncompromising internet user on an equal footing - in the collectivity of voices that form it. It contains the medium in which the text was born, the Internet, where there is no hierarchical arrangement of content. Following this view - not a mixture of high and low culture, but an indistinction between the famous and the anonymous, or the practitioner and the amateur - the poem promotes a desacralization of Mallarmé. After the concrete poets had raised Mallarmé to the heavens, Angélica Freitas pulls his leg and brings him down to earth in the middle of a crowded street, occupying the same space as any other person.

What Angélica Freitas' irony leaves open is the meaning of this gesture. Is placing Mallarmé next to anonymous and uncompromising people a criticism of Mallarmé's supposed overestimation? Or is it a criticism of the lack of hierarchical value and the erasure of contexts that reigns on the Internet? Or, in a third interpretation, the gesture could be a compliment to poetry as a democratic space, in which anything can enter, if one knows how. As for the meaning of this foundational gesture of the poem, as something beyond a procedure, but which adds meaning to the text, the message is not final, but ambiguous. For Camila da Silva Alvarce,

irony, parody, and laughter act in literary texts, in the vast majority of their occurrences, with the aim of suspending censorship and circumventing the prisons of monophonic and consequently authoritarian discourses. This is possible because the modalities in question favor polyphony and the dissonant element, legitimized by the contrast of ideas, a common trait between these three types of discourse. Therefore, these categories, as acts of communication, opt for a certain perspective or stance, which clashes with the other, and this is what guarantees polyphony. (Alvarce 2009: 12, my translation)

It's interesting to note that the poem draws attention to its restraint and the idea that drives it, but within the poem itself there is a statement that poetry is not made of ideas, but of words. Here the creative procedure and what the verse says clash with one another, and the poem takes on a new dimension of irony, with another enormous force of ambiguity.

In *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* (*A uterus is the size of a fist*), Freitas consolidated her experimentation, which she called “googllages” (“googlagens,” in Portuguese), i.e. collages made with Google. The central theme of the 2012 book is the place of women in contemporary society and the gazes that have historically been cast on them - and by whom. Freitas produces some joke-poems in the style of the anthropophagic modernist Oswald de Andrade and parodies traditional Brazilian songs, as in her criticism of the standardization of female bodies and behavior through the traditional song “One elephant bothers a lot of people / Two elephants bother a lot more”. Freitas takes this song and inhabits it with her poem, which says “a fat woman / bothers a lot of people / a fat drunk woman / bothers a lot more”. The melody in which there was one childish content now reveals serious social problems, such as sexism and bodily oppression. Thus, the poem also achieves the effect of suggesting that being annoyed with fat, drunk women is extremely childish.

Let's look at a poem from the section “3 poems made with Google's help”, “a mulher quer” (“a woman wants”):

the woman wants to be loved
the woman wants a rich guy
the woman wants to conquer a man
the woman wants a man
the woman wants sex
the woman wants sex as much as the man
the woman wants the preparation for sex to happen slowly
the woman wants to be possessed
the woman wants to be led by a male
the woman wants to get married
the woman wants her husband to be her companion
the woman wants a gentleman to take care of her
the woman wants to talk to discuss the relationship
the woman wants to talk and botafogo wants to beat flamengo
the woman just wants you to listen
the woman wants something more than that, she wants love, affection
the woman wants security
the woman wants to mess with you e-mail
the woman wants stability

the woman wants nextel
the woman wants a credit card
the woman wants everything
the women wants to be valued and respected
the women wants to separate
the women want to earn, decide and consume more
the women want to commit suicide
(Freitas 2012: 72, my translation)

The poem makes us laugh at the clichés, which highlight the inferior position in which women have been placed in patriarchal societies for centuries. According to Renata Miguel, the poet

Through laughter and irony, criticizes the sexist discourses that still affect women today. Through the use of humor, Freitas manages to expose these discourses, ridicule and criticize them at the same time as she proposes that they be revised. (Miguel 2017: 215, my translation)

By appropriating discourse published on the Internet, Angélica Freitas performs a kind of archeology of the average thought about women at a certain time, in a certain place. The poem makes the assembled discourse stand in opposition to the originals without modifying them in any substantial way, just expropriating them from their places to take them to another context, in which we see that these thoughts are not those of one recognizable person or other, but, rather, they permeate society as a whole. Beyond the obtuseness of certain ideas, there is a humorous effect that is fulfilled by the way Freitas arranges the verses: the poet creates contrasts between the focus of one verse and the next. When “the woman wants security” is followed by a line like “the woman wants to mess with your e-mail”, the comic effect comes from the succession of a universal and traditional theme with a shallow, dated and commonplace one. Freitas’ experimental writing thus takes on a strong political air without arriving at a simplistic, pamphleteering outcome; on the contrary, her poems are ingenious, biting, and sarcastic.

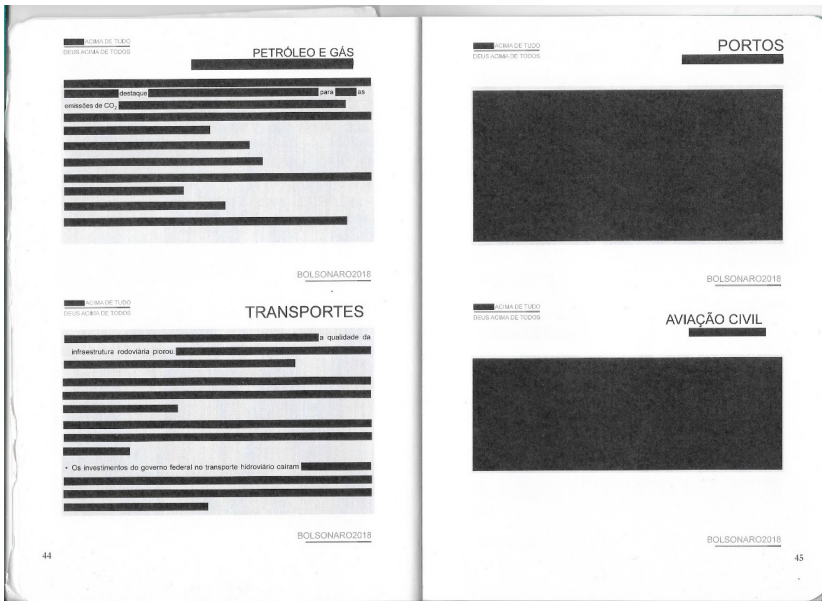
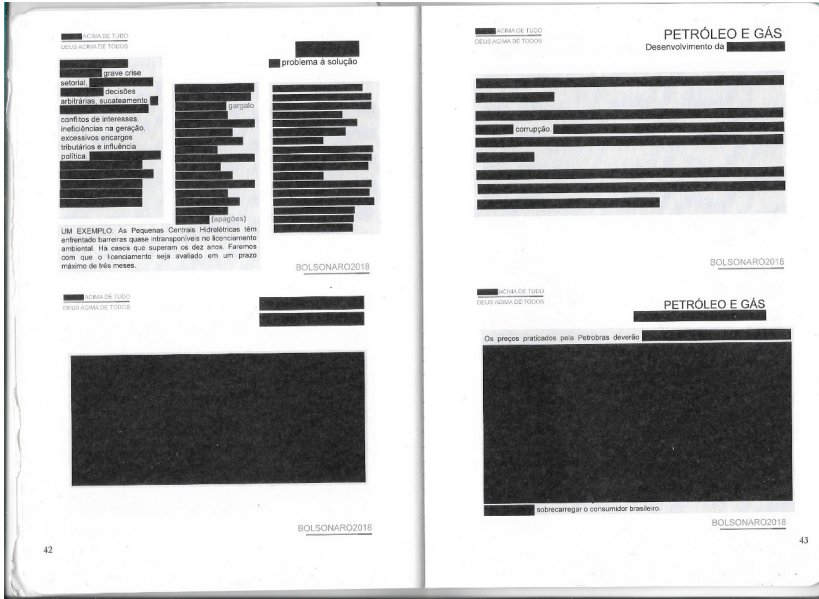
Looking at the work of the two poets, we can say that Roman Luján and Angélica Freitas use humor as a weapon to combat the symbolic violence that society regularly exerts on certain bodies, people, and languages. Without a doubt, Latin American humor in general draws from the wellsprings of its pain. As a way of surviving and creating bonds of identification, we laugh at our misfortunes, without forgetting what their roots are and how they are being updated. In this way, the Mexican poet and the Brazilian poet propose laughter as categorized by Bergson:

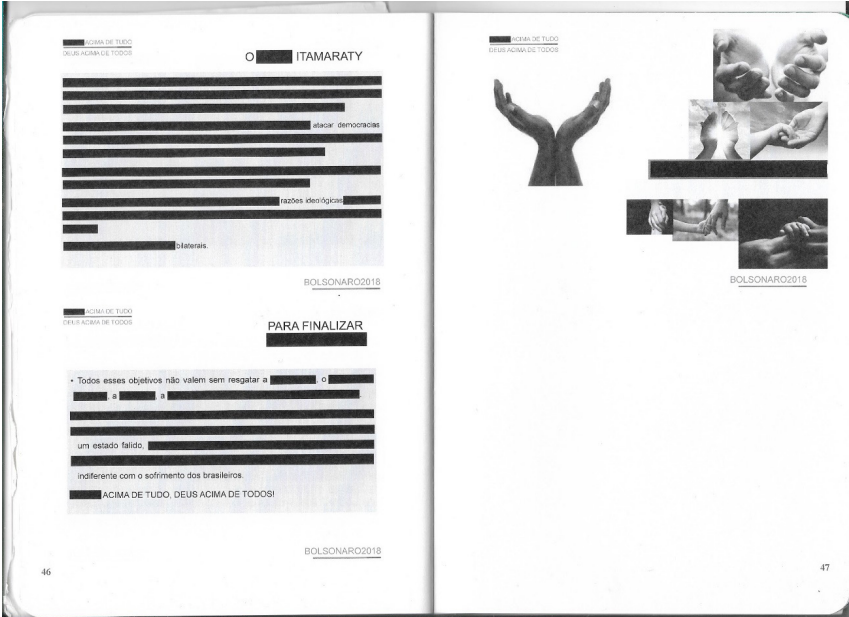
To understand laughter, it is necessary to place it in its natural environment, which is society; above all, it is necessary to determine its useful function, which is a social function (...) Laughter must correspond to certain requirements of life in common. Laughter must have a social meaning (Bergson 2007: 6, my translation).

Laughing at ourselves, laughing at what they want to make of us: Bolsonaro's plan for Rogério Bettoni and Jorge Miranda; the educational model according to Alejandro Zambra and the country of poets by Felipe Cussen

If Román Luján uses humor as a rebellion against false diversity, against the process of homogenization, and Angélica Freitas exposes sexism to ridicule, turning the sexist discourse against itself, we can say that both have as the target of their ferocious humor the one who answers to an Other. In a different approach, some poets and writers have been working with humor in experimental writing as a reflection on their own country, through a gaze that looks not at the one who is seen as Other, but at the one who is seen as the same, from the inside out.

Plano de Governo, by Brazilians Jorge Miranda and Rogério Bettoni, is an operation of suppression - a procedure that subtracts or erases excerpts from the government plan for the 2018 elections of then presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro. The deletion ends up revealing a discourse that is more in line with the truth than the official government plan submitted to the electoral authorities. In this way, laughter - nervous, embarrassed, desperate - is elicited by the gesture of revelation. Finally, we are able to clearly see what the former president was preaching when he cited the psalm John 8:32: "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". In the government plan that Bettoni and Miranda have reread and displaced, it is through erasure that the truth is revealed. Jair Bolsonaro's motto finally materializes. Against him. The formality of bureaucratic writing is unmasked as a mere game of appearance, and the candidate's truth emerges transparently. A curious erasure that results not in blockage, but in transparency. *Plano de governo*, the book, strips away the official plan, removes from it everything that it isn't in reality, which makes it truer than the official government plan - revealing the absurdity of the project which part of the Brazilian population elected.





(Bettoni / Miranda 2019: 42-47. Translations in Appendix I)

This is a rebellious and corrosive humor, whose impulse is revolt, sadness, and irreverence. In *Plano de governo*, the sophistication with which Miranda and Bettoni apply the suppression procedure is remarkable. The duo uses it to produce not just one type of effect, but three: on most pages, the deletion can reveal the violence and backwardness of Jair Bolsonaro’s plan, but also, when passages are completely deleted on a page, the complete absence of projects for certain areas of the country is expressed. Finally, as a third effect, the deletion can show the reader the emptiness of Bolsonaro’s electoral discourse, the misleading rhetoric that floats in a vacuum, the emptying of words that in other mouths and other plans could actually sustain some force of meaning, but which, in this case, once the lack of ballast is revealed, appears as gestures of purely performative effect. In a way, a productive sense of incapacity is also at work in the piece. Faced with the sad Impossibility of acting in real life, one acts on paper.

We can notice something similar in *Facsímil*, by Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra. There is a melancholic mood hanging over the work. It doesn’t deal with the emptying of words or the absence of projects that emerge, but, on the contrary, it deals with the incentive to speak and express oneself, but without the chance to choose one’s own words, without the chance to choose one’s own path (in reading, writing, in the city). One must speak only what is correct, read only what is expected, walk where and when one is authorized to do so, say only what, in any

given context, one can say. A successful author of short stories and novels in South America, Zambra never stopped thinking about his country through experimental strategies. His 2014 work is a serious joke about an obsolete and restricted model of education, as well as a poignant review of how the dictatorship inserts itself into everyday life by directing discourse. In *Facsímil (Multiple choice)*, Zambra raises the problem of the simplification of thought, the restriction of discursive spectra and the encouragement of single answers, answers that only indicate either this or that, especially when the themes are homeland, family, or love. To do this, the author makes use of an official document, the Verbal Aptitude Test, a multiple-choice test for admission to Chilean universities that was used between 1967 and 2002. He then creatively transgresses the text, adulterating the questions, creating new parodic questions, using the model to show polarized thinking, violence, inglorious nationalism, constraints on behavior, and the capitalist restriction on the complexity of thought, in a critique with a sad and mournful undertone, but not without a significant degree of burlesque humor. There is a revolt against the establishment of inexplicable criteria and a rebellion against the flattening of discussions into two options, yes or no, two sides, right or left, this or that. The book is acerbic in its criticism of the control of thought and bodies. By way of irony, the author points the finger at the obtuseness of the language of evaluation, the fascist and dictatorial language – which, unlike the official regime, can endure within democracy. Let's look at excerpts from the English translation of *Facsímil*:

In exercises 37 through 54, complete the sentence using the appropriate elements. Choose the option that best fits the sentence.

37. _____ the thousand amendments they've made to it, the Chilean Constitution of 1980 is a piece of shit.

- A) After
- B) Due to
- C) In spite of
- D) Thanks to
- E) Notwithstanding

(Zambra 2016: 25-27)

[...]

In exercises 55 through 66, indicate the sentences or paragraphs that can be eliminated because they either do not add information or are unrelated to the rest of the text.

57)

(1) A curfew is a regulation prohibiting free circulation in the public space within a determined area.

(2) It tends to be decreed in times of war or popular uprising.

(3) The dictatorship imposed one in Santiago, Chile, from September 11, 1973, until January 2, 1987.

(4) One summer night my father went out walking with no destination in mind. It grew late, and he had to sleep at a friend's house.

(5) They made love, she got pregnant, I was born.

A) None.

B) 5

C) 1, 2, and 3

D) 4 and 5

E) 2

(Zambra 2016: 35-39)

It's interesting to note that the work of Betttoni and Miranda and that of Zambra, as well as some of those mentioned above, reclaim what, according to Vilém Flusser, turning to etymology, could be precisely the beginning of writing - and which, in a modern context, becomes an experimental gesture:

“Writing” comes from the Latin word “scriber”, which means “to scratch” (ritzen). And the Greek word “graphein” means “to engrav” (graven). Therefore, writing was originally a gesture of making an incision on an object, for which a cuneiform tool (a “stylus”) was used. (Flusser 2010: 25, my translation)

Much like the idea of what it means to “write”, the notion of “style” has also undergone a transformation. From a first meaning that indicated a physical object, a tool for demarcating and intervening in the materiality of things, it gradually detached itself from its material reality to become a category of artistic practice and thought. In an interview from 2021, Zambra recognizes that, because every young Chilean interested in going to university is obliged to take this exam, spending a whole year or more preparing for it, many of these Chileans are more “prepared” to understand an experimental structure like the one in *Facsímil* than they are to read a poem or a novel (see Cotton 2021). Here, the writer touches on the issue of the non-literary reception of materials that are proposed as literary even though they use non-literary material. It seems entirely possible that a reader who is totally averse to

reading poetry, short stories, and novels will approach this experimental work without any kind of trepidation – from a literary point of view, it sounds strange; from a general culture point of view, there is *a priori* proximity between its model and a certain type of audience. A dialogue with mass culture, through the use of documents or texts that are not literary in origin, holds this different possibility of bringing the work and its readers closer together. In a way, literary experimentation makes the work lose some degrees of specificity, in other words, it stretches its tentacles into fields of life other than the strictly literary. If we think historically, the work is part of the change that took place mainly in the second half of the 20th century – diagnosed, for example, in Josefina Ludmer’s “Post-autonomous literature” –, in which art became less literary and more cultural, in an effect of the very gaze that was directed, especially with post-structuralism, towards culture and society as an immense network of texts and discourses.

As previously mentioned, Zambra’s gesture is part of a view of the social environment as a web of texts, which create realities, shape the present in order to form the future, and must therefore be questioned or exposed in its artificiality or obtuseness. The writer intervenes and creates parodies, re-readings of comparisons, which suggest another truth, concealed by the official fiction. It’s as if a member of the government had gone mad and, in his privileged position as creator of realities, he made the documents into whatever he wanted. Between submission to the code and aggression, between assimilation and expression, as Silviano Santiago says. The in-between place of Latin American discourse is also one created by documents, which always carry with them a certain way of reading people and creating interpretations of reality. In Zambra, Bettoni, and Miranda, we see a commitment to the power of irreverence and causticity. Writing by means of appropriation and adulteration is also, in these cases, a metaphor for the silencing of voices, a common occurrence in authoritarian regimes, which forces the writer to speak from the margins, to speak without being so visible – no longer producing new writing but intervening in the pre-existing text. With new reading protocols, they highlight that which had already been said and which may not have been noticed. They are betting on a jocular wit, without losing punch, in a way that is almost anarchic in its dimension of creation, exercising an experimental writing that makes political use of humor.

As a final example of experimental writing that sees humor as a useful tool for debates and combats in society, we offer a text by Chilean poet and researcher Felipe Cussen. Whereas Zambra, Bettoni, and Miranda looked from the inside out, Cussen’s text makes us think about two movements: both the discourse from the inside in and how the discourse from the inside operates in its attempt to project itself outwards. Chile, the poet’s country of origin, is proud of its poets, of its inhabitants’ relationship with poetry, and projects itself abroad as a country that values its poets, that presents them as great representatives of the nation and sees them as great universal poets.

Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize winner, is perhaps the most famous example. But Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro and Nicanor Parra, among others, also contribute to this construction of a national identity tied to its poets. It is this construction that Felipe Cussen calls into question with his poem “Chile: país de poetas” (Chile: country of poets).

“Mexico, it is said, has been a land of poets. Y sí: ya desde el siglo XVII, Hernán González de Eslava decía que ‘hay más poetas que estiércol.’” (Julio Hubard)

“Spain is a country of poets and it’s always had hundreds of them, some of whom are very good.” (Rafael Gómez Pérez)

“In a country of poets like Colombia, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to find a voice that stands out among all the rhetorical and grandiloquent clutter that we have inherited from the Spanish.” (Fabio Martínez)

“Lithuania could be called a ‘land of poets’: poetic creation has almost always been more intense and more original there than prose expression.” (Biruté Ciplijauskaitė)

“They say that Nicaragua is a country of poets, because poetry is the only refuge from a history of curses and catastrophes, from difficult living conditions.” (Javier Escudero)

“Portugal is a country of poets, as the history of literature teaches us.” (Paulo Bravio)

“To say that Brazil is a country of poets is more than a tautology.” (Aníbal Beça)

“It’s easy to dare and repeat the popular advice, the talent of a spirit surrounded by the primary hypothesis of the irreplaceable self, ‘Guayana, land of poets.’” (Abraham Salloum Bitar)

“Why go to Ireland when you can get just as wet in Wales, as drunk in Doncaster and as happy in Honolulu? Let me explain. It is first of all a country of poets.” (Alastair Sawday)

“Somalia, a country of poets and drought.” (Kenny Moore)

“Macedonia is now the country of poets. As it has always been.” (Mark O’Conor)

“Iran has always been a country of poets.” (Michele Leveux)

“Afghanistan is a country of poets.” (Peter Connors)

“China is a country of poets.” (Het Andere Oosten)”

“Greece is a country of poets.” (Joseph P. Consoli)

(Cussen 2012: 3, my translation)

By way of collection, accumulation, and consequent comparison, each verse-statement is gradually emptied of the meaning it originally intended to communicate. For it seems that many participants in literary culture see their country as a country of poets.

With this chapter, we aim to understand how the notion of the in-between place of Latino discourse is present and operates in contemporary times, through the direct (or audible) appropriation of imposed discourses – be it that of the Other, or

that of the Same to the Self, or that of the Same to the Outside - in a certain model of experimental writing that seems to us to be both a reaction and a symptom of the way of doing things popularized by the virtual environment and digital machines.

Finally, we think that just as interesting as the fact that some of these experimental writings are more like language curatorships than actual writing is the perception - embedded in their ways of doing things - that literature can influence the direction of society.

Note

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