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JOURNAL > SITE 0: CASTALIA, THE GAME OF ENDS AND MEANS | 2016

The Turn of the Canoe

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“I look at Brasília as I look at Rome: Brasília began with a final simplification of ruins.”

Clarice Lispector

Toward the conclusion of “Peregrinations, Visions and the City: From Canudos to Brasília, the Backlands become the City and the City becomes the Backlands,” Nicolau Sevcenko briefly reads João Guimarães Rosa’s profound short story “The Third Bank of the River,” published in *Primeiras Estórias* in 1962. Sevcenko sees Guimarães Rosa’s story as a case of the “thematic and formal” investigations of the possibility of “[r]econciling languages expressive of modernity with the specific characteristics of a society still strongly marked by the weight of its colonial past.”¹ Guimarães Rosa’s narrator tells us about his father, who had a canoe made for him and without notice, rowed to the middle of the river, where he stayed never to leave it again until his son indicated he would take his place. Sevcenko’s use of the term ‘reconciliation’ conjures notions of synthesis and totalities, fragments and irreconcilable pieces, thus instigating the all-too-familiar quandary surrounding modernity and postmodernity. An axis of much intellectual inquiry and debate in the twentieth century, these issues cut across specific territories of Latin American culture. In the introduction to *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America* (1995), John Beverley and José Oviedo incisively point out that:

The engagement with postmodernism in Latin America does not take place around the theme of the end of modernity that is so pertinent in its Anglo-American manifestations; it concerns, rather, the complexity of Latin America's own 'uneven modernity' and the new developments of its hybrid (pre- and post-) modern cultures. (José Joaquín Brunner argues that postmodernism is, in effect, the specific form modernity takes in Latin America).²

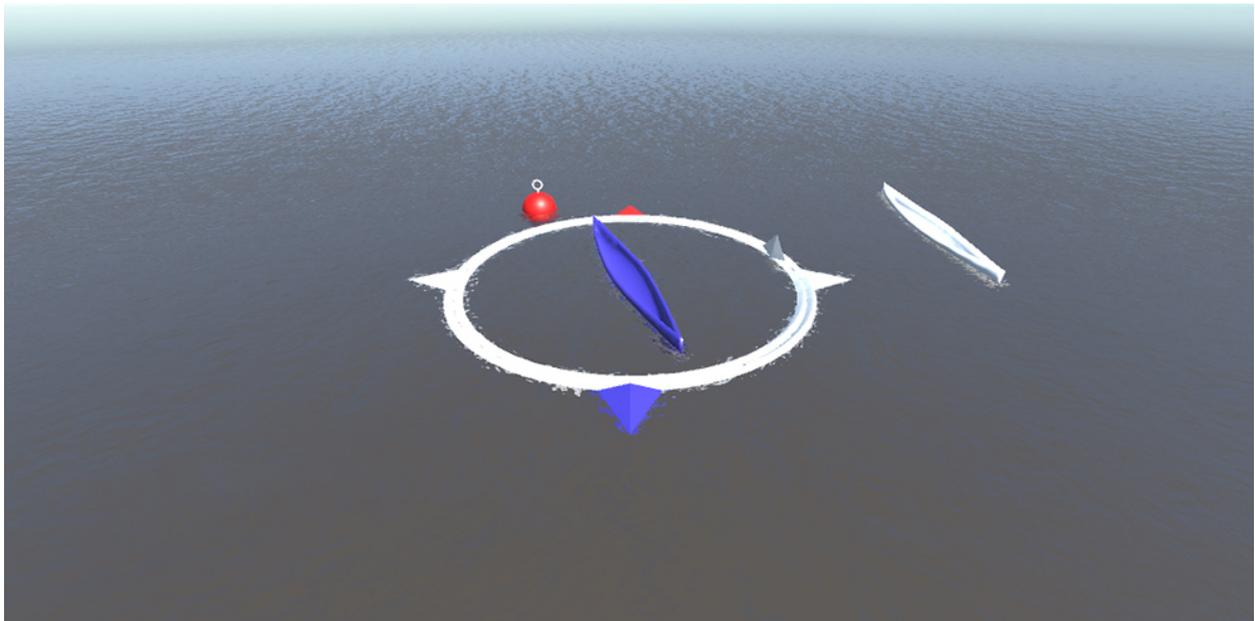
One of the reasons the question of postmodernity in Latin America does not necessarily concern the perception of the end of metanarratives is because of how imperatively projects of modernization ranging from sociotechnical development, literacy and social emancipation have posed themselves. From the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, modernization appeared both as means and objective of the transition from a colonial society to a socially and economically emancipated one. Because of the scale of the investments they required, these projects could not be completely abandoned, nor could they comprehend with stability the distinct hybrid of multi-temporal sociocultural expressions that exist in Latin America.

According to the basic progressive thesis, although colonialism bootstraps the European culture of modernity, it creates the condition for the emancipation of modern Latin American nation-states—that is, for their 'critical' moment in relation to the structures and mechanisms that produced them. This critical moment is simultaneously an expression of autochthony and difference from, and of appropriation and transculturation of enlightenment ideals. What is of concern here, however, are the problems that emerge from the asymmetries that lie on different sides of the trajectory of modernity, because they complicate the legislative, universal power that endows enlightenment ideologies. If the deployment of these ideals in a sociohistorical reality other than that of their emergence enshrines different referents and materials (concretely speaking), do their categorical imperatives remain unshaken?

If the possibility of a negative answer frustrates Western philosophical orthodoxy, it raises further difficulties and opportunities to think about what it means to have a conversation that is not dictated by the "absolute monologue of colonial reason," as Nick Land puts in "Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest: a Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity."³ Land exposes the paradox of the enlightenment in a description of modernity as an "inhibited synthesis," which is consummated in Kant's philosophy: "Kant's 'object' is thus the universal form of the relation to alterity; that which must of necessity be the same in the other in order for it to appear to us. This universal form is that which is necessary for anything to be 'on offer' for experience, it is the 'exchange value' that first allows a thing to be marketed to the

enlightenment mind.”⁴ In its absolute monological form, the extension and actualization of modernity in Latin America would not be a problem at all, since what is affirmed in this case is precisely the continuity between the ideals that appeal to the enlightenment mind *regardless* of the material referents that determine the locus of instantiation—it is the same modernity all the way down.

If what is emphasized is not the universality but the differences—the dissonant intervals that repel one from another, then we might be able to conceive of the problem in terms other than recognition and reconciliation. The impetus of this approach is akin to the one François Jullien adopts when he speaks of divergences in *On the Universal: the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue Between Cultures*, “But the concept of *divergence* is a rigorous and combative concept in this respect: by leading us to probe *the point to which* divergences could lead, to measure the distance which opens up between them, it unfolds the cultural and the thinkable to their limit.”⁵ Despite my skepticism toward some profound renewal of the culture of the enlightenment emerging from the encounter between modernity as an European ideal and culture, and Latin American modernity as a transcultured (at times ‘postcolonial’) instance, I take the exercise of thinking of the possibility of unbinding universalism, colonialism and modernity in the sense outlined by Jullien—that is, as an opportunity to “[p]robe *the point to which* divergences could lead.”



UCLA Concrete Canoe, Video Game (ACM, ASCE, Jungsu Pak, Theodore Nguyen, 2015)

Such a disentanglement would entail suspending the imperative of the universal as informing and regulating the image of what it means to think. As Land acutely anticipated in his text, this demands (among other things) a consequential engagement with anthropology. The inhibited synthesis whose functioning Land uncovers in “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” and relates to Lévi-Strauss’s *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* finds a contemporary interlocutor in the “anti-narcissistic” decolonization of thought that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes in the texts gathered as *Cannibal Metaphysics*, where one of the theses advanced is that “[e]very nontrivial anthropological theory is a *version* of an indigenous practice of knowledge.”⁶ A nontrivial anthropological theory—an “experimental metaphysics,” as Viveiros de Castro puts it—comes to enter into a disjunctive synthesis with “philosophy conceived as the *sui generis* ethno-anthropological practice of the creation of concepts” oriented towards the “permanent decolonization of thought.”⁷ This disjunctive synthesis between anthropology and philosophy would thus be the *possible* point of an uninhibited synthesis between the versions of practices and styles of knowledge that these disciplines study. Equivocation is the challenge that Viveiros de Castro’s conception of Amerindian multinaturalism and perspectivism poses for a project of cultural translation, oriented toward the externalization of reason. “Amerindian perspectivism is a doctrine of equivocation, of referential alterity between homonymous concepts. Equivocation is the mode of communication between its different perspectival positions and is thus at once the condition of possibility of the anthropological enterprise and its limit.”⁸ Drawing from extensive study of Amerindian collectives, Viveiros de Castro presents, under the name ‘multinaturalism,’ a perspectivist metaphysics which undermines the political exigencies of the universal; equivocation effectively posits the universal as a case of mistaken identity; a mutual stabilization of reciprocal apperceptions is represented as the ‘same’ object. Equivocation is fragile, unsuitable from grounding compromises with the weight of the past.

Read as a narrative of possible reconciliation, Guimarães Rosa’s “Third Bank” seems to present a scenario that corroborates modern progression: traditional life in the interior of Brazil is dissolved, the family is ruptured, the mother and sister move to a city, a brother to another, while a third son stays and maintains his tie with the father, who shows no signs of leaving the third bank of the river. Here, perhaps, we would be tempted to read the father as having lost touch with actuality; the son also asks if he has not gone mad, as someone who remains stuck in his archaic ways despite modernity’s transformations. But the third bank of the river can also be read as a manifestation of

irreconcilable convergences, as a place that is determined neither by vital needs nor by stagnation. “Doesn’t the father ever get sick?” asks the son. “And the constant strength of the arms, to have a hold on the canoe, resisting, even in the excess of floods, at the high water, there when everything dangerous flows with the enormous thrust, those bodies of dead animals and tree branches coming down—of fright, crashing.”⁹ The story does not capitulate to the literary determinations of either realism (doesn’t the father ever get sick?) or myth (as realm or discourse ‘outside’ history); nor does it reconcile languages expressive of modernity with a colonial past. To a great extent this is due to the seemingly trivial, but also profound, fact that the narrative is a literary and philosophical artifact of a supposedly ‘unintelligible’ event.

In this sense, Sevcenko’s reading of the story is revealing precisely where it insists on an interpretation of the narrative as determined by history: “Written at the beginning of the 1960s, it reflects the cultural climate of the time marked by a catalyzing event, which mobilized the creative energies of the country: the foundation of its new capital, the planned city of Brasília.”¹⁰ The site of construction of Brasília is at once a ‘nowhere’ and a ‘location’ *par excellence*: far from the coastal regions as metropolitan loci; the product of a deliberate gesture of centralization and geometrization of space. Sevcenko’s Brasília encapsulates this configuration:

*The Capital of Hope, as it was called, would be, at one and the same time, the origin of the “cosmic race” as conceived by one of the influential figures behind Mexican muralists, José Vasconcelos, and the centre which heralded the “third way”—the society resulting from the emancipation of colonial peoples from their past, as well as from the imperialist pretensions of powers locked into the Cold War. Brasília would be the “third bank,” the bridge between an undesirable past and a still impalpable future, the materialisation of the impossible.*¹¹

Sevcenko’s framing of Brasília as a “third bank” is symptomatic of the proliferation of visions in Latin America, where Brasília is, in the words of José Miguel Wisnik, “mirage of modern Brazil and modern Brazil as mirage.”¹² Brasília embodies the double modern impulse towards the ceaseless rejection of previous foundations—such as the old capital, Rio de Janeiro—and the insistent establishment of a new edifice, marking the supposed passage into the modern era.

In the face of his father’s decision to take his canoe to the middle of the river, the narrator-son, in Sevcenko’s words, “[h]esitates and reflects with the reader on the significance of this act, of his father’s invention of an impossible place, which does not exist, and asks if the reader would undertake to enter this place, becoming paralyzed like

the father in a permanent mobility, enclosed in the continuous flow of atemporality.”¹³ What Sevcenko assumes as a given is the status of the third bank of the river as an impossible place, which could as well be understood by reversing the direction, so that the third bank becomes the locus where *place* becomes an infinite problem. As Deleuze puts it in *The Logic of Sense*, “Sense is always a double sense and excludes the possibility that there may be a ‘good sense’ in the relation.”¹⁴ To take this reversal further, the third bank of the river allows the perception of “permanent mobility” and the “continuous flow of atemporality” to meet their Möbius-like inside-outs: *impermanent stasis* (or immobile transience) and *discontinuous damming of temporality*. If we see the third bank of the river as the (non)locus where all these visions meet and multiply, the framing of the text as standing for a relatively conventional narrative of modernity in Latin America must be displaced by one that explores the paradox of the third bank. Is the boat paralyzed in a permanent mobility or is it floating through an impermanent stasis? The point is not to choose either, but to arrive at the point at which both can be placed in communication. Guimarães Rosa stages the gestures that lead to conception of the third bank of the river as a place for a ‘horotic’¹⁵ meditation. The supposedly unthinkable act of staying at the margin of the margin thus founds both the communication between ‘oppositional’ flows of sense, and a contemplation of the margin itself, otherwise impossible from ‘either’ side of the river.



Rio Negro, NASA Modis Satellite (2008)

The ending of the story brings to the fore the multiple directions that aggregate at the third bank in a language that does not yield easy referents. After failing to take his father's place on the canoe, the narrator-son says, "*Sou o que não foi, o que vai ficar calado*"¹⁶ – "I am what was not, what will remain silent." By not taking his father's canoe at the third bank of the river he breaks what would be a linear patrilineal genealogy, establishing another one by connecting with a temporality that "was not." Notice the impersonal aspect of this temporality in the third person preterit '*foi*,' instead of the first person '*fui*.' This impersonal temporal trajectory leads the narrator-son to think that in death he might *at last* be on the canoe. "*Mas, então, ao menos, que, no artigo da morte, peguem em mim, e me depositem também numa canoinha de nada, nessa água, que não pára, de longas beiras: e, eu, rio abaixo, rio a fora, rio a dentro—o rio.*"¹⁷ "But then, unless that in the fact of death they take me, and place me too in any little canoe, in this water that doesn't stop, of long margins, and I, downriver, out the river, into the river—the river." In virtue of being the locus of convergence between impersonal temporalities—"o que não

foi” and “*o que vai ficar calado*”—a past that did not come to be and a future that will remain silent, the narrator-son’s intention of taking the canoe after his death is not productive of an imaginary; the discontinuity of the father-canoe-son series prevents its circumscription within the temporal scope of modernity. The canoe bifurcates destinies and functions as a singularization of fate from the point of view of the father and of the son, and this effectively breaks the linear genealogy and identity¹⁸ of the canoe. The father effectively stays in the canoe in life; the son potentially embarks on the canoe in death.

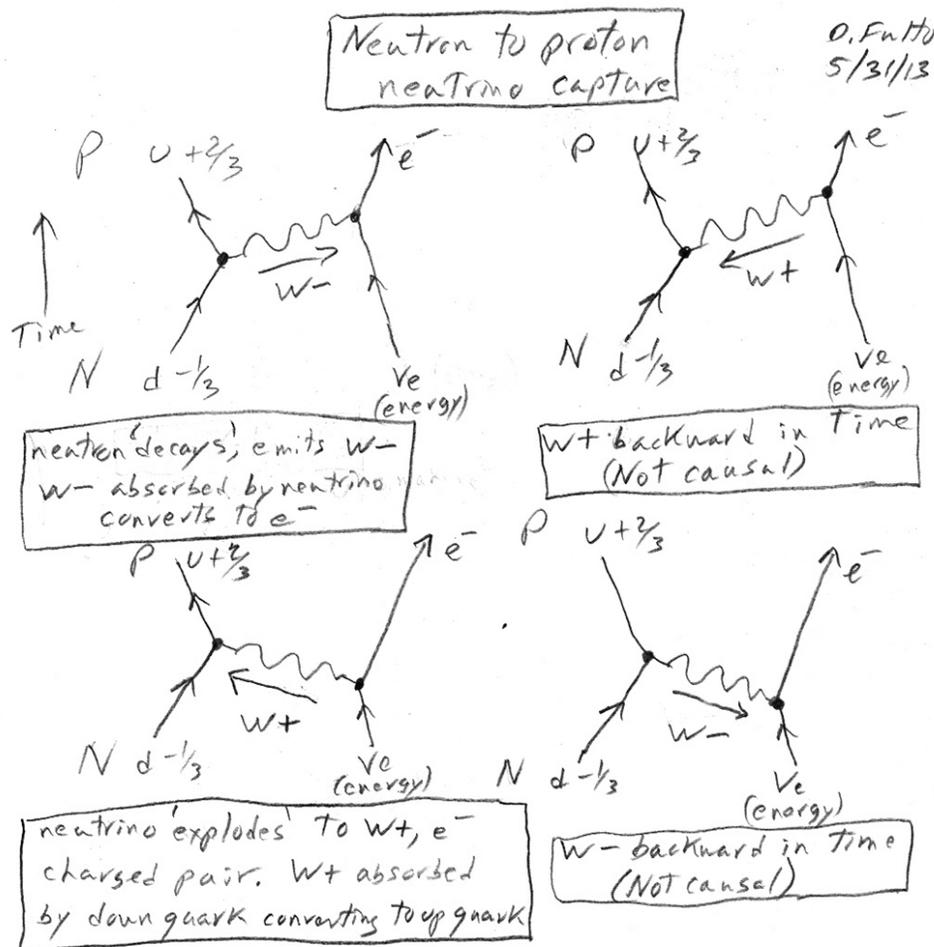
The conceptual theme of the margin, iconic and paradigmatic in the intellectual traditions of thought on modernity in Latin America, is retrieved and conceptualized with a new force by Fernando Zalamea in *América una trama integral—Transversalidad, bordes y abismos en la cultura americana, siglos XIX y XX*. As a margin of Western traditions, Latin America is “[l]ugar de fronteras y de tránsitos,”¹⁹ a place of frontiers and transits, in geographic and historical terms.

*Extremidad, límite o espacio en blanco, el margen representa, física y simbólicamente, aquello que queda de lado, alejado de un conjetural centro. Sin género y sin lugar, el margen es, sin embargo, precisamente gracias a su indefinición y su genericidad, un concepto de una extraordinaria riqueza y ductilidad para poder ver más ampliamente el mundo [...].*²⁰

*Extremity, limit or blank space, the margin physically and symbolically represents that which stays on the side, away from a conjectural center. Without kind and place, the margin nevertheless is, precisely because of its indefinition and genericity, a concept of extreme ductility to more amply see the world [...].*²¹

Following Zalamea’s conception of the architecture and topos of Latin American culture, the distances between the ‘panoptic,’ synthetic vision of Latin America as margin in the microscopic instance of Brasília, are traversed by a *telescopic*, transversal movement: “*Una propiedad telescópica de la cultura entra entonces en juego, cuando los más diversos fragmentos de la cultura se reflejan unos en otros—agrandando las imágenes de objetos lejanos.*”²² “A telescopic property of culture is thus in play when the most diverse fragments of culture are reflected in each other—enlarging the images of distant objects.”²³ Zalamea’s ‘semiotic’ conception of Latin America as margin of the West, culturally and geographically, accounts for the transits of information and perspectives that are generated by its intellectual currents. This semiotic and topological approach thus shifts the focus of the discussion away from the supervision of conceptual purity under universal imperatives to one on techniques and modes of communication, transit

of information, and the transformation of the concept. As Zalamea puts it in “Peirce and Latin American ‘Razonabilidad’: Forerunners of Transmodernity”: “[B]oth Peirce’s system and Latin American TRANS culture help to reinterpret universals as partial invariants of a logic of change, where the *borders of reason and sensibility* appear as objects of reason on their own right.”²⁴ The reinterpretation of universals as “partial invariants of a logic of change” is itself a shift that occurs through a transmodern²⁵ movement that cuts across modernity and postmodernity, and as such is not spatiotemporally circumscribable by either. In *América*, Zalamea sees “The pertinence of transmodernity as consisting of its possibility of registering accelerations and decelerations (García Canclini, Martín-Barbero), connections, superpositions, and links [...]”²⁶



Four Feynman diagrams (Donald E. Fulton, 2015)

Alongside these possibilities, telescoping and translation, traversal and equivocation are valuable semiotic and transcultural techniques of communication and transformation between styles of epistemic practices. When it crosses the margin, a place of transit and

flow, knowledge emerges as ‘material,’ or ‘information,’ rather than an ‘effect’ of conceptual purity. Viveiros de Castro’s proposal of translation also approaches the goal of an uninhibited philosophy: “Good translation succeeds at allowing foreign concepts to deform and subvert the conceptual apparatus of the translator such that the *intention* of the original language can be expressed through and thus transform that of the destination. *Translation, betrayal...transformation.*”²⁷ In this sense, reconciliation designates both an undesirable and unviable means and objective of encounters between languages and cultures, styles of epistemic practices, and distinct temporal series. On the theme of betrayal, perhaps one of the most pertinent instances of the tipping of positions between alliance and enmity is Werner Herzog’s film *Fitzcarraldo*, where Fitzcarraldo’s modernist dream of an opera house in the confines of the Amazon forest leads him to take up a role in the rubber economy as to acquire a ship to reach the construction site. Taking Fitzcarraldo for some kind of god, a potentially hostile indigenous tribe helps him move his ship over the mountain so as to avoid a dangerous passage, only to seize control of the ship for their own purposes. Guimarães Rosa’s “The Third Bank of the River” and Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo* suggest that at the limit of the controlled navigation of the canoe or the boat lies the current of the river, itself a gripping border between reason and sensibility. The former is a study of the third bank as impossible place, and locus where place becomes an infinite problem. The father studies the dissonant simultaneity between a *continuous flow of atemporality* and an *impermanent stasis*. It is from the perspective of the son, anchored outside the river and in charge of the telling of the story (narrative), that this task is presented as ‘unintelligible,’ which is all the more reason to undertake it. The immobile transience of the father’s canoe contrasts with the crash of Fitzcarraldo’s abducted ship, plotted by the indigenous people to appease the spirit of the rapids—that is, to reestablish balance in the flow of the river. Perhaps the latter can be seen as a daring, albeit fictional, exercise in a non-Western style of cybernetics in its many senses and transdisciplinary forms.

Footnotes

1. Nicolau Sevcenko. “Peregrinations, Visions and the City: From Canudos to Brasília, the Backlands become the City and the City becomes the Backlands.” *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*. Ed. Vivian Schelling. London: Verso, 2000. 100. Print.
2. John Beverley, Michael Aronna, and José Oviedo, eds. *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 4. Print.

3. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, eds. *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011. 74. Print.
4. *Ibid.* 67.
5. François Jullien. *On the Universal the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures*. Cambridge: Polity, 2014. 152. Print.
6. Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Peter Skafish. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014. 42. Print.
7. *Ibid.* 91-92.
8. *Ibid.* 87.
9. João Guimarães Rosa. *Primeiras Estórias*. 5th ed. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio, 1969. 35. Print. Although *Primeiras Estórias* has been translated into English, the passages cited here are my own translations, and are informed both by the theories discussed here and by divergences from the existing translation. See *The Third Bank of the River and Other Stories*. Trans. Barbara Shelby. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968. Print.
10. Sevcenko. 101.
11. *Ibid.* 101-102.
12. José Miguel Wisnik. *Sem Receita: Ensaios E Canções*. São Paulo, SP: Publifolha, 2004. 124. Print.
13. Sevcenko. 101.
14. Gilles Deleuze. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990. 34. Print.
15. Proposed by Giovanni Maddalena and Fernando Zalamea, *horotics* “[p]retends to open the way to general forms of reasoning beyond the polarity analysis/synthesis.” “A New Analytic/Synthetic/Horotic Paradigm. From Mathematical Gesture to Synthetic/Horotic Reasoning.” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* VI:2 (2012): 212. Web.
16. Guimarães Rosa. 37.
17. *Ibid.* 37
18. As Maddalena and Zalamea put it, “A *horotic* judgment (from *horos*, border) is a judgment that is blind to identity through changes.” “A New Analytic/Synthetic/Horotic Paradigm. From Mathematical Gesture to Synthetic/Horotic Reasoning.” 210. Web.
19. Fernando Zalamea. *América—Una Trama Integral: Transversalidad, Bordes y Abismos en la Cultura Americana*. Bogota: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2009. 197. Print.
20. *Ibid.* 198.
21. My translation.
22. *Ibid.* 205.
23. My translation.
24. “Peirce and Latin American ‘Razonabilidad’: Forerunners of Transmodernity.” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* I:1 (2009): 1. Web.

25. *Ibid.* 1. Zalamea describes Rosa María Rodríguez Magda's transmodernity as both a "diachronic and methodological" term.

26. My translation. 274.

27. Viveiros de Castro. 87.

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